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Looking at Congressmen

HOW DOES MY CONGRESSMAN SPEND TAXPAYER MONEY?

Report of the Clerk of the House

The Clerk publishes a 2,000 page book after each quarter detailing how Congress spends taxpayer money on itself. The book includes the payrolls and expenses for individual congressmen, for House committees and for the House bureaucracy.

The pages on your Congressman in these books are crucial to any investigation and are available in federal depository libraries as well as with the Clerk's Office of Records and Registration (202-225-1300).

Payroll Section of the House Clerk's Report:
What it tells:

The Clerk's report shows the name of every employee, the time period he worked, his title (Rostenkowski did not use titles) and the employee's salary for the quarter.

The Congressmen are responsible for their own payrolls. Each month the Congressman must certify that the employees did official work for him. In addition, the Congressman must sign a form--that is not public--to put an employee on or take him off the payroll.

What it is good for:

The payroll is a key document for trying to locate the names of former employees to talk to about the office and who did what.

It is also a starting point for uncovering ghosts. We started looking at people who had been on Rostenkowski's payroll over time and tried to separate out who were the workers and who were the potential ghosts. We decided to focus our suspicions on the employees who would go on and off the payroll for a few months at a time, the people on his payroll with full time city jobs and the employees who were tenants in his buildings.

We then started interviewing former employees to find out what these people did and learned that some never came into the office.

What it doesn't tell:

The Clerk's report does not list addresses or social security numbers, making it more difficult to find people. Some top level employees have their biographies and addresses listed in the Congressional Staff Directory--a private publication that is in many libraries. (However, most ghosts do not list their biographies.) To find the rest of them, check voter or driver registrations.

Expense Section of the House Clerk's Report:
What it tells:

The report lists all payments for the expenses of a Congressman's office
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including stamps, travel, real estate and automobile leases, and even utilities.

For each item, the report lists the date of the voucher, the voucher number, the payee, the service dates, a description and an amount.

What it is Good For:

The expenses reports are good for leads:

For example, the reports show that Rostenkowski bought \$3,000 worth of 22 cent stamps in March, 1982, that he paid \$1,050 monthly for six years to lease a mobile office from Wil-Shore Ford, or that he paid \$1,250 a month in rent to an agent for his office at 2148 N. Damen

It is up to reporters--using other records and interviews--to figure out that:

*No Congressman needs \$3,000 worth of 22 cent stamps especially with the price of stamps going up a couple weeks later. Besides, Congressmen can send out nearly all their mail for free without stamps by using their franking privileges.

*Rostenkowski was in effect using taxpayer money to buy himself cars. The government was paying Wil-Shore for cars that Rostenkowski took personal ownership of by having them titled in his name. With one of the smallest districts in Congress--33 square miles, Rostenkowski did not need an official mobile office.

*Rostenkowski's rent payments were going to his sisters.

What it Doesn't Show:

The report is the only information that Congress makes public about its expenses. Congress does not make available the underlying vouchers, copies of the auto or real estate leases or the bills that were paid. The House Administration committee won't even tell you what kind of car the taxpayers are leasing for a Congressman let alone give you the vehicle identification number.

House Administration Handbook:

This book tells Congressmen what they can do with their taxpayer funds and how to handle their paperwork for staff and expenses.

The House Administration Committee treats it like it is a state secret, just like they treat every record in their possession.

Try to get a friendly congressman to make copies of what you need.

House Ethics Manual:

This document is put out by the House Ethics Committee also known as the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct. They will send you a copy (202-225-7100.)

It tells Congressmen what they can and cannot do with their house expenses, their staffs and their their campaign funds.

The book gives Congressmen a lot of latitude to do whatever they want. Still, it does provide some basic standards and is handy for finding out answers to questions like can Congressmen use their campaign funds to pay legal bills. (The answer is yes as long as the congressman thinks he needs to do it to preserve his career.)

The book also points out where past Congressmen have gotten into trouble with either prosecutors or the ethics committee. The committee will send you copies of their reports on errant Congressmen.

