

Robert Atterbury

Brademas Center

Constituents: Can't live with them, Can't live without them

Constituents hold a special place in Congress. Credited with the good sense to elect those in power, they should technically hold enormous sway. From the viewpoint of a Congressional Intern, this is not so.

I went to Congress to see who had a voice, and how it was heard. While every Representative handles constituent issues differently, I believe I had a fairly standard experience. Some Representatives handle all constituent contact through their district office, while others split the duties. My office was the latter type. The Washington office handled constituent's legislative concerns, while the district office handled helping constituents, known as casework. I cannot speak to how my office handled casework, other than to hand it to the district office, but I can speak to how their concerns were incorporated into legislation and positions.

There is one continuous job assigned to interns – fending off constituents. Whether by telephone, mail, fax, or email, interns are there to insure constituents do not bother the staff. An intern's top priority when in the office is to answer the phones before they ring on the staffer's lines. Interns, the only human a constituent can reasonably expect to get on the phone are quickly taught how to handle any situation: do not take a position. Do not argue; do not agree; do not offer

information unless it has been approved explicitly in 'talking points'. Interns each develop their own repertoire of disarming sayings to entice people to give up. During my time the major issue was the healthcare debate. Even when people confronted me with horribly incorrect information, I was not allowed to correct them because it was not on the 'talking points'. Elderly callers telling me to keep the government's hands off their Medicare received the same response as people calling to support a public option. A cheery "I'll make sure to pass your comments along" or a concerned, "Thank you for calling, I'll make sure this gets to the right person." The job is to be as nice as possible, while stonewalling them until they give up. Interns are there to take a name, address, message, and tell people to have a nice day. The messages are dropped into a giant box to be sorted with all forms of constituent communication.

Beyond the standard telephone response, constituents only received responses via mail. Interns write these letters on behalf of the Representative, and while the staff reviews them, the interns are almost always the sole authors of its content. The Legislative Correspondent writes some letters; although those written by the interns vastly outnumber any that the staffer could create. Response letters follow a formula, thank the person for their comments, broad support for good legislation (whatever the issue is, lowering taxes, spending money, animal rights, hunting rights ect.), explain that the legislation they commented about is, what it

does, and where it is in the legislative process, and then thank them again. Some letters encompass an issue – like privacy rights – rather than addressing individual bills. The letters always avoid the controversial issues in the legislation. The office has hundreds of these on file, and the interns pull text from the old ones to ensure the ‘voice’ is right, meaning sections are repeated year after year. Oddly specific letters are pulled out for individual responses, but these are just a small percentage of the hundreds of letter sent each week. The intern drafts become form letters and whether someone is supporting Aerial Hunting Rights or stopping horse slaughter, they are going to receive the same response.

Unfortunately thousands of constituent comments are received, processed, and responded to without the Representative even being aware. They get tallies of the most popular letter sent out each week in their name. All of the sorting, processing and sending is done by the interns. The staff has only a vague idea of the content of constituent comments because for the most part they never seem them.

However, there are some phone calls and letters that make it through the wall. Lobby groups and business heads are all offered to speak with the appropriate staffer. Whereas constituents only come to the office to pick up tickets to the Capitol building, business and their lobbyists have several meetings per day with the staff. All materials sent by groups are passed to the staff, whereas letters sent by hundreds of constituents are sent form letters and are trashed.

Of course there are ways of incorporating constituent views into votes and positions, they just do not rely upon those most active in expressing them. The staff relies upon knowledge of the district and from the campaign. Yet constituents are almost shut out of the congressional dialog entirely, until their vote is needed.