

# Don't Have the Data? Make Them Up! Congressional Archives as Untapped Data Sources<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

At least once during our undergraduate or graduate political science methodology coursework we heard the story of the man who was searching for his lost keys not where he lost them but under the street lamp because that is where there is light enough to see.<sup>2</sup> Laughing and shaking our heads in agreement we resolved then and there not to succumb to the allure of using data that were easy to obtain even though they might not be appropriate for our research question. Then at least half of us (the second author included) proceeded to forsake the resolution, either pursuing a research project because the data were available or, using less than optimal data to address a research puzzle in the face of the many costs involved in collecting more appropriate data.

Archives containing the papers of former members of Congress represent a largely untapped source of data appropriate for addressing an endless variety of research puzzles in American politics. Given the wealth of data, why have these data sources not been more fully exploited by scholars? There are several reasons. First, many of the archives are in places that are not exactly tourist destinations: former House Minority Leader Bob Michel's (R-IL) papers are at the Dirksen Center in Pekin, Illinois, Speaker Tom Foley's (D-WA) are at Washington State University in Pullman, and Speaker Carl Albert's (D-OK) are in

the Albert Center at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. Then again, a number of these archives are in very accessible locales: former Speaker Tip O'Neill's (D-MA) papers are at Boston College, former House Minority Leader Gerald Ford's (R-MI) are in Ann Arbor,<sup>3</sup> and former Speaker Jim Wright's (D-TX) are in Fort Worth, Texas.<sup>4</sup> Second, many researchers are concerned, and rightly so, about funding for the travel and document duplication involved in archival research. Third, archival research requires a focused commitment of time in schedules that are packed with coursework, teaching, research, and service demands. Then there is the prospect of failure: "What if I go to the archive and I do not find what I am looking for, or my research does not produce any results?" This question, combined with the potential monetary and personal costs of archival research, is enough to turn anyone off! In this short essay, we seek to address some of these issues and offer some encouragement and advice to those who are willing to take on the challenge of archival research.

Before continuing, one question deserves an answer: Who are these guys to be dispensing advice? Over the last three years the authors have made a combined 10 trips to seven archives in seven states collecting data on the politics of committee organization from the papers of Carl Albert, Tom Foley, Gerald Ford, Bob Michel, Tip O'Neill, John Rhodes (R-AZ), and Jim Wright. In addition, we have worked with a local scholar to extract materials from the Charles Halleck (R-IN) papers at Indiana University.<sup>5</sup> We hope that some of the lessons that we have learned over the last three years will lead congressional scholars to become interested in using archival resources and provide some helpful direction for that first foray into archival research.

## Research Design Determines Archival Research Strategy

Original data collected from congressional archives provide congressional

scholars with an opportunity to address both current debates and "lapsed" debates in the field. Lapsed debates take several forms. The first form is as a research topic that was so well addressed that it *seems* that no further study is necessary. The second form is as a topic where the existing data have been *overworked* to the point where the scholarly debate has become stale, or the existing data are very old and new research could benefit from updating the data. Third, are those debates where appropriate data have *never been collected*, often with reference to the time and cost constraints involved in collecting appropriate data.

Before embarking on archival research it is important to have a strong research design. This is important as one seeks out research funding (discussed in more detail below) but, equally if not more importantly, it will guide one's search through congressional archives. Collections of congressional papers are often very large. The boxes in the Foley papers, for instance, laid end to end would stretch the length of almost two football fields. Obviously, one has to narrow one's search. Most congressional papers will be subdivided into sub-collections or "series," for instance, constituent correspondence, policy-related materials, party leadership, and so forth. Within these series are anywhere from a few to dozens of individual boxes, with each box containing a few to dozens of folders containing the congressional papers of the member. It would seem as though one were searching for a needle in a haystack. This is one critical point at which the research design is important. The research design provides a standard by which whole parts within the collection can be ruled out of the search, and then provides the standard by which boxes within a sub-collection will be identified for file-by-file searches.

