

Joseph Sargon Shamalta  
University of California, Los Angeles  
May 23, 2007

### The Paradox of Public Service

In the fall of 2006, I applied to become part of the UCLA Center for American Politics and Public Policy's Quarter in Washington program. Upon learning of my acceptance, I was filled with excitement. I was anxious to experience a culture outside of California and to take advantage of the program's focus on research. However, I was much more captivated by the idea that I would be living in the activity-center of the United States government. Even when I was a child, I sat by my parents' side watching the national news and following the political happenings of the time. As I grew older, I seemed to naturally love discussing and debating the key issues facing our country. These feelings became even more prominent when I founded my high school's first political party club, which I feel caused a wave of political interest among my fellow students. From that point on, I knew I could only find happiness in a career that involved public service. Not surprisingly, I applied for an internship with a U.S. congressman from California. Upon being hired, I knew I was entering into a new chapter of my life. My internship would allow me to serve the people of the United States in a much more profound and meaningful way than I had ever before.

An internship with a congressman is useful for getting a sense of what public service is truly like. There are times of great excitement and reward, but also times of strong frustration. It quickly becomes apparent that change is extremely difficult to initiate. I have observed the many challenges that the Congressman and staff deal with each and every day. From combating negative press coverage to persuading other members to cosponsor a bill, members of Congress truly have a difficult job. Although I have only been interning for a

little more than a month, I can easily say that my internship has provided me with a wealth of knowledge and opportunities. My supervisor has made a great effort to provide me with a valuable and well-rounded experience. My duties range from constituent work to helping the legislative assistants research policy-shaping information. Though some duties can be considered mundane, especially when it comes to daily office tasks, I am never bored because I feel that I am actually contributing to something meaningful. Through all of my duties, I gain a deeper understanding of how congressional offices work and just how “representative” our representatives are.

One of my favorite duties involves my work with constituents. I often take their calls, read their mail, and help form responses to their comments. Simply answering the telephones can be a daunting task. I have talked to many angered constituents who are extremely upset with some issue, ranging from Medicare to illegal immigration. Others call to voice their support or opposition to a bill being voted on in Congress. Despite the great amount of telephone calls that come in, I like communicating with the constituents each time. In my opinion, addressing people’s concerns is the pinnacle of public service. The Congressman once said to a group of constituents in his office that “all this belongs to you.” That simple comment struck me as a general truth that is too often ignored. While I often hear congressional staffers complain about constituent calls, they fail to realize that it is the constituents who pay for their salaries and their computers and their phones, etc. The government exists for the sole purpose of serving its people. Thus, when I take constituent calls, I do not think they should be easily disregarded. People are calling because they have some pressing concern or opinion that they believe to be right. While I am certainly not arguing that all constituents fully understand the issue they are calling about, it is important to

at least observe what is on people's minds. I realize that it is impossible to please everyone, so the public servant must act in a way that he or she believes to be in the best interests of both the constituents and the nation.

When I take calls or read constituent mail, I gain an understanding of what life is like for the people of the Congressman's district. Recently, we have received many comments in support of a bill that would provide protections against horse slaughter. While this seems relatively uncontroversial, I now understand that it is an important issue to many people of the area. Politics does not always have to be how the media portrays it; it does not have to be about partisan conflict and irreconcilable issues. Sometimes bills that seem unimportant to many people are extremely important to others. This is the nature of politics and public service. While it is impossible to satisfy all constituents, people should still feel that they have a government that serves them. When constituents call and demand things that are contrary to the Congressman's ideology, I still appreciate their effort. For example, while the Congressman will never support the impeachment of President Bush, I am glad that constituents are taking advantage of the rights provided to them in the Constitution by contacting their congressman. As public servants, it is the duty of every representative to listen to the people's comments. However, representatives are also officials that are elected to make smart choices, even if the decision is contrary to popular will. The legislator must understand the differing opinions on a subject and make the best judgment possible when formulating policy.

At my internship, I feel that I am contributing the most when I am helping the legislative assistants with their research. I frequently attend hearings ranging from such issues as military readiness to U.S. foreign aid to Africa. I then write a detailed summary of

what I observed, which is then given to the Congressman's staff. Usually, I will also have a conversation with the staff about what I observed and the different points of views that were present. I hope that by conveying this information, I am not only informing the staff but also contributing to the position that the Congressman will take. Hearings are extremely useful because they allow both Republicans and Democrats to explain their positions and provide evidence for their claims. In a world of media fabrication and "thirty-second sound bites," it is a relief to attend a hearing in its entirety and get more detailed knowledge about an issue. In Congress, committee and hearing rooms are the few places that actually have meaningful debate. It is exciting to witness this and become a part of the "power of reason," which should always be the dominating force in our democratic government.

I also help the legislative assistants with their work by completing various research tasks. Part of public service is knowing that your work will affect others; thus, I enjoy helping staff because I know that my work is directly contributing to their projects. When I help the staff with research, I feel like I am contributing to the way in which they will draft policy. For example, I recently conducted research on many major ports nation-wide. My research helped the commerce legislative assistant begin devising a bill that will help port cities gain greater profits from trade. As a public servant, it made me extremely happy to be a part of this process. I had a hand in the beginnings of a bill that will bring great benefits to cities nationwide. Words cannot describe how significant I feel that is – to be a part of that is all I can hope for in a career.

Through my internship experiences, I have gained a much stronger sense of how a congressperson's office functions. This has only intensified my desire to work with the legislature as I get older. I feel that Congress is the center of public service because it is the

only branch that is most responsive to the people. As I work with the legislative assistants more and more, I realize that they have careers that I could be quite satisfied with. When I questioned our health legislative assistant about her salary, she immediately replied “we’re not in it for the money.” From that simple statement, I gained a much more candid view of what government work is. While many people believe it is corrupt and for the power-hungry, I take a much more optimistic point of view. My observations have shown me that government work is an extremely fulfilling career for those seeking to make a difference. I strongly support the Aristotelian philosophy that true happiness can only be reached by those who are involved with public service. While public service can come in a variety of forms, I am most interested in government service. I feel that this is the perfect setting to make fundamental changes that will help the greatest amount of people possible.

Through all of my experiences working with Congress, I now understand the paradox of public service. Public service should be a duty carried out for the benefit of others. However, I also see it as a duty to be carried out for one’s own happiness. Helping others is the highest ideal one can possibly strive for. It also offers the highest sense of reward and satisfaction. With that in mind, public service is an opportunity rather than a task. It allows one to feel a sense of happiness and live a life worthy of recognition. On the other hand, public service does a great deal of good for others. There will always be people in need of compassion and assistance. To help make someone’s life better is an amazing reward in itself. I now realize that this is an ideal I will happily strive for, and in the end, I believe it is the only way I can live a life of true satisfaction.