

Political Scientists in Congress: Opportunities for Employment and Improvement

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The 118th Congress began in disarray. A gridlocked race for House Speaker, rank-and-file demands for institutional reform, record-high partisanship, and looming budgetary challenges consumed legislators and their staff. For congressional scholars however, many of these challenges were not only familiar, but had well-documented solutions (LaPira et al. 2020; Lovett 2021; Green and Harris 2020; Green 2019). As the new Congress faltered through its opening weeks, academic insight flooded Twitter, op-ed pages, and blog posts.¹ But did it reach the ears of decision-makers in Washington?

The relationship between congressional scholars and the institution is largely based on observation from afar. Yet both political scientists and members of Congress would greatly benefit from a more direct relationship. The House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress offers an example of how such relationships can be mutually beneficial: Tasked with reforming and strengthening Congress, the Select Committee employed political science PhDs over the course of the 116th and 117th Congresses.² As congressional experts in permanent or semi-permanent staff positions, we offered academic insight and served as liaisons between the committee and the scholarly community. We also performed the tasks familiar to non-academic committee staff: providing historical insight and original research, sourcing committee witnesses, and writing briefing memos, reports, and bill text.

While reform committees have historically played an important role in efforts to improve Congress, the institution should not rely solely on the work of select committees that appear every two-to-three decades. In this research note, we recommend congressional offices employ political science PhDs and in turn, congressional scholars pursue employment opportunities in the US Congress. These placements would be particularly helpful for congressional committees, party leaders, and rank-and-file members

eager to shape how Congress functions as the first branch of government. Figure 1 below illustrates the placements of PhDs in Congress over the past two decades—as well as the notable missed opportunity. Although recent trends indicate an uptick in PhDs in Congress, 407 placements pales in comparison to the tens of thousands of staff on Capitol Hill.

Importantly, we recommend that these employment opportunities be long-term. Hiring political science PhDs as long-term staff and fellows will allow for full assimilation to the culture of Capitol Hill, building trust necessary to undertake meaningful work. While opportunities like the American Political Science Association’s Congressional Fellowship program (APSA Congressional Fellows) are undoubtedly helpful for scholars seeking insight on their subjects and teaching anecdotes, these fellow placements are temporary. Our recommendation emphasizes the two-way benefits for both

PhDs in Congress

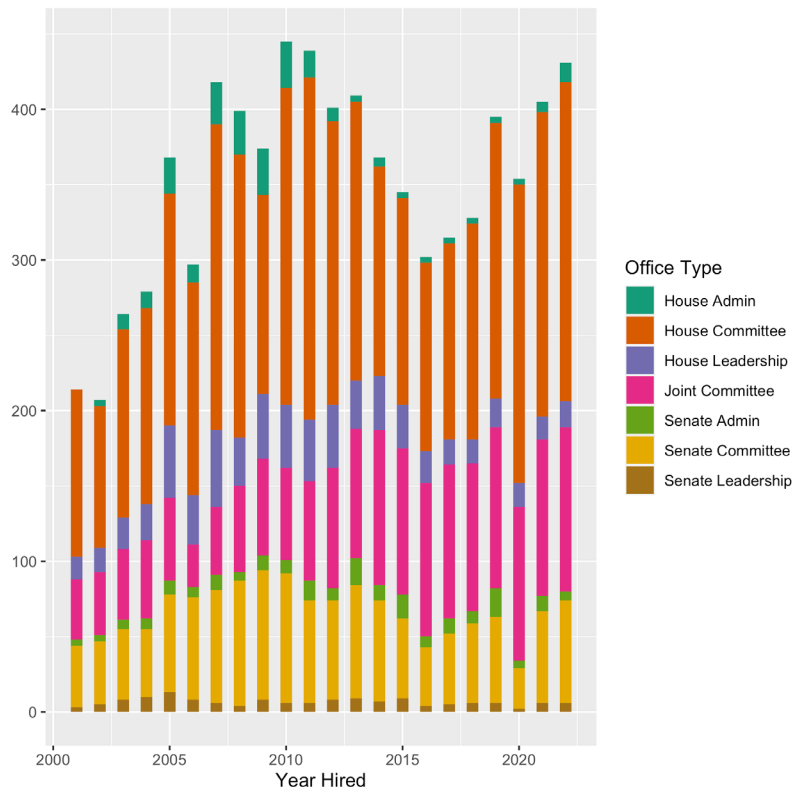


Figure 1: PhD placements in Congress, 2000-2022
 Source: LegiStorm (2022) and Sunwater Institute, collected by the authors.

political scientists and congressional offices that long-term placement offers.

In the remainder of this research note, we outline the benefits long-term congressional employment of political scientists offers members of Congress and scholars. We conclude with specific recommendations for implementation.

