Scholar Finds Congressional Archives Rich In Resources

By Robin Kolodny

My dissertation, "The Role of the Congressional Campaign Committees in Party Development and Leadership Selection in Congress," has led me down the path of congressional archival research. The Congressional Research Grant that I received from the Dirksen Center has enabled me to pursue a variety of archival sources which have been vastly underutilized.

My topic has been particularly difficult to research because the Congressional Campaign Committees (CCCs) have either shredded their records (due to the sensitive nature of some of their activities) or thrown them out, due to lack of storage space. Luckily, the individual congressmen who headed the campaign committees over time kept CCC records among their office files. Through the individual congressmen’s records, I have been able to record some of the CCC activities as well as discover the link between CCC activities and leadership selection in Congress, one of the key points of my research.

Congressional archives vary tremendously in size, organization and accessibility. Unlike presidential archives, congressional archives do not have the benefit of one central administrative agency overseeing their operations. Therefore, one must simply delve in. Using the guides to the collections of former members of Congress produced by both the House and Senate historian’s offices, I wrote to the various archives, explaining my project and research needs and inquiring about accessibility, photocopying policies and travel information. A few had substantial holdings and sent finding aids to the collections or their relevant sections.

I have been able to visit quite a few of these collections, putting my priorities with those having the richest holdings and those with the most reasonable accessibility. Two of the best congressional archives that I visited were the Joseph W. Martin Center at Stonehill College and the Everett McKinley Dirksen papers at the Dirksen Center.

The Martin Center at Stonehill College in North Easton, Massachusetts is an incredible facility featuring the papers of Speaker Joseph Martin. The director of the Martin Center (an historian) and his staff assisted me in every way, from planning my trip to suggesting new sources for my research. The collection was clearly and thoughtfully organized. making it easy for me to work through the multitude of documents. There were also many secondary sources on Martin, which helped place many documents in context. The Dirksen papers are even better organized (in fact, the best I have seen). Although there is no short form of the finding aid, the detailed version that I found upon my arrival was amazing. This is the only collection I have encountered that had individual file contents listed. Furthermore, this collection was in excellent physical condition. It was also very comprehensive, containing materials about many of the individuals with whom Dirksen worked. The staff was extremely helpful and attentive.

These archives are a valuable source of information, not just about the topic in question, but about the individual they are centered upon and the context in which the individual operated. Not only did I come to understand the workings of the CCCs, but also such things as the close and domineering relationship between Lyndon Johnson and Earle C. Clements through the Clements Collection at the University of Kentucky Archives; or the resentment between Joseph Martin and Charlie Halleck through the Martin Center Collection; or the frustrating relationship between Richard Nixon and his protégé Bob Wilson, through Wilson’s papers at San Diego State University. The list goes on and on. Congressional archives are an underutilized resource, but they are excessively rich for any student of political history.