Managing Congressional Papers: A Repository View

LYDIA LUCAS

WALTER JUDD HAD A GRIEVANCE. Judd was the United States congressman from suburban Minneapolis and vicinity from 1942 to 1962. During these twenty years, he had experienced a distressing change in the nature of his public service. By the end of his term, his major duties seemed to him no longer to be those of a lawmaker with a substantive role in formulating and structuring national policy. Instead he found constituent requests, services, and liaisons commanding 80–85 percent of his time and energy; and he felt that this change had come about because ordinary citizens had no recourse to the federal government except through their congressman. His defeat for re-election in 1962 followed an aborted announcement of retirement earlier that year, which had been prompted by his distaste and disappointment at what he obviously considered a comedown from lawmaker to lackey.[1]

Judd's papers reflect this transformation. Constituent service materials approximately doubled in quantity during his second decade in office, with the greatest increases occurring for such matters as assistance to military personnel, social security cases, and passports and visas.[2]

A similar pattern appears in the papers of most of Judd's contemporaries and successors. More than a third of the papers (1947–58) of Senator Edward J. Thye concern his interactions with federal agencies and congressional committees in behalf of his constituents. In 1948, similar letters begin to appear in abundance in Harold C. Hagen's papers (1943–54). Constituent files for legislative issues, executive departments, casework, and general constituent relations comprise half or more of the papers of representatives Joseph E. Karth, Ancher Nelsen, and Clark MacGregor, all of whom served during the 1960s.[3]

In the early 1950s, as the nature of the documented functions of members of Congress was shifting, the bulk of their papers began to mount in what an enterprising cataloger several years ago memorialized as a "crescendo of volume."[4]

The author is head of Technical Services, Division of Archives and Manuscripts, the Minnesota Historical Society. She prepared this paper for presentation to the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, at Salt Lake City, October 6, 1977.

[1] Letter, Judd to Russell W. Fridley, June 9, 1962, in Minnesota Historical Society accession files. Memorandum of conversation between Judd and Sue E. Holbert, Minnesota Historical Society, April 4, 1973, accession files, Minnesota Historical Society.

[2] General survey of Judd papers, by Tracey Baker, August 1977.

[3] Survey of political collections at MHS, by Lydia Lucas, 1975.

[4] Introduction, inventory to Harold C. Hagen papers, MHS.

Hagen's papers for his twelve years as a congressman occupy 18 linear feet; Thye's for his twelve years as a senator, 81 feet. A decade later, by contrast, twelve years of Karth's papers (1959–70) occupy 130 feet, ten years of MacGregor's (1961–70) occupy 170 feet, and sixteen years of Nelsen's occupy 200 feet.[5] Judd's files are half again as voluminous for the second decade of his service as for the first. And the senatorial papers of Hubert H. Humphrey, for 1949 to 1965, total 700 feet.

Dramatic increases have come in: first, documentation of those types of constituent relations once considered peripheral to a congressman's responsibilities as spokesman for his district; and second, the types of communications stimulated by the ease of photoduplication, the complexity of the national bureaucracy, the increased penetration of government into the fabric of the lives of its citizens, the immediacy of public interest in current legislation, and the sheer size and complexity of the American electorate and its concerns. Files on assistance in solving problems, on requests for information and publications, on congratulations and other expressions of personal interest, and on issues of intense public concern dominate these collections in obtrusiveness, if not always in quantity. They are larded with background files, printed and mimeographed items, photographs, clippings, and other memorabilia. The communications which have suffered the most lamented decline have been the substantive and thoughtful personal letters and memos of the years when a member of Congress developed opinions and positions and articulated them to friends, colleagues, and constituents with minimal reliance on briefing papers, staff writers, telephones, news releases, and robo replies.

It has by now become a truism that modern congressional collections are massive, low in individual content value, filled with accumulated miscellany that have no direct connection with the member's own activities, and largely devoid of substantive insights into the internal workings of Congress or the development of the positions of its members. It is tempting to bewail what is lost and to feel that the value and usefulness of these papers decreases in direct proportion to their size and to their altered character. Yet through all changes in style, in focus, in scope, and in complexity, the congressman and his office have remained the primary interface between the American people and the federal system. The significance of this role may in fact be increasing rather than declining. Any archival judgments about the management of congressional collections must be made with this role firmly in mind.