BENEFITS FOR CONGRESS

It has been well documented that experienced and effective staff help advance the policymaking goals of members of Congress (Ommundsen 2022; Crosson et al. 2020; Burgat 2020). While political scientists are equipped to provide policymaking expertise like other congressional staff, they also possess institutional and historical knowledge that can be particularly useful to legislators and committees.

1. Serve as a liaison between political science research and practitioners.

Political science PhDs are experts in their fields of study. Congressional scholars would bring informed decision-making skills to congressional offices and help connect academic research to policymaking. For example, many members and staff are aware of trends towards centralized power and strong party leaders—but their public-facing responses rarely consider historical orientation or long-term implications. Other issues, such as campaign finance, constituent and elite polarization, political communication, and budget and appropriations reforms are just a few of the examples of issues that perplex members of Congress every congressional session, despite well-established research and solutions from the academic community.

Hiring a political science PhD would also help rank-and-file members better understand how to deploy procedural tactics to counter powerful party leaders who have outsized resources. Congressional committees and working groups would be able to maintain policy autonomy by having experts on staff that can assist in witness identification and research assistance. And while some congressional leaders already do retain institutional experts on staff, congressional scholars can provide a more nuanced understanding of the potential long-term implications of in-the-moment procedural agreements.

2. Strengthen the research and problem-solving capacity of Congress with advanced methods training.

Congressional offices are often awash in a sea of information—statistical or otherwise (Baumgartner and Jones 2015). Identifying which information is reliable is an increasingly time consuming and complex issue for staff who may not possess the skills necessary to adequately meet the task. Equipping members of Congress with experts possessing methodological research training will improve the quality of information available to members, counteract the growing power of the executive branch, and ensure that valid, evidence-based information is being used in the legislative process. As noted by members and pundits alike, when compared to the executive branch, growing bureaucracy, and outside entities, Congress is suffering from a “brain drain” (LaPira et al. 2020). Political science PhDs offer the expertise and methodological training necessary to help Congress strengthen its Article I powers, combatting the current advantages of K Street and the executive branch.

Although Congress has several support agencies, such as the Congressional Research Service (CRS) and Government Accountability Office (GAO) that assist them with data collection and interpretation, these agencies are required to maintain an objective distance—providing interpretation and analysis, rather than suggestions or policy prescriptions (Kosar 2015). Likewise, these agencies can only assist when they are contacted for their expertise rather than take a proactive role in the policymaking process (Brudnick 2008; Fagan and McGee 2022). Employing a political science PhD “in house” would provide members with an expert who can not only perform original research, but propose solutions and discern quality policy information. In an age of increasing misinformation, this advantage has positive normative implications as well.

3. Improve Congress with meaningful reform and implementation.

Lastly, hiring political science PhDs, particularly congressional experts, will improve Congress. Bringing experts directly into the institution for long-term employment is the first step to not only finding, but implementing, solutions. For Congress to improve, all members—from rank-and-file to the Speaker of the House—must think of Congress as a whole institution, not as individual offices working independent of each other. Hiring experts that can provide a holistic and historical understanding of legislative behavior will encourage reforms that better the institution—not just individual members.

In addition to the woes of polarization, centralization, and declining expertise, Congress is suffering from an epidemic of declining constituent trust.³ Making Congress work better on behalf of the American people will have implications beyond institutional efficiency and power—it will improve representation.

BENEFITS FOR POLITICAL SCIENTISTS

1. Apply scholarship in a meaningful way.

The disconnect between academic work and industry application is well documented (Hoffman 2016, King and Persilly 2019), and this is certainly true for the US Congress. However, unlike other fields of political science research, the accessibility and institutional structure of the US Congress means that scholars have an opportunity to directly apply findings, test theories, collect data, and connect the vast field of existing research to tangible problems in real time. Questions of constituent representation, centralization of power, and institutional norms are raised daily in the halls of the US Capitol, and political science PhDs have the theoretical understanding and methodological training to address these questions.

Having scholars on staff who not only understand the theoretical questions Congress faces, but how to answer those questions with robust original research will help Congress better understand and address the challenges it faces. Scholars, in turn, can learn by applying their research in direct, meaningful ways. They can also benefit from direct exposure to the politics and people that play an important and often behind-the-scenes role in policy outcomes.

2. Generate better-informed research and teaching.

Existing programs that temporarily place scholars in congressional offices emphasize the research and teaching benefits that “real-world” experience provides. This is doubly true for scholars who join a congressional office for long-term employment. Qualitative

work and observational data informs research in essential ways and encourages instructors to teach beyond the “textbook” Congress.

