Harvard, Stanford, Yale Graduate Most Members of Congress

More than 40 state university systems also produced legislators

By MICHAEL MORELLA
October 28, 2010

In a recent campaign commercial, Tea Party darling and Republican Senate nominee Christine O'Donnell assured voters that she didn't go to Yale. If she reaches the Senate, however, she might not want to make that boast too loudly: With 10 current legislators, Yale University in New Haven, Conn., has produced the third most sitting members of Congress of any college, including six current senators.

In fact, many members of both the House and Senate walked the same university campuses and completed their undergraduate educations at some common colleges across the country on their journeys to Capitol Hill. *U.S. News* compiled a list of where the members of the 111th Congress earned their undergraduate degrees. Of the 533 current congressmen, 34 are without a bachelor's degree (though five of those members completed associate's degrees and one holds a nursing degree). Still, all but a few legislators attended college for at least some period. Several schools measured above the rest in the number of bachelor's degrees they awarded today's incumbent congressmen.

Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., took top honors, having awarded bachelor's degrees to 15 members on the current congressional roster. Many more senators and representatives took business and law degrees from the college's graduate schools. Harvard is one of only two Ivy League universities to rise near the top in number of undergraduate attendees (Yale is the other). The non-Ivy Stanford University in Stanford, Calif., finished second behind Harvard, graduating 11 members. Overall, about 8 percent of Congress's current roster earned a degree at one of the eight prestigious Ivy League schools.

The numbers were higher among state schools across the country. More than 40 state university systems are represented within the congressional alma maters. Colleges in the New York and California university systems were particularly popular for the 111th Congress. Both the University of California—Berkeley and the University of California—Los Angeles finished in the top 10, with the latter having graduated nine of its state's 53 representatives.

Fred Beuttler, deputy historian of the House of Representatives, is excited that public universities have such a strong showing in this Congress. "You don't see it as only a small cluster of schools," Beuttler says. "Diversity of talent and diversity of expertise have worked their way into Congress."

Breaking things down by chamber didn't produce drastically different results. In the House, Harvard reigned supreme by graduating 10 representatives, but in the Senate, Yale edged out Harvard and Stanford as the alma mater of six current senators to those universities' five. All in all, about 95 percent of current lawmakers have earned at least a bachelor's degree.

Thirty years ago, Congress was the same size, but about one tenth of its members hadn't earned a diploma after high school, according to statistics from the Congressional Research Service, a division of the Library of Congress that conducts research on the legislature.

Current Pennsylvania House Democrat Robert Brady went right from high school into technical school, where he learned to be a carpenter. "I was out there doing other things, having a different experience," says Brady. Though he didn't earn his bachelor's, Brady believes that higher education is important, having helped his own children attend college. He even teaches in the organizational dynamics department at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. For Beuttler, it is encouraging that members aren't measured by a "certain educational bar," but rather that "intelligence can be demonstrated outside of the classroom" as well.

Yet Senate Historian Donald A. Ritchie says that while the numbers might have shifted, college-educated lawmakers are nothing new. "You had very well-educated people in the early years of the Republic," Ritchie says. "There were quite a few college graduates." Ritchie points to statesmen Thomas Jefferson and James Madison among the country's learned Founding Fathers.

More recently, Ritchie notes the case of the late West Virginia Senator Robert C. Byrd, who passed away in late June. Forced to withdraw from Marshall University in Huntington, W.Va., Byrd secured his bachelor's degree from the college in 1994, at the age of 77 and after having already spent more than 40 years in Congress. Prior to that, Byrd spent a decade taking part-time classes at American University in Washington, D.C., to collect a law degree in 1963 while he served as senator. "There will always be individuals like that who are self-taught," says Ritchie.

Congressional scholar Gary C. Jacobson agrees. Jacobson, a professor of political science at the University of California—San Diego, thinks there will likely be a contingent of congressmen without an undergraduate education in the years to come. "You're going to get people with unusual backgrounds from time to time," he says. "I suppose if you looked at any group of American leaders, you would see the same kind of trend."