



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

APPRAISAL OF CONGRESS MEMBERS' PAPERS

A National Context

As archival repositories accumulate increasing quantities of, and as they become more familiar with the nature and content of, the papers of recent members of Congress, the issue of the bulk of these materials in relation to their documentary value has become an important collection management issue. Recent literature on the general subject of public officials' papers suggests that a commonality of outlook is beginning to solidify. Although nothing approaching unanimity exists regarding what materials within a given collection, or within a body of related collections, should be retained, a consensus is emerging regarding what should not be kept in its entirety, and regarding the bases upon which such retention decisions should be made.

The following exposition is based on a selective review of the archival literature. It does not pretend to comprehensiveness, but does encompass outlooks expressed in the major issuances that have specifically addressed archival management of Congress members' papers. Personal conversation at various times with archivists who deal with Congressional papers suggests that both the degree of variance and the degree of commonality expressed in the literature is an adequate reflection of archival opinion and practical research experience in general.

Patricia Aronsson, who has worked in four Congressional offices, provides the most direct and explicit summary of the issue in her chapter, "Appraisal of Twentieth-Century Congressional Collections," in Nancy E. Peace, *Archival Choices*:

...[C]ongressional collections are far larger than they need to be in order to reflect the important issues and activities that they document.... Thus, congressional collections require a new approach, one that addresses the many problems inherent in these collections. Because many of the drawbacks of these collections are a consequence of their size, it follows that the new strategy should focus on ways to shrink these collections.... (pp. 82-83)

Aronsson also notes (pp. 81, 82) that diminishing use of these collections by researchers, which is due in good part to their bulk and repetitiveness, raises questions about their value relative to that of other archival holdings. For studies of Congress, at least, many scholars rely wholly or in large part on published records and other secondary sources.

A 1985 conference on Congressional papers, sponsored by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), included an assessment of Congressional collections. This assessment postulated that they best document the activity of a Congressional office; matters of national, local, and regional importance (varying with the degree of the member's involvement); special interests of the member and principal staff members; and the member's life and career -- not general social and political history -- and concluded that evidence which does not

contribute to an understanding of these four areas is dispensable (*Congressional Papers Project Report*, p. 51).

Research Utility

There have been relatively few studies of the research use of Congressional collections that explicitly address the types of files that are the most likely candidates for selective retention or outright rejection. In some instances, their perceived value can be deduced from omission rather than inclusion -- e.g., an article in *Extensions* (Fall 1989) notes the potential of memoranda and liaison reports for determining the relative weight of constituency interests vs. other considerations in determining bargaining responses, while making no reference to constituent correspondence, replies thereto, or tallies thereof.

Numerous observers have noted that (1) most of the papers of a Congress member are really the papers of his/her office, and should be assessed as bureaucratic residue rather than as personal papers; (2) the content quality of 20th century Congress members' papers has declined, with much important communication occurring in person or via telephone; and (3) most collections see little research use. (c.f., Robert Warner, unpublished paper, Dec. 6, 1976)

Possibly the most explicit study of the research potential of a group of Congressional papers is one done for the Minnesota Historical Society by James K. Benson in 1976, under a Public Affairs Center research grant. He examined the constituent correspondence files of Clark MacGregor (in depth) and of Donald Fraser and Odin Langen (summarily), in order to assess their usefulness for purposes of quantitative research (especially to study patterns of public opinion) and to suggest guidelines for sampling and processing procedures. Among his conclusions was that "systematic" (i.e., linear) sampling, preferably among file groupings that have been clustered ("stratified") by nature, subject, and/or probable value, can yield a useful selection while minimizing costs.

Benson stressed that whenever constituent correspondence is studied, sampling will occur, since its volume is too great for any researcher to explore it in total. He suggested that a sample drawn during processing, leaving researchers with only a fraction of an original file, might be as useful as one drawn personally by a researcher from an intact file, as long as the sampling strategy was judiciously conceived and adequately documented. He urged that care be taken, however, to preserve a representation of all strata within a collection and of the overall distribution of similar items among these strata, rather than always just the "important" topics or files. The more general the file, the greater the potential need for "oversampling" to capture an adequate representation of its content. He also noted that the value of constituent correspondence as a research source is considerably enhanced if it can be linked to external data, such as city directories, public opinion polls, and censuses.

