

Connect 2 Congress Lets You Track Your Senator, One Vote at a Time

April 13 2010, By David Terraso

(PhysOrg.com) -- Most of us know who the President is, but fewer can name their U.S. Senators or Representatives. Even fewer can name how their congressional representatives voted on specific bills. And if you ask most people how many bills their members have sponsored or co-sponsored, you'd most likely be given a blank stare.

So, if it's our civic duty to keep up with what our government is up to, how exactly do we do that? Peter Kinnaird, master's student in Georgia Tech's College of Computing, wondered the same thing and came up with a program that makes keeping up with one's representatives as easy as clicking a mouse. The system, Connect 2 Congress, will be presented at CHI 2010, the Association for Computing Machinery's Conference on Human Factors in [Computing Systems](#), being held at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta, April 10-15.

"In the 110th Congress, which is 2007-08, there were about 14,000 bills and 2,500 votes that took place. How can anyone wrap their head around what all those bills mean? We created Connect 2 Congress to simplify all that," said Kinnaird.

The system works by analyzing congressional voting records with a type of [mathematical analysis](#) known as a Poole-Rosenthal score. Connect 2 Congress looks at all the votes that take place over that session of Congress and assigns values to it. Each yes vote gets a one and each no gets a zero. Those who don't vote are given a nine, which excludes them from the count for that issue.

“It doesn’t matter whether the issue is to recognize a community college for its great service or if it’s the healthcare bill, each roll call vote is counted the same,” said Kinnaird.

Once these numbers are assigned, the system lines up a string of ones and zeros that represent each person’s voting record and create a fingerprint of sorts for each member.

“When we do this, we don’t know who the person casting the vote is, what party they belong to, what race or ethnicity. All we know is that the vote was cast,” said Kinnaird. “We compare them with all of the other votes being cast, and by doing that we can rank people from liberal to conservative without any of that other knowledge. The results are displayed on a graph so that users can get a quick picture of Congress, or examine changes in behavior over time.”

Among a few interesting uses, voters can use the system to see how well the parties’ votes align at different points in the session. They can also see whether their representatives vote with their party or go off on their own.

In addition to showing where each member fits on the political spectrum, Connect 2 Congress also conducts a leadership analysis on each member.

“So, if you sponsor a bill you get a full point, and if you co-sponsor a bill you get anywhere from no points to a full point, depending on when you attached your name to it,” said Kinnaird.

The system updates a few times a day, allowing users to view Congressional activity from the present back to the beginning of the 110th Congress. Kinnaird is currently building a new version of Connect 2 Congress that tracks the current 111th Congress. The new version shows how votes are being conducted in the U.S. Senate as early as the

next morning and tracks how verbose the senators are. Kinnaird hopes to release the House version in the next few months.

Connect 2 Congress pulls its data from GovTrack.us (<http://govtrack.us>), not the Library of [Congress](#), because GovTrack.is considered reliable by government watchdog groups and it provides the date in a format that's easier to use.

Provided by Georgia Institute of Technology

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