Our current research on committee organization began when the first author thought to ask a straightforward question: "I wonder if committee organization in the Republican Party works the

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same way that congressional scholars understand it to work in the Democratic Party?" After all, the research on the subject had an exclusive focus on the Democrats and, while it was convenient to assume that Republicans would behave similarly, examining the Republicans could either: 1) Confirm what congressional scholars already know, giving us more confidence in our theoretical models or; 2) Suggest that the Republicans behaved differently, thereby challenging the conventional wisdom about committee organization.

How would we go about addressing this question? We knew that archival resources contained this information, but which archives should be targeted? More lengthy discussion led us to define the research question more broadly. We did not want to repeat what we believed to be an oversight in the existing research, that is, the lack of a comparative focus. Thus, we resolved to collect data from the archives of both Democratic and Republican members of Congress. In addition, we wanted to be able to address the issue of change in Congress. Existing models of committee organization are static, suggesting a process that does not change with respect to time—an assumption that we believed was worthy of an empirical challenge. Our second goal was to collect the data in such a way that we would be able to address committee politics diachronically.

Research design in hand, we were able to identify the archives of interest to us, write funding proposals, arrive at archives with a design that structured our search for appropriate documents, code the data we retrieved, and engage in data analysis. Perhaps the best initial source that we consulted to help locate a former member's congressional papers is the web site of the Clerk of the House of Representatives (<http://clerk-web.house.gov/>). The House Clerk maintains the "On-line Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress" which includes references to the locations of the papers of many of the 11,500 individuals who served in the House and Senate since 1789. In addition, the Clerk's Office is in the process of updating *A Guide to the Research Collections of Former Members of the United States House of Representatives, 1789–1987* which will be made available electronically on the Internet.<sup>6</sup>

Along the way we had some luck finding data that we never conceived, but we would never have found those data if our research design had not guided our search strategy. By looking in the right places we located the data

that we sought and found a few golden nuggets along the way. For instance, in Bob Michel's papers we discovered several thousand paper ballots that identified the votes of individual members in the Republican Committee on Committees for committee nominees. These data allowed the first individual level study of factional conflict within the committee selection process.

A final note on research design: If one envisions a very ambitious research design, as we believe ours is, it is worth considering finding a collaborator. Our data collection effort has been made possible through our willingness to share the duties of data collection, which involves personal sacrifice at the very least. Of course, the benefits of collaboration carry over to the research process more generally. Collaborative research allows for an exchange of perspectives that can result in a stronger end product.

## Searching for Funding

Perhaps the most practical concern of most congressional scholars and others interested in archival research is:

"Where am I going to get the funding to underwrite the costs of archival research?" Many congressional archives have funding available to support travel to the archive and related expenses. About half of the archives that we have visited offered some funding to subsidize the costs of research.<sup>7</sup> Usually, funding is contingent on the researcher having a clear idea about what he or she is looking for, explained in a short essay, and whether the holdings in the archive contain information relevant to the research project. This is where a strong research design can help. It is important to be able to explain what one is looking for so that the archive has a better idea about how their resources can benefit your research.

If the archive has a web presence, and many do, check for finding aids that provide a somewhat detailed index to the contents of the collection to determine if they have materials that can aid your research.<sup>8</sup> You may also want to contact an archivist at the collection and explain your project. This has two benefits. First, you get a better idea about whether the archive will be useful to your research. Second, making contact with an archive that may be funding your trip will give your grant application a higher profile in the selection process. Be sure to mention in your proposal that contact has been made and that the archive has the appropriate data. Appropriate background preparation, combined with the fact that very

few scholars (especially political scientists) use these archives, means that an application has a very good chance of being approved.