In a 1977 follow-up study, University of Wisconsin economist Charles Palit and political scientist Barbara Hinckley concluded that the retention of 20 per cent of large, homogeneous series would be sufficient for most quantitative researchers, and archivist Eleanor MacKay found that "meaty" letters are few and far between in general constituent correspondence. MacKay

recommended true random sampling rather than linear sampling, however, although not giving a rationale for this much more time-consuming procedure. (MacKay, "Random Sampling Techniques...", *American Archivist*, 41:3 (1977), p. 281-289).

A 1978 Conference on the Research Use and Disposition of Senators' Papers, sponsored by the U.S. Senate and attended by historians, archivists, and Senators' staff, generated a variety of commentary and some consensus (conference *Proceedings*), particularly with regard to constituent mail. The prospect of wholesale or "capricious" destruction of constituent mail bothered the historians a lot, but they tended to recognize that its research use is minimal in relation to its bulk and that reality dictates that not all of it can survive. There was considerable interest in microforms and computerization, including automated indexing, as solutions to the problem of bulk. Some pertinent highlights of this conference:

Lynn Gentzler of the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection observed that research in their recent Senatorial collections has been almost entirely topical, with no quantification usage (p. 29).

William E. Leuchtenburg observed that after one has examined the mail on a particular subject for awhile, it becomes predictable, and one's research aims can be attained without examining all of it (p. 39).

Senators' papers can provide qualitative evidence to support quantitatively based models of legislative behavior (James Hilty, p. 44).

"Most researchers 'work' constituent correspondence files to learn the senator's views on issues. The contents of constituent letters are not nearly as important as the senator's reply" (Martha Swain, p. 50). One should not relegate some classes of people (such as children) to second-class citizenship by routinely destroying their correspondence (Swain, p. 52).

"Senators' interactions with their staffs leave a much richer kind of documentary trail" than existed earlier. "The entire context in which a senator operates draws a much more institutionally rich record into his office from the outside world" (David Wigdor, p. 54). Senators' papers have not been getting used to write social history. "The sources for the study of American life are so much more widespread that it is just dysfunctional to try to expect every kind of political problem to be documented in a senator's papers" (Wigdor, p. 55).

Leuchtenburg ("The Disposition of Senators' Papers," *Prologue*, Winter 1979), in the course of arguing a public interest in preserving Congress members' papers, notes that "some of the richest sources for the New Deal period are those of less conspicuous senators." He also argues that there should be devised "methods of sampling that will preserve the essence of files," specifically including constituent mail and service files, so as not to eliminate all evidence of work that occupied a large proportion of members' time. Some archivists, in particular former Wisconsin state archivist Jerry Ham, have proposed that one means of achieving the latter goal is via selective

retention of largely intact files, either by a few repositories or for a few members' papers within a single repository.

Dirksen Congressional Center director Frank Mackaman, in a 1979 *Midwestern Archivist* article, assessed the value and usefulness of Congressional case files and postulated that many of their research values stem from the light they shed on the nature of representative democracy in modern times, as well as their potential for revealing socio-economic variables, patterns of constituent demands, and the operation of Congressional offices.

The 1985 conference on Congressional papers dealt with issues and considerations that might inform members, repositories, and the NHPRC itself in appraising and placing members' files. Participants developed a set of proposed minimum standards for Congressional collections, encompassing the following factors: (1) the member's stature, including role in or contribution to the Congress, longevity, geographical focus, political role, and legislative accomplishments; (2) the collection's quality: completeness and continuity in documenting the member's role in the public arena, operations of his/her office, important national or state issues, and personal life and career, as well as its relation to a repository's other holdings; (3) the member's relationship with constituency: geographical focus, special interests or problems of the district, breadth of ties with other players in the public arena, identification with particular philosophy or issues; and (4) the collection's manageability: especially organizational state, presence of indexes, and archivally sound media.

