

PS 1214: Congress

Constituency Connection Project

District Profile due January 28

Agenda due February 25

The first major assignment for the simulation is a two-part paper outlining the key social and political issues of your state and district. The paper is not meant to be a political document, so I do not want to see language like “the great state of...” I also do not want the paper to be a proxy for a tourism ad. Instead, you should think of it as a strategy outline for your behavior during the remainder of the simulation. Importantly, though, that strategy should be based in actual information about your district and your constituents. Although it will be tempting to insert language from websites or books directly into your paper without attribution, resist the temptation, as this constitutes plagiarism. If your paper consists almost entirely of the words of others, even if they are properly cited, this is also a problem. The point here is: BE CAREFUL. Start the project early so you will have time to consult me if you run into difficulty. You should expect your paper to be about five pages, double-spaced.

District Profile (2.5 pages)

The major goal of this assignment is to ensure that you are aware of the important political issues in your district and that you have devised a strategy for dealing with those issues prior to the “real” start of the simulation. It is therefore imperative that your paper be of good quality. A good paper will reap rewards for the rest of the simulation! Also, remember that style matters here. Be as creative as you want; Just make sure that all the required information is included.

Some questions you will want to be sure to answer include:

1. What are the district’s ideological/ partisan proclivities?

In class and readings, we will learn about “ideal points” and the spatial model. We will also learn that legislators are constrained by the ideological distance between them and their constituents. Hence, an extremely liberal representative from a district that is conservative will, in general, not be able to vote in accordance with his or her personal political ideology on every vote. This is because the ideology of one’s constituents creates a constraint, pulling legislators one way or another away from one’s own personal ideal point. Given this, you need to understand your district’s ideology in order to correctly account for this constraint on your legislative behavior. Therefore, you will need to estimate the ideological score of your district. An easy way to do this is by computing an average percentage of the Democratic vote in your Congressional district. Don’t tell anyone I told you this, but the data on Wikipedia is actually pretty good for this. The data you need are:

- Democratic vote for President in your district in the last two elections (2012 & 2016)
- Democratic vote for Member of the House in your district in the last two elections (2016 & 2018)

So for example, assume that in your Congressional district, the percentage of the Democratic vote for president was 48 and 52, and for the House races, it was 29 and 32. Your district's ideology score would be:

$$\bar{x} = \frac{48 + 52 + 29 + 32}{4} = \frac{161}{4} = 40.25$$

That is, the average Democratic vote share across these four elections is about 40 percent. That would be indicative of a district that is more Republican than Democratic. Making some assumptions about the relationships among ideology, vote choice and partisan makeup, we could conclude that this district is moderately conservative.¹

Now that you have an estimate of the district's ideology, we should also generate a measure of the variability of the district's partisan/ideological proclivities. To explain why, suppose that the average Democratic vote share across each of the elections were 63 percent, and the average deviation from one race to the next were only 1 percent (i.e. on average, there is only about 1 percent difference across the values for all four races). Under this scenario, you would know that the district is fairly liberal, and that there is very little variation in this level of liberalism. On the other hand, suppose the average deviation in the Democratic vote share were 23 percent. This means that on average, there is about a plus or minus 23 percent difference in the vote share across the four elections. Under this scenario, there is substantial variation. In the first scenario, there is more certainty in the estimate of the district's ideology but perhaps less "wiggle room" ideologically. In the second scenario, there is less certainty in the estimate but possibly more room to move ideologically.

To compute the measure of variability, you will need to compute the standard deviation of the Democratic vote share. This quantity is easy to compute. It is simply:

$$s. d. = \sqrt{\frac{\sum(x_i - \bar{x})^2}{n - 1}}$$

For the previous example, the numerator inside the square root sign would be equal to:

¹ It is important to note that this is a crude measure of ideology, but as a baseline measure, it will be adequate for the purposes of the simulation.

$$\sum (\bar{X}_i - \bar{x})^2 = (48 - 40.25)^2 + (52 - 40.25)^2 + (29 - 40.25)^2 + (32 - 40.25)^2$$

Which would be 392.75, the “sum of squared deviations from the mean.” Dividing this number by $n-1$ (in this case, 4-1) gives you

$$\frac{392.75}{3} = 130.98$$

In statistics, this number is known as the *variance*. Taking the square root of the variance gives you the standard deviation:

$$\sqrt{130.98} = 11.4$$

This number has a very natural interpretation. It tells us that the average deviation in the Democratic vote share in the district is about plus or minus 11 percent.

