

**Article:** "The Senate School of Public Policy"  
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**Issue:** July 2006  
**Journal:** *PS: Political Science and Politics*



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# The Senate School of Public Policy

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Given our national obsession with efficiency, time management, and resource allocation, it is astounding that political scientists have not recently examined the organizational structure of congressional offices.<sup>1</sup> Between the House of Representatives and Senate, there are 535 individual fiefdoms that employ those who toil away on Capitol Hill. What becomes abundantly clear from working on the Hill is that each of these offices marches to the beat of a different drummer. Every morning, after the ritualistic quest for coffee and the obligatory trot through security scanners, over 17,000 staffers find their way and open the doors to their respective offices.<sup>2</sup> It is assumed that what works for one office is not a panacea for all.

For the most part, the individuality of congressional offices makes sense. Each member or senator has unique views about representation, legislative priorities, future political aspirations, and the role of staff. Nonetheless, there is room in Congress for a wider sharing of “best practices” that could improve the organizational management found in its personal offices. By good fortune, I happened to stumble across such an example in Senator Joe Lieberman’s (D-CT) office.

Many Senate offices (although not all, by a long shot) take advantage of the various fellowship programs available on the Hill. Some offices even make room for numerous fellows on an annual basis. What makes Senator Lieberman’s office noteworthy is that the entire legislative team is organized with fellows in mind. In most offices, it is commonplace for a fellow to either assume the duties of a vacancy or work with a permanent staffer on a particular policy issue. Other offices may hire a fellow to fulfill a specific timely need, such as bringing on a health policy expert for avian flu research.

Instead of viewing fellows as *gratis* legislative assistants who fill policy gaps, Senator Lieberman’s office organization revolves around six “policy teams” that consist of one or two fellows and one permanent legislative assistant. Every year, each policy team works to develop a legislative proposal for the senator in January. The oral and written presentation of the year’s legislative goals facilitates a long-term planning mechanism for policy achievement. Although the permanent member of the senator’s staff is the “team leader,” the entire group meets regularly with the legislative director, the chief of staff, and the senator to discuss relevant policy strategies and ideas. In practice, there is minimal hierarchy within the policy teams. Fellows are treated as equal members of the legislative staff, and are encouraged to hit the ground running with the legislative planning session that punctuates the start of the year.

Long-serving staff members agree that this novel approach can be attributed to Bill Bonvillian, who served as Senator Lieberman’s legislative director for 17 years. Bonvillian describes the

formation of the fellows program in Senator Lieberman’s office as fortuitous. Soon after Lieberman joined the Senate in 1989, a prospective fellow schooled in environmental policy unexpectedly walked into Lieberman’s new office and offered his services. Bonvillian decided to give it a try, and soon realized there was an untapped reservoir of knowledge available to Senate offices. He proceeded to hire more fellows from a wide range of congressionally approved programs, and gradually developed the organizational structure that now defines the office.<sup>3</sup>

## What Makes It Work

After several interviews with senior staffers, I began to understand why the considerable reliance on fellows works well in Senator Lieberman’s office, but hasn’t been widely adopted in the Senate. The first reason is that an office’s organization must reflect the senator’s own goals and preferences. Senator Lieberman has an ambitious policy agenda and views his role as a senator primarily through that lens. To this end, Lieberman’s chief of staff explained the senator is “always trying to get the very best brains to work on issues.”<sup>4</sup> Bonvillian concurred, observing that “two heads are almost always better than one.”<sup>5</sup> The office’s wide range of policy goals requires a large number of seasoned professionals. When I asked why fellows are a necessary part of Senator Lieberman’s office, the current legislative director, Joe Goffman, responded, “We have a boss that rewards and demands a high level of policy support, and fellows are part of that fully integrated infrastructure.”<sup>6</sup> Senator Lieberman went a step further, acknowledging that “it is hard to imagine the office functioning as effectively without the fellows.”<sup>7</sup> Another reason many Senate offices don’t use fellows or restrict their access or assignments is that they are concerned that fellows will not maintain the confidentiality of a political office. Lieberman’s senior staffers run a comparatively open and transparent policy effort and have never had a problem with confidentiality.

