

A tour of DC for Political Scientists

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I was merrily chatting with a pal who is a well-regarded Political Science associate prof at a well-regarded school, and he was complaining about how the ratio of citizens to Congressmen varied so widely from state to state. He proposed a simple solution: double the number of Representatives. He's right: this would improve things, and in the process we would surely fix the fact that Montana has a Rep and DC doesn't, even though DC has a larger population.

And my reaction, as one who has spent a fair amount of time floating around DC, was 'golly, where are they gonna put them all?'

Geography matters, and not just in the broad sense that that phrase is typically used. The geography of DC reveals some details of the workings of the US government that are not apparent on paper. So, let us take a tour of DC from the polsci perspective.

Congressional Our tour will generally go East to West, beginning with Congress, which is the center of DC, in the literal sense that it divides the four quadrants and the street numbers/letters count up from it, even though this means the NW quadrant is much bigger than the SE.

The Capitol building itself is pretty large—by law it is the tallest building in DC.¹ But that's the tip of an iceberg. Capitol Hill really is a hill, which means that you can dig under it. The Capitol is flanked by several office buildings where everything actually happens, and they are all connected by underground tunnels, creating a sprawling complex covering about ten buildings, including the three Library of Congress buildings. This is convenient because vampires can run for office without having to worry about ever seeing daylight. There are even House and Senate monorails so they don't have to walk.

About an even amount of stuff happens in the flanking office buildings as the Capitol itself, yet security is lax and easy in the several office buildings. Feel free to visit your Senator's office and maybe grab a coffee at the seedy cafeteria downstairs. But if you want to enter the Capitol itself, you'd better not be squeamish about anal cavity searches. This shows the split between the iconic points of interest and the places where work gets done, which are rarely the same place. The Congress building itself is almost a giant decoy. If you want to go to a committee meeting, it'll probably be in one of the six flanking buildings. [It's easy to attend any public hearing: just show up several hours

¹From 1899–1910, the law was that no building could be taller than the Capitol (280 feet). After 1910, the limit was width of street plus 20 feet, which is actually a shorter height limit in all cases.



Figure 1: At left, the National Association of Realtors[®]. At right, how the NAR hopes to stay afloat.

early. If you're a lobbyist who has a lot of money and wants to ensure a seat, you can hire a bike messenger to show up at 6AM, and then take his/her place in line after you get some coffee.]

The flanking areas are also necessary because of how public-facing Congress is. Any crackpot anywhere can visit their Congresspeople's office building. The aides I've spoken to say that true 'I'm gonna break something' security risks are very rare, but people who talk a little bit too much are a daily matter. Thus, there's a sort of balance between easy public access and making sure that Congressfolk don't actually have to meet random public. For example, every office has a Congresspersons-only elevator.

By the way, South of the House office buildings, there are a few open spaces taken up by parking lots. So there actually is room to expand the House. There's lots of parking on either side of Congress both because most Congressfolk live in the suburbs, and probably as a security perimeter.

Tourist tip: the bars by the Congress are of course crawling with low-grade staffers fresh out of college (who are basically powerless, but haven't yet realized it). But pass on the Hawk and Dove and go to the Capitol Lounge. Throw on something half a step up from office attire and tell them you're there for the party upstairs. On any given night, there'll be a reception for something, and corresponding drink specials or free booze.

Judicial, by the way Directly behind Congress, one finds the Supreme Court. It's one building. Given that the Capitol is really the Capitol complex, the Supreme Court is actually surrounded on three sides by Congress, which makes it look still smaller. So right off the bat, we see how asymmetric the three branches are. We learned in grade

school that there are three branches that each balance each other, but the map reveals that they are by no means equal in power. Nobody cares about the Supreme Court, there's no easy-access public building for lobbyists to visit, and as far as I understand it, the Supreme Court is fine with that.

OK, back to Congress. Just West of the Congressional complex, you get the lobbyist offices. Nothing says industry in decline like an office with a view of the Capitol. For example, it will come as no surprise that the National Association of Realtors[®], the organization that is in a sort of ongoing antitrust scrutiny by the DoJ and is well on its way to obsolescence as a pre-Internet information aggregator, has a quite attractive building jaunting distance to the Capitol. Nor was I surprised when, a month or two ago, the Cable Industry opened a little storefront a block from the NAR.