These stipends vary from a few hundred dollars to over a thousand dollars. Sometimes the cost of travel and document duplication (which varies from \$.10 to \$.50 per page) and postage exceeds the available stipend.<sup>9</sup> In these cases, internal university funding is perhaps the most convenient source of funding. Most universities have small grant programs for faculty; larger graduate institutions offer small amounts of funding for graduate student research.<sup>10</sup> For graduate students, these small grant awards offer an excellent opportunity to hone one's grant writing skills and build one's vita. For early career professors these grant awards are a good way to demonstrate immediate success to your department and your administration while waiting for the slow wheels of the journal machine to begin to provide more evidence of your research success.<sup>11</sup>

## Planning the Trip

Your first step is to go through online finding aids to identify which boxes may contain the documents of interest. Contact the archivist to identify the numbers of the boxes you are interested in examining, but also take advantage of this contact to review the purpose of your visit. Archivists can be very good resources prior to and during your trip. At small to medium sized collections, archivists are likely to have detailed knowledge of their collections; they may have done some or all of the filing themselves and know exactly which boxes and files contain what you need. More accommodating archivists may take an active interest in your project and make suggestions for searching parts of the collection that might not have occurred to a researcher with less knowledge of the collection. At larger collections, the archivists may have less intimate knowledge of the collection that you are researching, though they will do everything they can to aid your progress. Our experience is that archivists are friendly, interested in the research, and are as helpful as possible.

Trip planning also involves more mundane details such as how to get there, how long to stay, and where to stay. Advice on the former will vary. If it is possible to reach the archive by car, then drive. Driving will provide more flexibility with respect to lodging, meals, and after-hours exploration. With respect to time considerations, confer with an archivist to get an

estimate of the volume of material through which you will be searching. Then, plan more time than you think you will need. If the archivist says that it will take three days then plan for at least four days, five if you can. This is especially true if you are making your first trip to an archive. Finally, if you are traveling on a tight budget (and most likely you will be) and visiting a university-based archive contact the university housing department; there may be moderately priced on-campus housing available.<sup>12</sup> If you are visiting a private archive, ask the archivists for recommendations; they live in the area and can point you to inexpensive lodging close to the collection.

One last piece of advice: Fraternize with the locals. If there is a university in the area, contact someone in the political science or history department who might share a common research interest. It is our experience that other scholars are interested in what you are working on and are often very hospitable. Furthermore, most archives close around five o'clock, leaving a lot of free time in the evenings—locating a likeminded scholar can relieve some of the after-hours tedium. It is also wise to bring along enough work to keep busy during your time away from the archive; bring even more work if you are not the social type.

## Upon Arrival

Be prepared for what you will find. Not all archives are the same. There are two schools of thought in archiving. One school holds that the organization of the papers when they arrive communicates some important information about the context in which the documents were generated. The other school holds that the archivist should impose order on the documents by arranging the documents to promote easy access by researchers. Archives that are arranged following the latter philosophy make it a great deal easier to locate files with the documents that the researcher has identified. Archivists who hold to the former philosophy mistake disorder for meaning. Congressional staff spend little time and effort on organization.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond archival philosophy, one other variable strongly influences the state of a collection. Some members leave Congress and others are run out of Congress. When a high-profile member of Congress leaves the institution, a professional archivist is often invited to catalogue the member's papers before they are shipped to their final resting place.<sup>14</sup> When a member loses an elec-

tion careful organization is overcome by the need to quickly vacate the offices. When a collection like this arrives at an archive it represents a special challenge to the archivist who is charged with organizing the collection.<sup>15</sup>

Whatever the state of the papers, it is important to remain focused yet be flexible. Congressional archives are fascinating. It is not difficult for those of us who love politics to become caught up in reading each and every document. Have fun, that is a part of the process, but remember why you are at the archive. Maintain your focus on tracking down what you have come to find. Your time at the archive is limited. The last thing that you want to do is be on your way home knowing that there are still documents there that you did not order for copying. Remain flexible about leads that you may want to track down later if there is time, but go after your target documents first.