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HOW DOES MY CONGRESSMAN SPEND HIS CAMPAIGN MONEY?

Often, how Congressmen and other politicians spend their campaign money is more interesting than how they get it.

Dan Rostenkowski used his campaign money to pay himself rent, to buy cars for himself and his family, and to eat at pricey restaurants.

You need to get the Congressman's full campaign disclosure forms complete with expenses. While the names of donors are on-line, the Congressman's expenses are not.

You can either get the reports through the Federal Election Commission or through whatever state agency collects campaign reports in your state. Under Federal Law, the congressmen must file the reports in state and the state often makes them available quicker than the federal government does.

You should also look for other political committees associated with your Congressmen. High-ranking members of the House like Rostenkowski often have other leadership PAC where they funnel money to other congressmen. In addition, Rostenkowski had ties to secret local political fund which paid rent to his daughters.

WHAT DOES MY CONGRESSMAN OWN?

Congressmen and their top staffers must file a detailed disclosure statement each year with the Clerk of the House. The congressmen's reports are also filed in their home states with the office which regulates campaign disclosures and the recent reports are available on Nexis.

These reports which are due May 15 but not made public to June list assets, liabilities, and gifts and sources of income for the preceding year.

Their main drawback is the values are listed in ranges.

Still, the disclosures provide a roadmap to a Congressman's finances and a starting point to determining whether the Congressman is using his office or his campaign for personal benefit.

In the 1980's, Rostenkowski's disclosure reports showed that a friend was doing bang up job of investing Rostenkowski's money as trustee of his blind trust. The Sun-Times found that Rostenkowski had returned the favor by using his clout to get the friend a special tax break.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN MY CONGRESSMAN GETS IN TROUBLE?

He will either start billing his campaign for his legal bills or he will set up a legal defense funds or do both--anything to avoid using his own money to pay the the lawyers.

Rostenkowski has charged his campaign fund \$230,000 in lawyers for himself and his staffers and his associates. (The House thinks its perfectly okay for Rostenkowski to pay the legal bills of his aides when they are being questioned about him.)

He also set up a Legal Defense fund which raised \$750,000 in five months from lobbyists and cronies. Congressmen only have to disclose the donors to their defense fund once a year when they file their personal financial disclosure forms covering the preceding year.

Subpoenas. Under House Rules, members must inform the House that they or members of their staffs have been subpoenaed. These notices--but not the actual subpoenas--are put in the back of the Congressional Record for anyone to find. They can at least provide you with a confirmation that a grand jury is looking at something.

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BOOKS AND ARTICLES:

Above the Law: The Rise and Fall of Senator Thomas J. Dodd by James Boyd. 1968. New American Library. The classic tale of Congressional corruption told by the former aide who helped bring the Senator down.

Congress and the Nation by Congressional Quarterly. These giant library reference books, along with CQ's Guide to Congress, provide detailed descriptions on how Congress works and how Congressmen have gotten into trouble in the past.

Gold-Plated Politics by Sara Fritz and Dwight Morris, published by Congressional Quarterly Books. A look at Congressional spending by two Los Angeles Times reporters who used a computer to analyze two years of campaign reports for all Congressmen. This paperback details how Congressmen use their campaign funds as personal slush funds and for everything but elections. The book is loaded with examples and does a good job of explaining what the rules are on expenditures.

Handbook of Campaign Spending by Sara Fritz and Dwight Morris, published by Congressional Quarterly Books. 1992. This is the hardback, more detailed (and more expensive) look at campaign spending complete with break outs on each congressman and how their expenditures compare with their colleagues.

Capitol Cash by Gannett News Service and USA Today. 9-28-92 through 10-2-92. This series, which was reprinted in pamphlet form, took an unprecedented, computerized look at how Congress spends its money. Its a good reference.

Who Runs Congress by Mark Green. Bantam Books. This paperback was done by the Ralph Nader Congress Watch and includes information on past Congressional corruption.

"From Rags to Riches" by Joel Kaplan and James Pratt, Common Cause Magazine, January 1986. The article details the various ethical lapses and scams of then U.S. Rep. William Boner of Tennessee.

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