Executive Continuing West from the Capitol, we cross the National Mall, featuring many Smithsonian museums. [The Smithsonian is not one museum, but a chain of them, including the National Zoo.] But to the North and South of the Mall is a host of bureaucracies. To the South is the Department of Agriculture, which takes up what would be four city blocks if we built streets through it (and there are already bridges connecting the N and S halves). From which we learn that the Department of Ag got built back when agriculture was important and DC wasn't yet crowded. They ain't giving up their land now, of course. The Ag department runs a mini-university for all branches of the Federal govt, so if you want to learn a language or such, you're probably going to go to the Dept of Ag to do it; I imagine it's part of their continuing efforts to remain relevant.

The more modern departments, such as NIST, NOAA, the NSA, NASA, and the NIH are in the Maryland suburbs, which was all that was left at their founding. But note also that these are all technical bureaus, as if the scientists collectively said 'excuse me, but I'd rather be doing research in a nice office than becoming more politically connected.' And then they complain when science funding shrinks.

Back to the Mall's surroundings, the EPA, the IRS, the executive-branch DoJ, the FAA, the DoE, the SEC, all your favorite three-letter acronyms (TLAs) are there. This is a nice place to put them, I suppose, because they are spanning the space between the Congress and White House. I don't have much to say about these buildings, though, 'cause they're just kinda boring.

Many cities have a Zero Mile Marker for distance-to-city calculations. DC's is just south of the White House, which seems a bit odd given that the intuitive zero marker would be the center of the grid system (the Capitol). I suppose this was some sort of political compromise, to have two centers to DC. [Once again, we don't care about the Judicial branch.]

The Executive offices impress me as a smaller body. There are a few flanking the White House itself, which is a squat little building compared to everything around it. This means, by the way, that you can only see the White House from one or two non-Fed buildings. I am told by an ex-employee of one of the hotels that can see the White House that they had to call ahead every time they wanted to do roof maintenance, so as to ensure that nobody gets shot by snipers. [The Hotel Washington has a rooftop deck which gives a pretty good view, but their prices are \$\$\$. Go during happy hour, nurse a drink or two for an hour, and enjoy the view.]

The rest of the White House's environs are park-like: to the North is Lafayette park, featuring a 24-hour, decade long peace vigil by a few homeless folk, and to the South is the Ellipse and Washington Monument. It's certainly a much nicer security perimeter than the Capitol's mix of parking lots and semi-untended parks. There are of course far fewer people than there than Congress so there are naturally few office buildings, but I get the impression of much more iconic activity than actual work out of the White House area.

The White House's immediate neighbors are diverse. To its East is the Treasury, whose South face you will recognize from the \$10 bill. The street just North of the Treasury (closed to auto traffic) is a popular hangout for Segway riders.

Next to Lafayette park, one will find the Federal Courthouse, which houses the US Court of Claims (where suits against the U.S. government go), the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit (the guys who invented software and business method patents, as well as a few other innovations), and I'm not sure who else. This should strike you as odd, because the Supreme Court is on the other side of town. The space East of the Supreme Court is nothing that couldn't be torn down via eminent domain, so a Judicial Complex would have been possible. But instead, the top of the Judicial pyramid got spread out across DC. This says something to me about how the different branches work: Congress needs to network, network, and network more, while the Court of Claims judges and the Supreme Court judges don't talk very often. The clerks at the Supreme Court have a basketball league, which meets in the basketball court in the top floor of the Supreme Court building [the highest court in the land!!! Yuk, yuk!], and the Court of Claims guys aren't even invited.

Further West Keep going two blocks, and you hit the World Bank/IMF complex. Of the bodies that define the international law system (The UN, WTO, ICJ, one or two other TLAs), these are the only guys who are located in DC. Also, they are DC's third largest employer. The World Bank has no underground tunnels, so you've got lots of people walking around, and their buildings have no unifying architectural theme, so it just feels like you're downtown (which you are). Across the way from the World Bank's gigantic HQ building are boring old law offices and such. I'm not sure how many buildings the WB has, but I've been to the J building, and I don't think they skipped letters.

Directly in front of the WB HQ is a small triangular park, normally occupied by the usual homeless folk. But during the summer months, there are the regular protests, which are conveniently held in that park, a stone's throw from the HQ. A few security guys watch the crowd to make sure nobody takes that *stone's throw* thing too literally, everybody goes home, and on Monday it's back to homeless guys in the park and the Bank managers milling around trying to build consensus among themselves.

