



May 15, 2009

Future NC leaders get valuable learning experience

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The Public Policy Institute at Western Carolina University continued an annual tradition recently by bringing approximately 200 North Carolina teenagers together to simulate a real legislature. The students wrote their own legislation, passed it out of committee, lobbied for their preferred outcome and debated it on the floor.

Sure, they learned a great deal. What is perhaps more interesting, however, is what we can learn from these budding legislators. By examining the challenges they faced and the strategies they used, we can learn much about the legislative process — whether we're talking about the legislature in Washington, Raleigh or your local town. Here are a few of these lessons.

Size matters

No matter the legislature, numbers help tremendously in getting legislation passed. This point was demonstrated clearly in our simulation. Hendersonville Middle School, which brought a team of 63 students, passed almost all of its legislation. Schools that brought five or six legislators had a harder time convincing others to vote for their legislation. Although this may sound like an artificial difference, this actually is similar to how it really works. A state like California, which claims 53 members of Congress, will have a much easier time passing a bill than Wyoming, which brings only one member to Washington.

Lobbying is about information

Often we tend to be skeptical about lobbying — perhaps conjuring up images of lobbyists “buying votes” to influence the process. But as N.C. Sen. John Snow pointed out in his address to the students, lobbyists who are the most effective are the ones who are familiar with both sides of a bill and help to educate rather than nefariously influence the outcome of an issue. Sure, the information they provide may favor their side (political scientists call this interested information), but good lobbyists avoid giving misinformation for fear that a legislator will not trust them again.

This was the case with the young legislators who did very little “horse-trading” and much more reasoning throughout the process. Students who were the most successful lobbyists were the ones who shared the most information and could accurately and honestly make a case for their legislation. Some are ‘showhorses,’ others are ‘workhorses’

Just like a good basketball team must include scorers and passers, a good legislative delegation must include both workhorses who do the behind-the-scenes work and showhorses who are more likely to make speeches and take to the airwaves to pass their legislation. For example, if you are not a political insider or a resident of the Fifth District of South Carolina, you may not have heard of Rep. John Spratt, as he is rarely on television or quoted in the newspaper. Nonetheless, Spratt is known as a keen legislative mind, well-respected on both sides of the aisle for his contributions behind the scenes. Spratt is a textbook example of a workhorse. Contrast Spratt with someone like S.C. Congressman Jim Clyburn, who is effective, at least partially, because of the ease with which he speaks on camera and on the floor of Congress.

We saw numerous examples of the showhorse vs. workhorse distinction. Some of our budding legislators were successful by working behind the scenes to draft the best legislation and have the most facts. Others relied on their natural skills of oration and speechmaking. The most successful delegations had both.

Legislators are people, too

Like people working any job, legislators get tired. Toward the end of the session, they may be watching the clock — thinking about getting home to see their kids, or hitting their favorite spot for dinner. They also may be aware of the rapidly ticking clock and want to accomplish something before

the session ends. As a result, much legislation gets passed near the end of the session. After three hours of floor debate at the American Youth Congress, we still had 14 bills to consider. Questions and debate were sparse near the end and nearly every bill got approved. Although we may think bills passed at the end of the session represent legislators "gaming the system," it may have more to do with simple time consideration and the lack of stamina after long and taxing days. Similarities between the behavior of legislators in Congress and the teenagers from the American Youth Congress demonstrate that legislative behavior is determined as much by the rules and regularities of the legislative process as it is by the intent of the legislators themselves. Or it may just mean we've got a lot of future politicians in North Carolina.

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