As archivists, we have a variety of obligations in regard to those congressional papers which we elect to solicit and keep. We must select and preserve materials that are of enduring research value, and pass judgment on those which we feel are not. We must safeguard individual rights and interests represented in the files, both in regard to when and how they are used and in regard to whether or not they are kept. We are generally expected to be able to provide retrieval or reference services to the congressman, and often to his successor. We must make the papers available, physically and bibliographically, for research use. We should, in fact, aim our organizing and inventorying techniques at encouraging such use, for its absence undermines our rationale for having such papers. Finally, and perhaps primarily, we must manage these papers without allowing

[5] Survey of political collections at MHS.

them to pre-empt time, space, and resources that belong to our other collections and activities.

The substantive insights into the member of Congress and his setting, insights such as historians and political scientists sought and found in nineteenth and early twentieth-century collections, have been superseded, or at least submerged, by bulk and repetitiveness. The key to extracting maximum value from the modern congressional collection lies in formulating a clear basis for making new value judgments—judgments which we have not had to make before, but which are now necessary if we are not to be swamped in a sea of paper—and in imposing these judgments upon the collections.

What are a Congress member's papers good for? What might a researcher expect, or hope, to find documented there? The member's role as interface between constituents and government in the context of current political processes provides a framework for exploring some answers to these questions. Among the aspects that might be documented are:

1. The structure, management, activities, and interrelations of the member's office and staff, and their relation to his duties and priorities.
2. The legislative process: the nature and extent of the member's participation in the introduction and movement of bills, his major legislative interests, his impact and influence, the interaction of his interests and activities with the concerns and pressures of his constituency.
3. The role and importance of his committee work, and its relation to his other activities.
4. Interactions with other federal departments and agencies: the member's role both as a congressman and as a representative of a wider public in the overall governmental structure.
5. Interactions with constituents: their problems, concerns, and opinions; how they are expressed; how he responds to them; the type and scope of his constituent services; his role as representative of his constituency, and how completely he fills this role; how he defines and identifies his constituency and his obligations to it.
6. Local and regional history, including the geographic and demographic parameters of public opinion; and community development, economics, and public services.

With some criteria in mind for evaluating congressional collections, there are several strategies available for coping with them efficiently. One of the most basic is to consider how many of the factors that we want to document require the retention of a file, or a portion of a file, of actual papers. Conversely, we must consider the items that bear little or no relationship to the topics we want or can reasonably hope to document. Application of these criteria to selection and weeding can substantially strengthen a collection by removing a great deal of dross.

For example, state and federal government publications, including committee reports, hearings, and selections from the *Congressional Record,* are available elsewhere, and most are listed or indexed. Form letters, news releases, mimeographed memos, and other issuances of federal agencies are unlikely to be found in sufficient quantity or completeness to be of research significance. Similar issuances of committees, congressional caucuses, legislative research groups, etc., are also likely to be incomplete and unreflective of a members' personal partic-

ipation in such groups. Topical background files are seldom complete or unique enough to constitute a significant subject resource. All such materials can be discarded or transferred ruthlessly. Unless they happen to be an integral part of a working file, there is little likelihood that a researcher will even use them, much less come to the collection in search of them. The same principle can be applied to pamphlets, magazines, political tracts, promotional and campaign literature, and other materials, even those accompanied by a covering letter and response, if they were sent as informational or complimentary items and have no integral relevance to the files.

Other types of files serve only as tangible evidence of the full scope and nature of the official or semi-official activities of a member of Congress. These can effectively be discarded and replaced by a sheet appended to the collection's inventory, listing file types and quantities for each year, with perhaps brief comments on their character. The most ubiquitous examples of such files are those of constituent requests for copies of bills, agricultural yearbooks, mailings, other government publications, flags flown over the Capitol, assistance in arranging trips to Washington, and similar routine services, as well as congratulations, condolences, and other personal contacts. Files of invitations and service academy applications should also be considered for such treatment, although the choice here is less obvious, since they can reveal patterns of behavior not readily available in other form.

A second tactic is sampling. Sampling can assume a variety of forms, depending on its purpose and on the types of materials to which it is applied. It is not a panacea, nor can it responsibly be used on the entirety of every congressional collection. It is most valuable for groups of homogeneous items or files where bulk is substantial, where subject content is either thoroughly amorphous or very uniform, and where predictable research uses will not be unduly compromised by a substantial decrease in volume. Sampling works best when done according to a uniform and predetermined procedure based on volume and types of files rather than on individual, *ad hoc* value judgments, and when the sample size and procedure are carefully recorded for the benefit of future users.

Sampling decisions are influenced by the organization of the Congress member's files, which determines the quantity and types of materials that can fruitfully be sampled and which affects the size of the sample that is drawn. Miscellaneous constituent correspondence can comprise half or more of some collections, and a relatively small sample (perhaps as little as 10 percent) can continue to reflect the character of the materials while reducing them to a size that is manageable for surveys and analyses. Other, more structured, collections may still contain heavy correspondence on certain legislative or policy issues of particular public concern, though a larger sample (one in three or four) is advisable to preserve a full range of opinion and its expression.