Perhaps the most excruciating decision one faces when doing archival research is which documents should be copied. Copies are expensive, and the tighter one's budget the more excruciating the decisions become.<sup>16</sup> Documents that are specifically identified in the research design receive first priority. Following priority documents are those that are closely related to the core of the research and are unanticipated discoveries. If you stick with this strategy you will minimize the number of unwanted copies, though you will always find some of these when you get home; this is a cost of trying to be both speedy and thorough. After several days in the files it may become difficult to distinguish between documents that have been ordered for copying and the documents that one is coming across; duplicates of many documents are commonly spread across files. With regard to priority documents: When in doubt, have it copied. Finally, resist the temptation to copy everything that is interesting; you do not have enough time or money!

Take notes as you search the papers. Make note of documents and folders that you might want to return to; it is always possible to order some limited copies from the archive once you are home if you know where the documents are located. Taking notes will also help remind you of research questions that might be pursued using your new data.<sup>17</sup> While searching through an archive one will imagine an almost endless list of possible research directions; but memory fades, so write it down.

Learn to identify the handwriting of the legislator so that you can distinguish

between marginal notes written by the member and those written by staff. Considerable insight can be gained from a "respond coolly, TPO" scrawled at the top of a committee assignment request letter when one is sure that TPO is Thomas P. O'Neill. At the Albert Center we examined Speaker Albert's notes from a Spanish class that he took at the University of Oklahoma after his retirement to identify his penmanship. If a key staff member was assigned responsibility for an area of your research interest, try to identify that person's handwriting as well. Josephine Wilson maintained the committee assignment files for Minority Leader Ford throughout his leadership of the House Republicans. Wilson's apparently sarcastic comment written in the margins of a *Congressional Quarterly* article reveals a great deal; next to the statement that ". . . members said lobbying of the executive committee [the committee responsible for making Republican committee assignments] is fairly rare," Wilson wrote: "ha! ha!"

It is possible to collect archival data without actually visiting the archive. The authors have successfully used a graduate student to complete archival research from a distance, and some of libraries (including all of the National Archives facilities) will provide photocopies of identified documents or folders via mail order. For this to work, however, the researcher needs to have a working knowledge of archival research, an extraordinarily specific idea about what one is looking for, the ability to communicate exactly which documents one wants, and the luck to find a graduate student who is comfortable doing archival research.<sup>18</sup> We suggest avoiding this strategy until the researcher is personally comfortable with doing archival research. However, if this is the only way to get the data it is better than not getting the data at all.

## Conclusion

Without question, there are significant barriers facing scholars who would use congressional archives, time and funding constraints chief among them. But the potential benefits of archival research are many. We return from our trips exhausted and glad to see our families again, but also more enthusiastic about our research and more knowledgeable about Congress. The archival experience enriches our teaching as much as it does our research. The researcher will find that potential stories that enliven classroom presentations, provide context, enhance one's credibility as an

“authority” on Congress, and help to clarify otherwise abstract theoretical concepts to students abound in these archives.

Congressional archives provide important new data with which congressional scholars can address significant puzzles in the literature. The archives that we

have visited contain data that could significantly advance scholarly understanding of the roles, strategies, and success of party leaders in the House. For many years, this debate has suffered from a lack of high quality data appropriate for addressing theoretical conjecture about the influence of the House leadership (or

the lack thereof) in the policy process. Just because appropriate data are not readily available does not mean that you can't go make them up! We contend that congressional archives are the perfect place to begin looking for the data that will influence the next generation of American politics research.

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## Notes

1. The Everett McKinley Dirksen Center and the Caterpillar Foundation, the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, the Carl Albert Center, the California State University, Bakersfield University Research Council, and the Niagara University Research Council provided financial support for this research.

2. Walking down the street one night one happens upon a man who is obviously intoxicated and is searching the sidewalk and street for something. Wanting to be a Good Samaritan one asks the man what he has lost and if he would like some help. The man answers, “Yes, I dropped my house keys and I am having problems finding them.” A detective by nature, one asks the man where he was standing when he dropped his keys. “Down the street there,” says the man casually pointing while continuing to look down where he is standing. Curious that the man is not looking in the area where he indicates that he lost his keys one asks, “Why are you looking here when you lost your keys over there?” “Because,” the man answers quite seriously, “it is dark over there and there is a street light here, I can see better.”