The University of Washington conducted a survey of users of its Congressional papers in 1986 (before their Warren Magnuson and "Scoop" Jackson senatorial files were fully available, however), and from 35 respondents found the following to be the most used series: General correspondence (28), personal correspondence (19), subject files (13), legislative files (9), department/agency correspondence (7), speeches (5), committee files (5), project files (3), and aides' files (1). Respondents found the various correspondence series to contain the richest content for their studies. (Karyl Winn, SAA presentation and appended survey results, 8/86)

Senate and House offices, Aronsson points out, all engage in the same three activities: meeting constituents' needs, representing the home district's interests, and legislating national policies (p. 84). Moreover, many materials -- such as correspondence and background information on the general range of issues before Congress -- tend to be duplicated in the papers of all Congress members who served during the same time period.

Only by paring down these collections to their unique elements will archivists succeed in making them useful to researchers and manageable for archives. (p. 83)

Aronsson stresses that her recommended appraisal approach "requires meticulous background work," with the archivist becoming thoroughly familiar with the Congress in general, the home state's individual members and their offices, and issues important to the state, preferably while the members in question are still in office (pp. 83-84). Of particular importance are the characteristics that make each office unique: special state concerns (such as mine-safety legislation in West Virginia), the member's personal interests, committee assignments (also reflective of the member's prime interests), and popular causes that surfaced during the member's tenure (national

and state issues in general, and any issues with which the member may personally have strongly identified). (pp. 85-86)

Emerging Consensus on Disposable Materials

Even absent the opportunity or resources to work directly with a Congressional office or to study in depth the collections already in repository custody, a body of opinion regarding certain specific types of materials or record series is emerging from the collective experience of those within and without the Congress.

Senate History, July 1978 [sic], offers guidelines for a records disposition program (originally derived from the Sept. 1978 Conference on Research Use and Disposition of Senators' Papers), including a list of potential bulk-reduction disposables. These are:

- Duplicates
- "Orchestrated" pressure mail (office to keep count of pieces received)
- Printed Congressional documents
- Service academy appointments
- Requests for government publications, flags, photos, etc.
- Routine congratulations (graduations, newly naturalized, etc.)
- Letters from school children
- Job applications and resumes
- Requests for assistance: immigration cases, securing visas, passports, military transfers and promotions
- Veterans' files
- "Crank" files
- Awards, plaques, other memorabilia
- Unorganized clippings
- Office operation files (requests for equipment, phone bills, etc.)

Records Management Handbook for United States Senators and Their Repositories (1985) (hereafter *RM Handbook*) adds the following:

- Declined invitations
- Congratulations on election, reelection
- Routine requests for information that were referred elsewhere
- Pressure group publications
- Thank you letters and condolence letters
- Orchestrated pressure mail (save an example, along with a CMS printout of names and addresses)

The 1985 conference on Congressional papers included as an appendix a 1983 report by an ad hoc planning group on a manual for Congressional papers (never written). It included appraisal and disposal recommendations for several categories of Congress members' papers. These are incorporated into the discussion, below, of specific types of record series. They rest explicitly on two propositions: (1) "redundant information need not be saved," and (2) "what the collection best documents must be saved," but all else is relative (p. 49). Cynthia Miller of the House Historical

Office uses this as a handout for staffers and repositories who ask her advice on retention and disposition (personal conversation, 4/8/91).