If you compute these quantities, you will not only have an estimate of the district’s ideological/partisan proclivities, but also the variability around this estimate. Your paper should include discussion of these values and what they mean for the way you will have to play the game.

2. What issues/policies are important to your state/district?
 - a. Is the population of the district primarily found in rural or urban areas? (Question relevant to infrastructure/agriculture issues)
 - b. What is the percentage of the district’s population that is black, Latino, and Asian? (Question relevant to racial/ethnic issues)
 - c. What is the median household income of the district, using the most recent census data? (Question relevant to employment/income distribution issues)
 - d. What is the median age (or average age if that is all you can find) in the district? (Question relevant to insurance and education issues)
 - e. What is the percentage of college educated citizens in the district, using the most recent census data? (Question relevant to education, development, and technology issues)
 - f. What are the major geographical features of the district that may be politically relevant? (Question relevant to environmental, tourism, development issues)
 - g. Does the military have a major presence in the district? (Question relevant to armed services, foreign affairs, military base issues)
 - h. Are there any locations of concern for possible terrorist attacks? (Question relevant to homeland security issues)

Agenda (2.5 pages)

Using the information from your district profile, and any other information you deem important, think about the issues that would be most politically important to the district. Note that when you gather the information, you should also consider the data on your district in a comparative context. Is your district relatively richer or poorer than other districts? Is it younger or older? More or less racially diverse? The “meat” of your paper should be a political agenda for your district, focusing on three or four top priorities. This agenda should be politically realistic and produced in accordance with your analysis of questions 1 and 2 from above. Remember: a raging conservative cannot and would not credibly propose a liberal agenda. You are constrained in what you can do by your own political views, those of your party, and especially those of your constituents!

3. What is the connection between you, the member of the House, and your constituency?

In this analysis, I want you to compare your “ideology score” to your district’s score. First, take this quiz: <http://www.theadvocates.org/quiz.html>. For simplicity’s sake, just use your economic score. The score you will get is actually a “conservative” score, so you’ll need to subtract that number from 100 to get a number that is comparable to the score you just created above for your district. Now, compare these two numbers. Is your score distant or close to the district’s estimate? What does proximity (or lack thereof) imply about how you would play the game? Be sure to consider the variability estimate of your district’s ideology. Do your constituents give you much “wiggle room” in your behavior? Why or why not? Are you free to move far ideologically from your constituents, or are they pretty ideologically firm? By this I mean the following: suppose your district has an ideology of 50 and a variability estimate of 25. Suppose further that your own ideology score is 60 (so you’re a bit of a liberal). Even though you know the average variability around 50 is plus/minus 25 (or 25 to 75), how does that variability factor into your being a liberal? Are you free to move to more liberal positions, or are you constrained by the conservatives in your district? Related, how might your level of seniority relate to the amount of “wiggle room” you have? Ultimately, what you need to do is describe who your constituents are ideologically and use this information to help determine what your “political range of motion” is.

4. What are you *like*?
 - a. What is the relationship between the constituents and you?
 - b. What parts of your background are uniquely suited for the district, and what parts may you want to downplay?
 - c. Who are your four constituencies?
 - d. How do you interact with constituents when you are home?

Here, I don't want to know about strategy as much as personality. Remember: I'm not asking about the "real" Member of Congress; I'm asking about the one you are playing. This can be just plain ol' you or it can be as flamboyant as you choose. Just remember to ground your answer in the realities of your district. And districts can differ – around Pittsburgh, a non-native Pittsburgher would have a hard time getting elected to Congress, but this is not a problem in, say, Phoenix, because no one is really from there anyway.

The profile and agenda must include citations to any sources (in print or on the Internet) and a works cited (should only include works that have an in-text citation). Be sure that you can *trust* the Internet sites you are using. A list of sources to begin your research is attached. Do not rely exclusively on the sources listed below – they simply serve as a means to get you started.

Examples of sources

Books and periodicals

Almanac of American Politics
Politics in America
Congressional Quarterly Almanac
Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report
National Journal

Internet Sources

Clerk of the House (for previous election information):
www.clerkweb.house.gov

Find out about the "real" Representative from his/her webpage:
www.house.gov

District-level demographic information:
www.census.gov

More political information:
www.vote-smart.org