T
he last several weeks have been quiet in Washington as the Democrats convened in Boston and the Republicans in New York. Due to the political conventions, the summer Olympics, and the Labor Day holiday, Congress was out of session from July 24 to September 6. Their current session will likely adjourn soon, as members want to get back to their home districts and states to campaign. How much will be accomplished on the annual appropriations bills before the end of the session is anyone’s guess.

Presidential Election Hinges on Geography

As the 2004 presidential election between incumbent George W. Bush and Senator John F. Kerry (D-MA) enters the home stretch, unprecedented attention is being paid to the geographic contexts of the race. Both campaigns are plotting a strategy aimed at winning enough votes under our state-by-state electoral system. Most experts agree that a majority of the fifty states fall into either the “red” (Bush) or “blue” (Kerry) category already, and that the election will be decided based on the outcome in fifteen or so “swing states.” These electoral prizes, which include Ohio, Florida, Pennsylvania, Missouri, and Wisconsin are hotly contested and are the focus of extensive campaigning and politicking. Both candidates have decided on targeted television advertising purchases focused on major markets in the swing states, meaning that many Americans won’t even see one ad in the final weeks.

All of this gives rise to an exciting time for political geographers. Phil Steinberg, professor of geography at Florida State University and chair of the AAG’s Political Geography Specialty Group, noted that, “Electoral geography is a major branch of political geography and this involves the calculation of different outcomes for popular and electoral votes as well as analyzing how shifts in voting patterns reflect changes in the regional alignment of political parties.” Prognosticators are having a field day this year, but we won’t know who was proven right until (at least) November 2.

Congressman May Push for Federal GIS Coordinator at OMB

There’s a strong probability that Rep. Adam Putnam (R-FL), chairman of the House Government Reform Subcommittee on Technology, Information Policy, Intergovernmental Relations and the Census, will push next year to enact legislation creating an official to oversee the federal government’s GIS programs. The official, whose duties remain to be determined, would most likely be placed in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), within the Executive Office of the President which supervises executive branch agencies.

At a June 23 hearing on geospatial information, Putnam noted that he convened the session as “an opportunity to examine the progress of the OMB’s oversight of (federal) geospatial investments. This hearing also provides an opportunity to examine the cross-agency and intergovernmental coordination and collaboration in the collection, consolidation, maintenance, and sharing of geospatial data and geospatial information systems. We need to determine what programs exist across the federal government, how much is being spent, if data is shared across the federal government any more efficiently than since our hearing last year, and how the federal government is progressing in its coordination efforts with state and local governments.”

Testifying that day, Karen Evans, administrator of e-government and information technology at OMB, asserted that “I believe we are heading in the right direction based on both the progress achieved to date along with our planned next steps. However, I would like to stress while the progress in the last year is commendable, it is just a start of the work ahead of us.” Picking up on this, Putnam asked Evans if she felt a GIS coordinator post should be created within OMB. Evans asserted that such a position “is not needed because OMB does not have an operational role in this area—we do not own or manage geospatial assets. Rather, through my office, OMB will continue to oversee agency compliance with federal geospatial policies and government-wide geospatial activities and, when appropriate, modify those policies to improve the federal government’s acquisition and use of geospatial information.” She also went on to explain that “to improve internal agency geospatial management, agency geospatial information officers should be positioned under the Chief Information Officer [of their respective agency]. This placement provides geospatial leads the opportunity, as found at DHS and EPA, to drive greater geospatial utilization through those agency officers responsible for agency information policy.” Despite this stated opposition from the administration, Putnam has asserted several times that he favors a coordinator to insure that federal GIS investments are well managed, and he will likely push to codify this next year.

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