The IMF personality is a bit more like the Supreme Court: head down, looking at the numbers, caring more about getting the details right than talking to people. It has only two buildings (one of which was built just last year), which just look more closed than the World Bank's. The new building's internals were built to combat this, with lots of haphazard stairways and crossing hallways designed to maximize the odds of bumping into people while walking around. But from the outside you don't see

this. The World Bank's HQ, by contrast, is one giant window, and from what had been the pre-terrorist paranoia guest entrance, you could already see the waterfall and giant central courtyard. You immediately get the sense of people walking around trying to build consensus with each other (and thus getting nothing of substance done).

Oh, and we should maybe take a quick jaunt up Mass Ave, which crosses between Union Station and the Capitol, passes what I will call "Industry in Decline and Desperately Lobbying Row", and eventually becomes what is known by those who work there as "Think Tank Row." Indeed, most of the think tanks that I can think of are up there, except for the Heritage Institute, which owns prime land right by the Senate side of the Capitol complex. Keep going up Mass ave (we're past the White House now) and it quickly becomes what everybody calls Embassy Row. Indeed, almost every house there is an embassy, and almost every embassy is along Mass Ave, except for a few stragglers like the Mexican embassy, which is right by the World Bank/IMF. The Vice President's house is toward the top end of Embassy Row; general consensus is that Richard "Dick" Cheney's undisclosed location is the Naval Observatory, right across the street. It's a sensible place to put his house, because nothing happens at any embassy but iconic parties and receptions (and visa paperwork), and I can't imagine anything else happening at the Vice-Presidential mansion. The location is super-annoying, by the way, because the route between the White House and the VP's house goes right through some heavily populated areas (Dupont Circle) and every time the VP wants to frigging commute, he needs an entourage of six limos, ten police motorcycles running their sirens, and four SUVs, and traffic and any hope of conversation accordingly stops. Surely it doesn't have to be that way.

The Military-industrial complex The Pentagon is across the river in Northern Virginia. It is immediately adjacent to Arlington National Cemetery, and I believe offices on that side of the building have a panoramic view of the many rows of graves.

NoVa is thus defense contractor central, and if you make your money blowing stuff up, or doing paperwork about blowing stuff up, then that's where your office will be.

NoVa is seriously unwalkable. It's just highway after highway, connecting a long string of parking lots. The stereotypes of military being right-wing and sort of rural and driving everywhere align just fine here, compared to Metro and pedestrian-focused DC. If you're a left-wing DC hipster who takes Metro everywhere, you just would not be able to function down here.

There are a few NoVa exceptions, such as Crystal City and Pentagon City, which are a series of malls, hotels, defense buildings, and Metro stops all connected by walkways. That's where you can go to the TGI Friday's and be the only person there who isn't in an officer's uniform and a buzz cut.

Oh, the US Patent and Trademark Office is down there too, kind of across from National Airport, which means that a great many patent lawyers have Northern VA addresses. The complex itself is getting gigantic, in direct correspondence to the USPTO's increasing efforts to make everything patentable.

It didn't have to be that way. The NIH is in Bethesda, Montgomery county, MD (among the best-educated counties in the USA), and its campus is eminently walkable: one side to the other in ten minutes, and a shuttle bus in case that's a problem. Both

it and the Pentagon have their own Metro stop, and a transit center directly above the Metro stop, but somehow the NIH managed to not ring itself with parking lots.

You can tell what bills are before Congress by checking the advertising on the Metro. The orange/blue lines include Capitol South, so it gets the current bills before Congress. Metro center was bought out by American Chemistry a while back, and before that it was Cable. Both VA and MD commuter rail arrive at Union Station, so you can't get out without passing a gauntlet of please-don't-regulate-us ads. It was Toyota last month; this month it's Blue Cross/Shield. Most mid-to-high level bureaucrats live in well-educated Montgomery County, and so the MD-to-DC red line always has ads for computer equipment and office supplies.

The yellow line goes to VA, so the ads there are always for personnel carriers and fighter jets. Yup: the same advertising to make you feel good about picking up some Starbucks on the way in to the office is used to sell products with price tags in the tens of millions. I mean, how does the decision process go, exactly? The officers head down to TGI Friday, have a few mudslides, and just buy the first transatlantic personnel carrier that pops into their heads?