Political science scholars should be able and encouraged to continue original research and teaching opportunities while working for the US Congress. However, we do note the limitations of working in congressional offices: all staff are part of a team. But although there is limited autonomy for the direction of research within the office, agreements can be made to allow for independent scholarly publication.⁴ This will depend on the policies of individual offices, and scholars should work with potential employers in the hiring process to negotiate these terms. Adjunct teaching positions, lecturing opportunities, or other forms of instruction are already common among staff, and it is likely the experience provided by congressional employment appeals to academic employers as well.

3. Gain exciting and supportive employment opportunities.

Lastly, given the increasingly limited job market prospects for PhD graduates (Diehl 2021), as well as increasingly antagonistic state government actions towards the tenure process (Hollingsworth 2023), long-term employment with the US Congress offers a fulfilling opportunity for congressional scholars. Working with members of Congress and a vast array of institutional experts can provide scholars with a robust, meaningful research agenda, and allow them to utilize the problem solving, strong writing, and effective communication skills they possess. Furthermore, pay and benefits, as well as opportunities for advancement potentially supersede that of academic employment.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

This proposal encourages political scientists and members of Congress to consider long-term employment of PhDs in Congress. For Congress, reinforcing offices with experts that understand the nuanced elements of legislative behavior and processes will strengthen the quality of congressional research, reform the institution, and improve the quality of representation. For political scientists, congressional staff positions offer numerous benefits, including meaningful application of research and an intellectually stimulating work environment. We emphasize that these opportunities should be long-term employment, allowing PhDs time to onboard, understand the culture, build trust, and contribute to the office and institutional goals.

While undoubtedly beneficial to scholars, the existing APSA Congressional Fellowship is a short-term opportunity largely focused on benefits to the academic—not necessarily the office or Congress itself. However, the APSA Public Service Fellowship provides a roadmap of how the Association can support long-term, multi-year employment of political science PhDs in Congress. The Public Service Fellowship should be expanded to include more offices, particularly rank-and-file members and congressional committees. Fellowships from other entities could also support long-term employment for specific congressional reforms, such as technological improvements, diversity and inclusion initiatives, or administrative reform.

We also encourage political science PhDs to pursue long-term employment positions outside the confines of fellowship funding. While this will require more upfront work on the part of the potential employee, the benefits are obvious: likely higher pay, employee

benefits, and being a clear member of the staff. It should be noted, however, that working in Congress is not for every political scientist and requires great flexibility and the willingness to work on a team. Your in-office research agenda will largely be dictated by the needs of your employer and the institution, and the resulting policy and congressional publications will likely be unattributed to specific staff. Research often requires a quick turnaround, resulting in educated guesses on policy recommendations rather than a robust analysis. However, the training and expertise of political scientists means that recommendations and decisions—even when made quickly—can still provide profound insight for members of Congress and staff.

For this career route to be possible, legislators, committees, and party leaders must facilitate these employment opportunities. Congress should consider how the expertise of political science PhDs will benefit their offices and the institution and create dedicated positions for these employees. In particular, we encourage the House and Senate Administration Committees and Rules Committees to dedicate positions for institutional experts. Additionally, party leaders and rank-and-file members would undoubtedly benefit from having institutional experts on staff. Offices could also expand their expectations for existing positions such as Legislative Director or Coalitions Director to reward candidates who bring forward the institutional knowledge that political science PhDs offer.

It is no secret that Congress is in dire need of improvement—but many of the solutions already exist. However, the disconnect between academic research and implementation is vast. Direct, long-term employment of congressional experts offers clear benefits to not only political science PhDs but to Congress, and by extension the American people, as well. ■

ENDNOTES

1. See: Levin, Yuval, *New York Times Opinion*, “Some Good Can Come out of the Kevin McCarthy Fiasco,” Jan. 10, 2023; Schuman, Daniel, *Newsletter: First Branch Forecast*, “Rule of the Rules,” Jan. 9, 2023; Binder, Sarah A, Brookings, “McCarthy Paid a Steep Price for His Speakership—Now What?,” Jan. 10, 2023.
2. Three Modernization Committee staffers were funded by the American Political Science Association’s Public Service Fellowship, two of which are co-authors of this piece (Gaynor and Rackey).
3. While confidence in US institutions is down across the board, Congress remains by far the least trusted with just seven percent of respondents saying they possess a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the institution. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394283/confidence-institutions-down-average-new-low.aspx>
4. For example, the authors reached agreement with the Modernization Committee to successfully pursue publications and research opportunities during the course of their employment (See Rackey et al. 2022, Gaynor and Rackey 2022).

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MEMBER CAREER UPDATES

Awarded Tenure, title change from Assistant to Associate Professor (2023)

Josue Franco
Cuyamaca College



Received PhD in Political Science, joined Knox College as a Henry Luce Foundation/ASIANetwork Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow and Visiting Assistant Professor of International Relations (2022)

Chirasree Mukherjee
Knox College



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