3. Do not forget that Ford was a member of Congress. He was the House Republican Leader before becoming vice president and then president. Ford's papers include approximately 1,344,000 pages of documents from his years of service in the House.

4. Interestingly, during the writing of this note an interesting pattern became apparent. The first author has made six trips to archives with four of these to more accessible locations and two to less accessible locations. The second author has made four trips, all to less accessible locations. Statistical analysis of this anomalous pattern resulted in a strong relationship between being the first author and visiting a more accessible collection ( $\tau\text{-}b = .67, p < .002$ ).

5. Our thanks to Jason Lantzer, an ABD in the Department of History at Indiana University, for his excellent research assistance.

6. The *Guide to Research Collections of Former United States Senators, 1789–1995* is avail-

able from the Senate Historical Office. Another useful source is “Congressional Collections at Archival Repositories” which is available at: [http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/c\\_clctns.html](http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/c_clctns.html).

7. The Albert Center, The Dirksen Center, and the Ford Presidential Library all have travel grants. It is my understanding that the Foley Institute at Washington State University will soon begin offering such grants as well. Several other collections also offer funding, former Representative Morris Udall's (D-AZ) collection and former Representative Claude Pepper's (D-FL) collection, for example. For a more complete listing see the APSA web site at <http://www.apsanet.org/PS/grants/>.

8. Many archives lack the resources to post an online finding aid. Some archives charge duplication and postage fees for hard copies of finding aides; if this is the case, try to narrow down your search with the help of an archivist to a limited number of pages to minimize cost.

9. One of the authors confesses to avoiding postage costs by packing an empty suitcase and filling it with photocopies. If you do this, we recommend that you include this suitcase as part of your carry-on luggage rather than risk having your hard work misdirected to Boise.

10. Although our research has benefited from support from all of these sources, truth be told, we have had to support our research through grants of support from the Frisch Foundation and the Kelly Charitable Trust. We are thankful to the CEOs of these charitable organizations, Elizabeth Rothrock and Sheen Rajmaira.

11. Of course, there are sources of more substantial funding such as NSF. The authors never sought funding from these sources in the completely unsubstantiated belief that many reviewers would view archival research as “risky,” the risk being that the researcher might not find valuable data in the archives and the funds would be wasted. We do not discourage others from pursuing funding in these deeper pockets and we hope that our suspicions will be proven wrong. We have not been disappointed yet by a

trip to an archive, we have found all the data we were looking for and more.

12. Let's face it, staying in a dorm while conducting archival research is about as close to being Indiana Jones as scholars of American politics can get!

13. Both authors have worked on the Hill. If our experience is any indication, staff adhere to the following style of organization: 1) Stack documents on desk; 2) When it becomes too difficult to find things put like papers in a folder; 3) When the stack of folders becomes too high put the folders in a box; 4) When the stack of boxes gets too high send boxes to storage.

14. For instance, former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-ME) announced his retirement several months before the end of the 103rd Congress and then allowed an archivist to catalogue his papers before they were sent to Bowdoin College.

15. This is the case with the Foley Papers. Speaker Foley lost his bid for reelection in 1994 and was forced to vacate his offices in short order. As a result, the relative lack of order in the Foley papers presents a minor challenge for the researcher.

16. Of the archives that we have visited, only the Ford Library allows the researcher to photocopy the documents. This can result in a considerable savings (10 cents per page self-service versus 50 cents per page if library staff do the copying—these fees are standard throughout the National Archives and Records Administration) that must be weighed against the additional time (and drudgery) needed to photocopy.

17. Most archives now allow researchers to use laptops; however pens are still typically taboo. Pencils are the writing implements of choice.

18. Given the lack of emphasis on archival research in political science it is probably best to hire a student in a department of history as they may be more knowledgeable about archival research and use their time, and your money, more wisely.