

Environmental Profiles of Senators

Consider yourself a first-year staffer at the Sierra Club's Washington, D.C. office. With the start of the 111th Congress, the Sierra Club is assessing strategy for the upcoming term. Your task is to provide a succinct memo of a Senator's environmental record, clout and responsibilities in Congress, environmental concerns, and political ties (constituency, funding sources, etc.).

The following websites offer places to begin as you develop profiles of the Senators. It is up to you to be the **detective** — to track down as much useful information about these officials as you can that would be of interest to the Sierra Club's staff. Some ideas for the types of information you might look for include:

- * Biographical profile and position statements on Senate home pages at <http://www.senate.gov>
- * Senate committee appointments at <http://www.senate.gov>
- * Legislation sponsored or co-sponsored by the Senator <http://thomas.loc.gov> (use advanced search)
- * Position statements on issues available on <http://www.votesmart.org>
- * Campaign donation records available on <http://www.opensecrets.org/politicians/index.php>
- * American Conservative Union ratings available through <http://www.acuratings.org/>
- * Environmental voting records available through <http://lcv.org/scorecard>

These websites provide more information than is necessary to provide a useful profile of your senator. Your task is to ferret out useful information, determine which information is most interesting, and synthesize it into as insightful and information a profile as you can. There is no set formula for this brief; follow your leads! If you think you have a lead, but you aren't sure how to follow it, be sure to ask me. I'll help.

Here are the general steps you should follow to complete this assignment:

1. Gather as background information, committee appointments (if relevant), general position statements, and campaign contribution information as you can about your selected Senator.
2. Sort through your research material, and determine what information is most important to report to the Sierra Club staff.
3. Be prepared to present what you've learned in class.
4. Synthesize this material into a 1 to 1-1/2, 1-1/2 spaced, concise profile. Please organize your assignment as a memo to the Sierra Club. Do not simply report what you found; present it carefully in a clear, cogent, and efficient manner. What connections do you see in your research that aren't apparent at first? Three-fourths of your issue brief should provide evidence and background information. The final few lines of your issue statement should offer your assessment of the Senator's record on environmental issues.

A sample memo regarding Senator Harry Reid from Nevada (Democrat) prepared in 2007, at the start of the 110th Congress, follows.

To: Sierra Club Staff
From: xxx xxxxx
Re: Senator Harry Reid's Environmental Voting Record
Date: 2/10/07

Harry Reid (D, NV) was elected to the Senate in 1986 and now, in his fourth term, holds a uniquely influential position as the Senate Majority Leader. Elected by his Democratic colleagues as the party's primary spokesman, Reid is charged with scheduling the Senate's legislative business, which gives him a pre-eminent role in setting the Congressional agenda. As the Majority Leader, Reid has the authority to enable (or prohibit) certain bills to pass from their respective committees to the Senate floor. This strategic prioritization will allow the Democrats to address environmental issues that their Republican counterparts so often failed to incorporate into the Senate's legislative program. Furthermore, the Majority leader is customarily given first recognition to speak on the Senate floor, which should further promote discussion, proposals, and votes on ecological issues in the 110th Congress. By virtue of his leadership role, Senator Reid will also have a greater ability to advance legislation beneficial to his constituents in Nevada, conferring a great deal of influence a relatively small state.

Throughout his political career, Senator Reid's environmental record has been consistently positive. He strongly supports conservation measures and has voted to strengthen major laws like the Clean Water, Clean Air, and Endangered Species Acts. For the 109th Congress, the League of Conservation Voters scored his environmental positions at 79%, one point shy of his career average. This indicates that he is a steady, reliable force in favor of environmental protection, and although he does not sit on an ecologically relevant committee, he should be able to garner Democratic (and even bi-partisan) support through his role as Majority Leader. Recently, Senator Reid has voted against drilling in ANWR, co-sponsored an energy independence bill, and authored the Brownfield Revitalization and Environmental Restoration Act to clean up contaminated sites around the country. On the state level, he has worked to ensure the preservation of national parks, the protection of trout species native to Nevada, and to maintain state control over gaming regulations (as opposed to federal standards). While these initiatives *are* environmentally friendly, tourism and other economic considerations are quite evident, which suggests they may have been formulated primarily to please his constituents rather than pursue ecological goals-- an approach typical of most legislators, as they are driven largely by the re-election incentive.

Senator Reid's dominant ecological concern, however, is the proposed nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain. To prevent the Bush administration's initiative from going forward, Reid co-sponsored the Nuclear Fuel On-Site Storage Act, which contains budgetary restrictions that have effectively incapacitated the project. Beyond the obvious environmental concerns, the suggested plan for Yucca Mountain has serious social, economic, and public health implications, since the transportation, storage, and potential radiation of nuclear waste pose a clear and substantial threat to Nevada's people and industries. Reid relies heavily on scientific evidence in opposing the Yucca Mountain plan, a feature common to many of his environmental positions (for instance, global warming and water pollution). Thus, any data or research presented by the Sierra Club is likely to prove beneficial in advancing a particular cause, for Senator Reid seeks to present his constituents with "sound science" in formulating realistic, desirable policy solutions.

As evidenced by his 22 years as a Senator and recent selection as Majority Leader, Mr. Reid is a popular political figure, both among his constituency and the Democratic Party as a whole. His longevity and position of power within the Senate give him the utmost political clout, and his reputation as a “consensus-builder” serves to further his influence among Democrats and Republicans alike. Along with the fact that much of Nevada is rural and conservative, this ability to reach across party lines may help to explain Senator Reid’s surprising lifetime ACU score of 21-- a relatively high rating for such a prominent Democratic legislator. Geography factors in for many reasons, such as the type and availability of natural resources, the businesses or industries critical to the state’s economy, and natural parks and other tourist attractions. But Reid’s ability to compromise (and sometimes vote) with Republicans will be numerically valuable in getting legislation passed.

As Majority Leader, Senator Reid also had the authority to determine committee chairmanships as these positions switched from Republican to Democratic control at the beginning of 2007. Two notable environmental committees are the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, chaired by Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico, and the Committee on Environment and Public Works, chaired by Barbara Boxer of California (both of whom, like Reid, have LCV scores at or above 80%). Since 1989, Senator Reid has received over \$16,000,000 in funding, predominately from individual contributions (65%). Another 31% came from PACs (of which business interests gave 66%), and 13% was donated by single-issue or ideological interests. Because the ambitions of the Sierra Club mesh quite well with the overarching environmental perspective of the Democratic Party-- and a conservation-oriented legislator like Harry Reid in particular-- we must work closely with him to advance our perspectives and priorities. Regardless of party affiliation, the Majority Leader is an extremely powerful legislator who, strategically, must be addressed; but with the advent of the 110th Congress and Majority Leader Harry Reid, the Sierra Club’s likelihood of environmental legislative success has dramatically improved.