

# Turning Theory to Practice: A Political Scientist Tackles the Hill

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When I first learned that I would be spending most of my final year in graduate school working on Capitol Hill as an APSA Congressional Fellow, I really did not know what to expect—other than that I needed to hurry up and finish my dissertation! Since most of my training was empirical in nature, with a smattering of formal theory here and there, the one thing I knew for certain was that I was in for a novel experience. After all, there are few substitutes for acting as a participant observer to uncover a different perspective on a subject.

## Finding an Assignment

After our intensive orientation, the first task was to find an office that was willing to spare some space for another staffer. I was amazed to discover just how small some of the offices were, especially on the House side. There were many choices to make: House or Senate, committee or personal staff, and minority vs. majority. Every decision came with consequences. Working for a House member would probably come with more access since there are only a handful of staffers compared to the 30 or so staff in an average Senate office. If I decided to work for a committee, then I would spend most of my time working on a specific issue. Minority staffers, especially in the House, are unlikely to have any sort of legislative influence.

Since I was in my last year as a graduate student, I happened to be on the academic job market at the same time as I was selling my wares around the halls of Congress. While interviewing for two separate jobs at the same time was not exactly a fun experience, I had to remind myself that it was better than the alternative of not interviewing for any jobs. From my perspective, the academic hiring process is only slightly less stochastic compared to finding an office assignment.

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**Michael Crespin** will start as an assistant professor at the University of Georgia in the fall of 2006. He is currently working in the office of Daniel Lipinski (D-IL).

At least I knew who to contact at a university to apply for a job.

After interviewing in over a half dozen offices, I found a spot for myself in Representative Dan Lipinski's (D-IL) office. The Congressman was an APSA Fellow and a political scientist before he was elected to serve the 3rd district in his home state of Illinois (Political Science Fellow, Class of 1998–1999). It turns out, former Fellows are everywhere in Washington D.C. In fact, Vice President Dick Cheney was a Fellow before he began his career in public service (Joseph E. Davies Fellow, 1968–1969).

## Lessons Learned

When I talk to my colleagues in academia, the first question they usually ask is “What are you learning in D.C.?” In some respects, I have confirmed a lot of what I have read and learned about Congress. For instance, some staffers spend a significant part of their time addressing constituent concerns. While I have not personally helped someone's grandmother cut through the bureaucratic red tape to get a Social Security check or sign up for one of many prescription drug plans, I have seen it happen and know that constituents are happy to receive the help. Although I have not witnessed a Member drawing a spatial diagram to figure out how to vote, I cannot help but think about backwards induction when I see an amendment tree.

During my short time in Washington, I have also come to understand the ebb and

flow of district work periods interspersed with time spent legislating. Even after accounting for the normal Tuesday–Thursday workweek, nearly an additional 15 weeks are set aside on the legislative calendar during this session for spending time in the district. Although I read Richard Fenno's *Homestyle* (1978) in my Congress seminar, it was not until I spent some time on the Hill that I understood the importance of the district to the study of Congress. Happily, our fellowship provides funding to travel with the member back to the district so we can have our own mini-Fenno experience.

## Highlights

So far, I have enjoyed many highlights during my fellowship—some planned and others not so. We had the opportunity to meet with House Parliamentarian Hon. John Sullivan on the floor of the House. He shared with us many stories, including his unheeded advice on how to bring to a close the three-hour vote on the Medicare Prescription Drug Act. I also got to watch George Lucas discuss with Nancy Pelosi and House staffers the future of American innovation. You will never guess who he said he would cast as the Emperor from the current crowd of political characters. The biggest highlight so far though has to be having Congressman Colin Peterson take my request as he entertained the crowd with his country-music stylings at an all-you-can-eat BBQ reception.<sup>1</sup> Who knew Congress could be so much fun!

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## Notes

\* I want to thank Charles Bullock, Jeff Jenkins and especially Dave Rohde for helping me get into the Fellowship Program.

1. Representative Peterson played a mean version of *Folsom Prison Blues*.

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## Reference

Fenno, Richard. 1978. *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* Boston: Little, Brown.