The bottom line is tight resources. The total amount of financial support available to a senator is the sum of two personnel allowances (administrative and legislative) and an office expense allowance. In 2006, the total of these three allowances varied from \$2.5 million to \$4.1 million, depending on distance from Washington, D.C. to the home state and the state’s population.<sup>8</sup> With these allowances, senators must set up separate offices in their home states to handle casework and outreach, correspondence staff, in-house information technology experts, administrative and press staff, and, finally, a modest number of legislative staff to handle the entire range of national policy issues. Given the small size of Connecticut and its relatively close proximity to the nation’s capital, a reliance on seven or eight fellows to supplement the permanent team of six legislative staff makes Lieberman’s enterprising policy agenda possible. There is no other Senate office that uses fellows in these numbers. It also enables Lieberman to pay a reasonable salary to the permanent legislative assistants he hires, which greatly increases the prospect of attracting policy veterans to the office who can serve as “thought leaders” on the Hill. Lieberman’s permanent staffers also tend to stay longer in their jobs than the average Hill staffer. Senator Lieberman credits the intellectual stimulation provided by the fellows as an important factor in Bonvillian’s uncommonly long tenure as legislative

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director.<sup>9</sup> Senior policy adviser Fred Downey, who has worked over 10 years for Lieberman, concurs. According to Downey, the fellows “refresh annually” while consistently bringing “real skills and abilities” to the office. The fellows have advanced the Lieberman staff’s reputation as a “mini think tank on the Hill.”<sup>10</sup>

The annual infusion of fellows also contributes its own distinct policy advantages. Goffman described Lieberman as a “compulsive innovator.” To think about policy problems in that way requires both “experienced legislative assistants” and “fellows who are on the cutting edge.”<sup>11</sup> Mixing policy experience with fresh conceptual knowledge provides Lieberman with a blend of advisers who can meet his legislative goals. The policy experience of each fellow varies, but the goal of incorporating fellows is to bring a fresh perspective to the legislative team. This enables fellows to expand their horizon (I am now versed in most major weapons systems and their acronyms) and bring a new point of view to the table. Instead of regurgitating the same ideas again and again, fellows help the legislative staff routinely formulate novel solutions for the senator. According to Lieberman, the only challenge of this arrangement is that “my staffers generate so many good ideas due to their intellect, I have to discipline them to prioritize.”<sup>12</sup>

Another factor that enables Lieberman’s judicious use of fellows is the office architecture. The way in which a congressional office is laid out may seem insignificant, but the design of a senator’s allocated space can actually preclude the addition of fellows. Bonvillian commented, “If you don’t design a space for fellows, you won’t have fellows. This is a challenge because space is a premium on the Hill.”<sup>13</sup> With this understanding, the Lieberman office has made a commitment to create space for seven to eight legislative fellows. A year ago, Lieberman had the opportunity to move to the historic Russell Building, the closest office building to the Capitol. However, because of the age of the building, which predates the growth in congressional staffing, the office space in Russell was much less adaptable to reconfigurations that would enable a large legislative staff. Lieberman decided to stay in the Hart Building instead, and redesigned the office to reflect the policy team organizational structure. In the process, permanent legislative assistants gave up their semi-private office space in lieu of more carrel space for fellows and the ability to group members of each legislative team in close proximity to one another.<sup>14</sup>

Almost immediately, the policy teams became more integrated. According to Goffman, the new office layout actually benefited the permanent legislative assistants because the heightened integration of the policy teams enabled greater efficiency, better communications, and ultimately more policy achievements for the senator. The placement of a fellow within a particular office space is usually a reliable indicator of how the fellow will be utilized. If fellows are given a small workspace near interns or legislative

correspondents, it only makes sense that they will assume the work duties of those who surround them. On the other hand, if they are given a permanent workspace, complete with a television for viewing the floor and committee hearings on C-SPAN, filing space, and bookshelves, the fellows will naturally assume the responsibilities of a legislative assistant. Offices hoping to attract several fellows annually must create an office configuration that accommodates this need.

