

How My Congressional Fellowship Informed My Research Agenda

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As an American Political Science Association Congressional Fellow, I served from January through August 2012 on the Democratic staff of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (the Lantos Commission). The Lantos Commission is a bipartisan body in the House of Representatives that serves as the principal site in Congress for elevating human rights as a priority in US foreign policy. I accepted this placement based on the opportunity to be the lead aide on the commission for Representative Jim McGovern, the Democratic Co-Chair of the commission. McGovern had established himself as one of the leaders in Congress on international human rights issues, and I was excited by the prospect of working for a member of Congress who was very active and skilled in advancing an important foreign policy agenda.

I began the fellowship with a long-standing interest in how US foreign policy works. Prior to going to graduate school, I had worked at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Lee Hamilton, a former US Representative who had been one of the leading voices in Congress on foreign policy during the 1980s and 1990s. As a special assistant to Hamilton at the Wilson Center, which he led after retiring from Congress, I co-authored with Hamilton a short book on the foreign policy roles of Congress and the president (Hamilton and Tama 2002). By the time I began my congressional fellowship nearly a decade later, I was an assistant professor with a research agenda and teaching portfolio centered on the politics and process of US foreign policy. I was eager to gain firsthand experience working on Capitol Hill, and the fellowship provided me with that opportunity.

My role working for McGovern on the Lantos Commission included organizing commission hearings on various human rights issues, meeting with human rights organizations and activists, and drafting letters to executive branch officials and foreign leaders about human rights concerns. In addition to those commission responsibilities, I assisted McGovern's efforts to advance human rights legislation.



One such piece of legislation end-

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ed up becoming the principal focus of my work as a fellow, and provided me with important insights that greatly influenced my subsequent research. In 2010 and 2011, before I had started my fellowship, McGovern had introduced legislation that mandated sanctions on Russian government officials who had committed gross violations of human rights.¹ This legislation, which became known as the Magnitsky Act, was inspired by a particularly egregious human rights violation in Russia involving the brutal death in detention of a Russian whistleblower named Sergei Magnitsky (Browder 2015). In conjunction with McGovern's introduction of the legislation in the House, Democratic Senator Ben Cardin introduced companion legislation in the Senate.²

In early 2012, McGovern saw an opportunity to gain more support for the legislation, as members of Congress in both parties increasingly had concerns about Russian behavior. After fraudulent parliamentary elections in Russia in December 2011 resulted in large-scale protests in Moscow, the Russian government cracked down harshly on demonstrators and passed a variety of laws prohibiting and punishing civil society activity (Herszenhorn 2012). Meanwhile, the Russian government was beginning to provide extensive military assistance to the Syrian government of Bashar al Assad, which was engaging in a brutal military campaign against Syrian rebels and civilians (Parvaz 2012). McGovern recognized that all of this troubling Russian behavior might lead more members of Congress to back the Magnitsky Act. In fact, the legislation became the principal vehicle through which lawmakers sought to hold Russia accountable for bad behavior in 2012.

McGovern charged me with helping him gain more support for the legislation and move it forward. Part of this work involved gaining cosponsors for the bill, which we did mainly through "Dear Colleague" letters to other House members telling them about the legislation and inviting them to sign onto it. This effort resulted in the legislation accumulating 39 Democratic and 39 Republican cosponsors in the House by August 2012.

Yet cosponsors alone were not going to be sufficient to get the legislation approved. To advance the legislation to the floor of the House, it needed to be approved by the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC). At the time, the House was controlled by the Republican Party, and the chair of HFAC was Republican Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. Ros-Lehtinen and McGov-

1 H.R. 6365, The Justice for Sergei Magnitsky Act (111th Congress); H.R. 4405, The Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act (112th Congress).

2 S. 3881, The Justice for Sergei Magnitsky Act (111th Congress); S. 1039, The Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act (112th Congress).

ern had a history of clashing over foreign policy—in particular, over Cuba policy. Like many Cuban-American elected officials, Ros-Lehtinen was a staunch advocate of isolating Cuba's Communist government and placing heavy pressure on it. McGovern was a leading proponent in Congress of normalizing relations with Cuba and easing sanctions on the country (Kucinich and Blake 2008).

Despite this history of policy conflict between the two lawmakers, Ros-Lehtinen decided to support the Magnitsky Act and brought it up for a vote in HFAC, where it was unanimously approved in June 2012.³ Five months later (after my fellowship had ended), it was passed by the full House, by a vote of 365-43.⁴ It was subsequently approved by the Senate, and signed into law by President Barack Obama.⁵ I was proud to have been able to play a small role in helping McGovern advance this landmark legislation.

My work on the Magnitsky Act greatly influenced my research agenda, contributing to subsequent decisions I made to conduct major projects examining patterns of bipartisanship and polarization in US foreign policy. In working on the legislation, I had been struck by the degree of bipartisan support for it despite the high level of polarization that typically characterizes the contemporary US Congress (Theriault 2008; McCarty 2019). After my fellowship, I set out to understand how levels of bipartisanship or polarization vary across issues and why elected officials line up in different ways in different policy debates. Among other things, I found that bipartisanship remains more common on foreign policy than on domestic policy, and that political alignments on issues are greatly influenced by the ideological and advocacy landscapes associated with them (Tama 2024; Friedrichs and Tama 2024).

In addition, my work on the Magnitsky Act influenced subsequent research I conducted on the use of economic sanctions by the United States. Although Obama ultimately signed the Magnitsky Act, the Obama administration had opposed the legislation as it moved through the legislative process, based on a concern that it would harm US relations with Russia. After my fellowship ended, I conducted new research showing that such congressional-presidential tensions are typical in US sanctions policy and that Congress wields more influence in this policy area than is commonly understood (Tama 2020; Elshehawey et al. 2023).

For each of these parts of my research agenda, the fellowship was valuable in giving me a deeper understanding of Congress and opening doors for me to develop relationships on Capitol Hill. Many of my research projects have included case studies that draw on interviews of current and former members of Congress and congressional staff. While researchers can certainly arrange such interviews without having worked in Congress, my fellowship experience has made it easier for me to connect with people on the Hill.

The fellowship has also influenced my teaching and service to the profession. I regularly teach courses on the politics,

3 Markup Before the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, "Various Bills and Resolutions," Serial No. 112-175 (June 7, 2012).

4 House Roll Call Vote 608 on H.R. 6156, The Russia and Moldova Jackson-Vanik Repeal and Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012 (November 16, 2012).

5 Public Law 112-208.

processes, and institutions of US foreign policy. When covering the role of Congress in these courses, I am able to provide students with a greater depth of knowledge about the workings of Capitol Hill than I would be able to offer if I had not served in a congressional office. The experience also allows me to lead simulation exercises in the classroom, in which students play the roles of members of Congress and executive branch officials, more realistically.

In addition, the fellowship has informed work I have done over the past decade to connect the worlds of academia and policy making. A year and a half after completing the fellowship, I joined the leadership team of Bridging the Gap, a multi-university initiative with the mission of fostering public engagement by university-based scholars and connecting scholars and practitioners (Tama et al. 2023). Some of Bridging the Gap's programs include engagement with congressional staff, and my fellowship experience has enabled me to be a point person for these forms of engagement.

In short, the fellowship has greatly enriched my career. It has served as a key foundation for my research agenda over the past decade, while also enhancing my teaching and service. At a time when Americans display declining confidence in both political and academic institutions (Brenan 2023; Jones 2023), the fellowship also serves an important societal function in cultivating greater mutual understanding between the political and academic spheres. In light of the fellowship's individual and societal benefits, let us hope that it continues to thrive, for at least another 70 years. ■

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