An even more obvious candidate for sampling is constituent form mail—runs of identical (usually printed or mimeographed) form letters, post cards, or newspaper cut-outs supporting or opposing a specific legislative issue. Their content is sufficiently preserved by keeping a single sample, with a form reply, if any, and an estimate of the quantity discarded; and their potential usefulness for demographic surveys is compensated for by their association with files of actual correspondence on the same issue.

There are also bibliographic strategies for coping with bulk. The analysis and inventorying of tens or hundreds of linear feet of materials, if done according to the procedures that are standard for smaller collections, will consume a staggering amount of time, literally enough to break the back of an institution with limited resources. Given their low item-value in comparison to bulk, and their relationship to a Congress member's known activities, they can and must be dealt with in the aggregate.

Most congressional collections are structured to a greater or lesser degree, and their structuring follows predictable patterns. The nature and subject content of various series is likewise predictable. There are executive or departmental files, reflecting the member's interactions with federal agencies; bill files, on legislation introduced by the member, sometimes accompanied by considerable correspondence; legislative committee files, of letters and other papers regarding bills and issues handled by the various congressional committees; constituent and/or state files, on constituent services and local issues; case files, which may be a separate series or may be part of the files for pertinent departments or agencies; campaign files; and personal activity files of various sorts, including speeches, newsletters, invitations, news releases, clipping files, and biographies.

The structuring and predictability of congressional collections have two important implications for their archival management. First, the archivist can minimize processing time and concentrate it to best advantage by capitalizing on the existing file structure, relying heavily on series summaries and annotated file lists rather than on narratives or lengthy folder descriptions, omitting internal sorting wherever it is not necessary to the effective use of a file, and organizing and inventorying in detail only the most valuable, heterogeneous, disorganized, or unpredictable materials. Keeping the papers in their original folders is a controversial procedure but worth considering where time and money are important, for it both eliminates costly refoldering and preserves the tangible evidence of how office activities were conceived and organized. Control files and other finding aids should be assiduously sought and scrupulously preserved, for if complete they afford a personal name-access to the papers that eliminates the need to search out and list significant correspondents.

The second implication of file structure and predictability is one more of attitude than of procedure: *no Congress member's office files are unique.* All congressional collections contain departmental, legislative, committee, and other functional files, or their equivalents, and they vary little in form and purpose from collection to collection. Beyond the obligation we owe the researcher by fully and accurately accounting for the files in our possession, time spent in analyzing the common and the obvious is time wasted.

The unique character of a congressional collection, that which most firmly supports our rationale for acquiring and preserving it, derives instead from the individuality of the Congress member in his interests, his personal style, and his contribution to the governmental and representational process, and from the locally rooted attitudes, problems, and concerns of that portion of the American public embodied in his constituency. I return to the concept of interface, which can both guide and justify many decisions that must be made about the accumulation and management of modern congressional papers. If the member is viewed outside of his local context, basically as a cog in a bureaucratic structure, then we can logically look toward lessening our management burden and pro-

moting the use of his papers and those of his colleagues through centralization, subject-matter collecting, rejection of constituent files, and selective retention of different types of files by different institutions. I am opposed to all of these. I submit that the way in which the member defines and expresses his relationship to his constituency, and the way in which his papers reflect this relationship, also shape their most unique and enduring values.

The question of how to define and respond to the research strategies that might be used to explore and analyze this interface are beyond the scope of this paper. Our first obligation is to define and describe the modern congressional collection in ways that not only make its effective use possible, but that actively encourage use. This goal can best be approached through a conceptual framework which familiarizes researchers both with the overall nature of all such collections and with the unique contribution of each particular collection and its creator, and which offers assurance that a research project based on the papers will prove manageable and worthwhile.

Although we may find it painful to pare down these collections and in some cases to structure a researcher's work for him through heavy sampling and weeding, the hard, cold truth is that our public is not going to use materials that they feel are too much for them to manage. If researchers perceive a collection *as a whole* to be overwhelming, then the whole of that collection is likely to remain unused. Do we want to fill our stacks with collections that are unexpurgated but also untouched; or do we want to promote and encourage their use even at the cost of predetermining some of what is kept for that use? My own response I think is obvious. I feel strongly, however, that archivists, whatever their ultimate decision might be, have no business handling modern congressional collections unless they are prepared to face up to this question, and to the pros and cons inherent in either choice.