Finally, the characteristics of the state represented can also impact staffing structure. At 34.6%, Connecticut ranks third nationally in the percentage of state residents (25 years of age and older) who have a bachelor’s degree.<sup>15</sup> The culture of higher education in Connecticut reinforces Lieberman’s preference for employing fellows who uniformly possess graduate and professional degrees in their respective fields. Connecticut’s high level of education places a premium on an experienced legislative staff. Because Connecticut is just a short plane or train ride away, an impressive proportion of the state’s special interest groups, community organizations, and businesses visit Senator Lieberman’s office annually. The fact that many fellows, who often meet with constituents, hail from states other than Connecticut is not problematic. Instead, Connecticut’s often sophisticated voters do not only hold a “state-centric” point of view but tend to adopt a more “national” scope.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, Lieberman’s preference for talent over parochialism dovetails nicely with the state’s own culture, talents, and preferences.

## Disseminating the Fellow Model

There are two main problems with trying to replicate Lieberman’s staff organization in other Senate offices. First and foremost, the specific variables I described may shake out differently in other offices, thus discouraging a senator from adopting the “Lieberman legislative model.” The other significant impediment is that senior Senate staffers simply may have no programmatic way to learn about what works organizationally in other offices. Although general management and administrative advice is available to Senate offices, Bonvillian confessed that in his entire career as a legislative director, he never “talked to anyone about the dynamics of how to organize a legislative staff because we were following such a different model.”<sup>17</sup> Although a bipartisan group of Senate chiefs of staff regularly meet, they have not discussed how to integrate legislative fellows into an office structure.<sup>18</sup> It is unlikely that 99 other Senate offices will want to transform themselves into the quasi-school of public policy which exists in Lieberland, but the sometimes moribund state of legislative affairs on the Hill certainly suggests that a wider propagation of its virtues is warranted.

## Notes

1. There are some recent exceptions. See Hammond 1996; Herrnson 1994; DeGregorio 1995; Romzek and Utter 1997; and Whiteman 1995. Older classics include Malbin 1980 and Fox and Hammond 1977.

2. Office of Personnel Management, November 2005 employment estimates; see <http://opm.gov/fedddata/html/2005/november/table2.asp>.

3. Besides APSA’s Congressional Fellowship, there are numerous other programs that support fellows in the House and Senate, including the AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science), the Fulbright program, the Pierson Fellowship in the State Department, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy Fellows (part of each APSA Congressional Fellowship class), the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Fellowship Program, the American Psychological Association Fellowship, the American Sociological Association Fellowship, the Carl Albert Center Fellowship (also part of the annual APSA Congressional Fellowship class), the Brookings Institution Legislative Fellowship Program, the Governmental Affairs Institute Fellowship Program, and the Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Program.

4. Interview, Clarine Nardi Riddle, April 11, 2006.

5. Interview, Bill Bonvillian, March 31, 2006.

6. Interview, Joe Goffman, April 23, 2006.

7. Interview, Senator Joe Lieberman, May 24, 2006.

8. Paul E. Dwyer, CRS Report, “Congressional Salaries and Allowances,” 6.

9. Interview, Senator Lieberman.

10. Interview, Fred Downey, May 24, 2006.

11. Interview, Joe Goffman.

12. Interview, Senator Lieberman.

13. Interview, Bill Bonvillian.

14. Interview, Lynn Baker, April 28, 2006.

15. U.S. Census 2004 American Community Survey; see <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

16. Interview, Joe Goffman.

17. Interview, Bill Bonvillian.

18. Interview, Clarine Nardi Riddle.

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