

PS 1211: Legislative Process

The Bill
Due March 17

Your mission (should you choose to accept it): Create an original bill for introduction in the simulated Congress and design a strategy for publicizing and passing it. Besides earning a great grade and my eternal esteem, good work on this project offers you opportunities to:

- Formulate a real policy proposal of interest to you
- Apply what you have learned about how legislators design legislation
- Construct a political strategy, using what you know about how real legislators balance their jobs both on and off the Hill
- Engage in actual professional writing
- Practice writing for different audiences

Your role: For this mission, you will be playing the role of your legislator's crack policy chief. You've got a J.D. from Georgetown, you've been on the Hill so long they know you by name at Bullfeather's, you attended James Carville's wedding to Mary Matalin, and you've not so recently carefully removed Jack Abramoff's card from your Rolodex. You're a pro, and you've got the connections to show for it. You work fourteen hours a day, and there's a 22-year-old intern who brings you coffee every day and would do anything to get your job. Your boss trusts you implicitly.

The phone call: It's 8 a.m. on a Monday. You've been in the office since 6. You get a call from your boss. The conversation goes like this:

YOUR BOSS: <<Insert your name here>>, I need something new. I need to you to draw up a *bill*, something that will play well at home, but has a good chance of really passing. I rely on you to tell me how to weight those two concerns, given what you know about my political situation. I need it to be in proper form, like the bills you can search at <http://thomas.loc.gov/>. I need you to prepare a *memo* of two pages or less, double spaced, outlining both your strategy for publicizing the bill back in the district and your strategy for trying to get it passed in the House. To go with the memo, I want a *press release* for the folks back home and a "*Dear Colleague*" letter to convince other Members of Congress to support the bill. This needs to be good. You mess this up, and I may have to give the coffee intern guy a shot at your job.

YOU: I'm on it. <click>

The assignment: As you know from the conversation with your boss, you will be producing four documents: a bill, a press release, a "Dear Colleague" letter, and a strategy memo. More information on each of those parts is below.

The bill: Each legislator will be required to submit a legislative bill for consideration in the House. You are permitted to introduce more than one piece of legislation if you like, but you MUST submit at least one bill for which you are the sole author and for which you complete ALL of the tasks outlined here. The content of this bill can cover any topic (within the jurisdiction of the House – no making future hockey legend Sidney Crosby the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court).

The proposed legislation is the fuel that will power the legislative side of the simulation. You should write an original bill, not just download one from some website. You may use existing bills to work from or modify; however, I want you to write the legislation. From past experience, overly technical or lengthy pieces of legislation rarely get brought up in the simulation. At the same time, overly simplistic and exceptionally brief pieces get ignored, too. Although there is no page limit, bills usually run a page, maybe two, long. Your best shot at passing a bill is writing something that has a tangible outcome – that is, one that moves the status quo. You can write a bill to “authorize” spending, but remember the Senate’s “Byrd rule:” You spend it, you pay for it. If you want to spend new money, you need to identify where you are going to cut.

The press release: This document explains to the press, your constituency, and related interest groups that your boss has introduced a piece of legislation and why that makes him/her a great person. As is the nature of press releases, it should be brief, to the point, and should extol the virtues of your boss. Your job here is to help make the point that your boss is a great representative. Keep in mind, though, that you are a government employee and cannot therefore actually tell them to vote for your boss.

The “Dear Colleague” letter: The audience for this letter is other Members of Congress, although it is a public document. Your job here is to try and convince your boss’ colleagues to co-sponsor your legislation and to help him/her pass it. Here, you’re selling the legislation, not your boss. Tell the other Members what the bill does, why your boss is introducing it, and why they should help. Keep in mind that most other legislators will not take the time to read the legislation, so this letter is your big chance to get them to sign on.

The strategy memo: This brief memo (your boss told you to keep it under two pages!) is the “meat” of the assignment. The release and the letter are part of the strategy you outline here. As with all your actions, your strategy ought to be constructed with an eye toward your political constraints. What is it about your constituency (or the greater political world) that prompted this legislation? What are you hoping to accomplish with this piece of legislation? (Note that these accomplishments could be political ones for your boss, both on and off the Hill, or they could be “good policy” accomplishments.) What is the likelihood of success of the bill? Are the political benefits back home good enough that likelihood of success is less relevant? Analysis of the political chances of the bill will be a large part of the best strategy memos.

Assessment: OK, fine, very cute, you might be thinking. But all I really want to know is: *How are you going to grade this thing?* Well, I have two answers. First: *We're on an intellectual journey here and you're ruining it.* Second, the assignment is worth 100 points total. Below, I list the point value for each section and a list of the questions I'll be asking myself as I assess that section. "Self," I'll say....

The Bill (20 points)

- Is it in the correct format?
- Is it properly written?
- Is it complete?
- Is the proposal well thought-out?
- Is the proposal feasibly one that could pass in the House (in other words it is constitutional and otherwise legal)?

Press release (20 points)

- Is it in the correct format?
- Is it professionally written?
- Does it correctly characterize the bill?
- Could it be cut-and-pasted into a small newspaper with very little staff?
- Does it provide enough information for a reporter at a larger newspaper to start writing a story?
- Does it make the Member of Congress look good?

"Dear colleague" (20 points)

- Is it in the correct format?
- Is it professionally written?
- Does it correctly characterize the bill?
- Does it provide a persuasive argument for why a legislator should support the bill?

Strategy memo (40 points)

- Is it professionally written?
- Does it correctly characterize the bill?
- Is it succinct and to the point?
- Can I skim it in 30 seconds and get the "gist" of the argument?
- Are the press release and "Dear Colleague" clearly part of the overall strategy?
- Does the strategy memo provide the Member of Congress with enough information to form an independent assessment of the quality of the strategy?
- Is the strategy politically feasible, given the political realities facing the Member of Congress?

Handy tips:

- You can find examples of press releases and “Dear Colleague” letters on the web pages of most real Members of Congress.
- Don’t put a bill number on your bill. That’s up to the leadership.
- A good place to look for government projects to cut is the website of the organization Citizens Against Government Waste, at www.cagw.org. They put out an annual “Pig Book” of spending projects they think are wasteful. There’s something there for everyone!
- REMEMBER: You are writing to your boss. As is clear from your conversation, he/she is no-nonsense, and your memo should reflect that. He/she will probably read it on the Capitol subway while rushing to a vote. Make it clear and easy to read, or the coffee intern guy will.