Case studies of the processing or other management of specific collections reveal some strong patterns in the selection of materials for disposal:

Philip Hart Papers (Michigan Historical Collections): disposed: boxes of thank-yous, invitations, post office patronage files, some routine requests files; candidates for disposal or weeding: constituent mail, clipping service packets, office administrative files. (Thomas E. Powers, unpublished paper, undated)

President's mail at Ford Presidential Library: general bulk opinion mail (about 25% of total holdings): they surveyed each box of bulk mail, made a rough sort by subject area, then drafted disposal memoranda for each subject that established disposal or sampling criteria based on type, degree of uniformity, etc., and retained descriptions of sampling strategies with box lists and quantities. (Dennis A. Daellenbach, unpublished paper, May 9, 1985)

Reagan White House general public opinion bulk mail: once every 2 weeks, an Office of Presidential Libraries archivist went through the stored bulk mail, removing from every 5th or 6th box a random sample totalling ca. 1% of the whole. The White House had made a computerized record of name, address, and subject at the time each letter was answered. (Daellenbach, op. cit.)

In 1976, Dan Reed, head of the presidential libraries system, told Sue Holbert of MHS that the FDR Library was sampling constituent mail and discarding much, and recommending to the other presidential libraries that they do likewise, especially with older collections after the donors are gone or no longer interested (SEH memo, 10/21/76, in LL Public Affairs Seminar 1977 file).

Assessments of Individual Series Types

Below are more extended discussions of several of those records series that are frequently proposed as prime candidates for disposal or heavy weeding.

Constituent case files

These relate to the Congressional office's intervention to help an individual or an organization obtain a federal benefit or solve a particular problem with a federal or sometimes a state agency. The majority involve social security benefits, veterans' benefits, welfare assistance, and travel or immigration matters. There may also be substantial files on military service obligations, and/or on assistance to local businesses. Nearly all of them offer the twin problems of considerable bulk and potential confidentiality.

Aaronson notes that while casework meets an important need, it is "not one of the fundamental responsibilities of members of Congress" (p. 85). Although researchers need

to know that this activity occupied much staff time, she considers the historical significance of the actual letters "minimal," and points out that "researchers cannot expect congressional collections to document the whole of the U.S. experience" (p. 93). She suggests that archivists consider recommending that the congressional office schedule these files for periodic destruction, except in the case of problems or issues specific to a particular region or reflective of a member's own strong interests (p. 93). Retention of a small sample, for anecdotal values, is also an option, provided access policies protect the individuals' privacy (pp. 93-94).

Cynthia Miller of the House Historical Office is now recommending to members that they dispose of their constituent case files, due to bulk and confidentiality (personal conversation, Feb. 1989). *RM Handbook* recommends that "routine cases" be considered temporary, with only those bearing on "agency oversight" (undefined) or that become individually significant being permanently retained. It notes, however, that opinion is divided concerning the long-term research value of such files, and recommends that the office consult with its designated archival repository. Cumulative case work indexes and reports, if extant, should be retained (pp.14-15).

The 1977 *Final Report of the National Study Commission on Records and Documents of Federal Officials* recommends sampling case files to "allow the timely disposal of most ... while retaining a sufficient record of the Member's ombudsman role, and of areas of constituent concern" (p. 36). Its minority report, however, felt that "privacy considerations outweigh the value this correspondence may have in documenting the activities of members of Congress" (p. 87).

The *Congressional Papers Project Report* notes that because of their volume "the responses have become routinized to the point that individual items lose historical significance," but points out that some go beyond routine handling and others may be of special significance to a region. Content analysis should be done before rejection or sampling, particularly to determine whether routine and significant are interfiled. The aggregate should be permanently represented, via summary reports, logs, etc. (p. 53).

David Wigdor feels that "institutional casework" (assisting towns, major industries, etc.), which reveals an array of intergovernmental connections, is much more historically valuable than is individual casework (*Conference on the Research Use...*, p 54-55).

MARAC Technical Leaflet #4: "Processing Congressional Collections" (1985) states that constituent correspondence/case files should be closed at the discretion of the archivist. Most of Jacob Javits' were disposed of prior to transfer; some of the remainder will be closed for 20 years, with the stipulation that thereafter constituent names will not be used.

Constituent mail (issues mail)

Archivists who deal with serious quantities of these files appear unanimous in feeling that they cannot and must not all be retained; that some representation of public views and concerns must be preserved; and that this is best done via sampling -- whether done by the

congressional office through its filing and/or record-keeping procedures, or by the receiving repository. The *Congressional Papers Project Report* notes that their "historical significance lies in the total volumes and in single examples of the opinions and emotions expressed," that most Congressional offices have developed procedures for selecting items that require individual attention, and that registers (if present), instructions, and master replies are what should be preserved (p. 52).

RM Handbook (after urging that the Senatorial office consult with the repository archivist) recommends that the office consider microfilming or sampling large volume, single issue mail and "multiple issue" letters; retain small volume mail on issues important to the Senator or the state; discard out-of-state and unanswered letters; retain a sample of post card and form mailings, along with a count or a CMS printout; retain a master set of form paragraphs; and generate and keep cumulative indexes and reports of issues mail (pp. 12-14).

An interesting sidelight: Avra Michelson (unpublished paper, April 1985) found that Michigan governor Milliken's communications office, apparently in common with that of governors of several other states, routinely discarded bulk mail, often with neither response nor disposal record, so that his files offer a very skewed reflection of citizen opinion.

Jim Benson notes that constituent mail may be a significant source for the study of trends of "activist" opinion during the last few decades, a period when mass political letter-writing has emerged as an important new form of political participation (Letter, LL's public affairs seminar 1977 file).

Service Academy Files

Here opinion seems to be unanimous: these can be disposed of with no net loss of information, their only potential value within a given Congress member's files being to perhaps reveal patterns of political patronage. The service academies maintain files on all their students. Aronsson (p. 95), the *Senate History* guidelines, and *Congressional Papers Project Report* all recommend disposal, the latter noting that a register or summary and procedural information should be retained. The *Senate RM Handbook* considers files on those actually appointed to be permanent, but also notes that "if the office maintains a register of applicants and appointees, and documents the process by which decisions were made..., the register should be sufficient for historical purposes" (p. 16). Michael Berman, Walter Mondale's legal counsel, recommended retaining only their summary lists of applicants for each year, and the Minnesota Historical Society implemented this decision in transferring the Mondale senatorial files to MHS.

Routine constituent requests

For photographs, biographies, statements or greetings, complimentary copies of public documents, flags flown over the Capitol, White House tour tickets, etc. Congressional offices tend to keep these as separate files or sub-files. Aronsson (p. 95), *Senate History* guidelines, and *Senate RM Handbook* (p. 16) all recommend disposition. The

Congressional Papers Project Report, noting that the process is more important than the individual actions, recommends retaining registers and/or summary reports, and in the absence of these perhaps retaining no more than a summary description to record their existence, scope, and volume (p. 52).

Routine greetings and congratulations

To the member on holidays, his/her birthday, etc. From the member to constituents (usually in response to a solicitation from the constituent or a relative) on 100th birthdays, 50th wedding anniversaries, weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs, graduations, etc. Senate *RM Handbook* does not mention these; neither does Aronsson. *Senate History* guidelines recommend disposition.

Invitations

For appearance at an event (with or without a speech) or, less frequently, for personal meetings. Aronsson (p. 90) and Senate *RM Handbook* (p. 5) consider accepted invitations to be permanent, declined invitations to be temporary (optionally keeping a summary or log). *Congressional Papers Project Report* additionally recommends seeking a register or finding some other way to record the volume and general character of invitations routinely declined (p. 52).

Newspaper clippings

Clippings files are the result of deliberate selective processes, and their concentration and arrangement may enhance their research value to the point where it overrides their redundancy; they should be judged on their informational merits before disposal (*Congressional Papers Project Report*, p. 50). *RM Handbook* considers them permanent, noting that the repository should be consulted to determine a focus for those to be retained (p. 17).

Legislative files

The *Congressional Papers Project Report* notes that while redundancies may be weeded out, "the transactions recorded in the files are essential to an understanding of one of the central purposes of the office, and the files should be retained in their totality" (p. 53). *RM Handbook* recommends retention of files on bills sponsored/co-sponsored by the member; archivist appraisal of proposed bills; disposal of files on bills in which the member had no personal involvement (p. 7-9).

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