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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on a two-semester experiment using computer technologies in the university political science classroom. The instructor incorporated electronic mail (e-mail), the Internet, and an on-line conferencing program into the course requirements for an upper-division course on the Supreme Court and an introductory honors tutorial on U.S. politics. The paper describes: (1) how each of these technologies was utilized to provide ideas on how to incorporate cyberspace in the classroom; (2) lessons learned from using a VAX Notes conference during the past year; and (3) how best to take advantage of Internet resources in the political science classroom. Appendixes include an introduction to computer conferencing with VAX Notes and un-edited VAX Notes Topics. (EH)

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Cyberspace and the Political Science Classroom

*Reflections on Using the Internet
and On-line Conferencing*

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Introduction

This paper is a reflection on a two semester experiment using computer technologies in the political science classroom. I incorporated electronic mail (e-mail), the Internet, and an on-line conferencing program (Digital VAX Notes) into the course requirements for a upper-division course on the American Supreme Court¹ and an introductory honors tutorial on American politics.² In this paper I will do three things. First, I describe how each of these technologies was utilized in both classes, to provide some ideas on how to easily incorporate cyberspace in the classroom. Second; I discuss some lessons that I have learned from using a VAX Notes conference this past year. The paper concludes with some suggestions of how to best take advantage of internet resources in the political science classroom. With a little effort, cyberspace can become an integral supplement to the classroom experience. For those of us at institutions with limited resources, the internet is a vital tool to link students (and faculty) to the information age.

Cyberspace in the Classroom: an (un-scientific) Experiment

In an attempt to provide variety and promote creativity in my teaching, last fall I began to include computer requirements in the course I was teaching at the State University of New York at Albany. My goals were two-fold. First, I wanted to enhance my course by enabling students to access relevant materials on the internet. The internet has a wealth of resources for political science, ranging from full-text versions of the Congressional Record to presidential press releases to Supreme Court opinions. Unlike the same materials retrieved from commercial services like Washington Alert or Westlaw, the internet is free to any student with a university computer account. By introducing students to these resources, their

¹ RPOS335, The American Supreme Court, The University at Albany, SUNY, Fall 1994 (3 credits).

² TPOS101 American Politics Honors Tutorial, General Education Honors Program, The University at Albany, SUNY, Spring 1995 (3 credits).

opportunities for research will be increased.

Second, I wanted to help students become familiar and comfortable with the internet and electronic mail. As we are rapidly entering a "digital" world, where people communicate in "bits rather than atoms," it is crucial that today's students are comfortable with - and proficient - in the information age.³ As one of my students pointed out in a course evaluation, requiring use of the internet "forces the timid to merge onto the info highway; an integral part of all our futures. Either we become comfortable with it or get left behind."

What I did

There were three separate computer components of each course: electronic mail; an internet assignment; and a vax notes conference. Each served a different purpose.

E-mail

First, electronic mail or e-mail was used as a means to more efficiently communicate with students outside of the classroom. I required each student to submit their e-mail address to me so I could create a class distribution list. Using the mail program PINE, I could easily send a quick piece of mail to the entire class at one time. E-mail was used for several purposes. First, I encouraged students to communicate with me through e-mail. Throughout the semester I would receive mail on anything from questions about course content to explanations for class absences, to follow-up requests for letters of recommendation. Second, I used e-mail to send important information to students. Throughout the semester I sent them information about how to better use the university's computers. Handouts on various computer issues were distributed solely through e-mail. Occasionally I would forward copies of important materials to the class. For example, during my spring class, we spent time speaking about the rather odious internet censorship

³For an intriguing analysis of the issues involved in the digital age see Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (Alfred Knopf 1995).

bill currently under consideration in Congress. After discussing the bill in class, I was able to download a copy of the bill text through the internet and send that copy to the whole class. On one occasion I used e-mail to provide students with an essay assignment that they otherwise would not have received for another week due to an unfortunate stomach virus that forced me to cancel class before a holiday. Finally, in my Supreme Court class, e-mail was provided as an optional way to complete a class assignment. Students were required to use the internet to find a Supreme Court opinion (described below) and to answer three questions about the case. They were given the option of sending their answer to me through e-mail. Although the vast majority of the class opted to use the more traditional method of typing or word processing their essay, almost 25% of the class used e-mail.⁴ Several students commented to me that they chose not to use e-mail because the computer's default mailer did not have a very good editor, and they were concerned about having their work destroyed.⁵

Internet Assignment

The second use of computer technology in each course involved the internet. In the Supreme Court course, the students were given an "Internet Assignment." They were provided directions to access the Project Hermes database of Supreme

⁴ I should point out that receiving essays through e-mail can actually be more difficult for the instructor to keep track of. If the entire class used e-mail, I would have received more than 25 individual pieces of mail, creating some logistical problems.

⁵ The quality of computer resources can be a real problem for instructors requiring e-mail usage. At the University at Albany, the VAX mainframe's default mail program (MAIL) is notorious for aborting long e-mail messages in process. If students forget to hit the "ENTER" button at the end of each line of text - it is very easy to generate a "buffer full" error and have the entire message aborted. Although more sophisticated mailers like PINE and ELM avoid such pitfalls, these problems are worth being aware of.

Court opinions⁶ using either FTP or the world wide web.⁷ The students had to find a specific case from the 1993-1994 term,⁸ have that case downloaded to their account, and then use the computer center to print it out. Each student was given three questions they had to answer about the case. All the instructions of the assignment were distributed through e-mail. As described above, the students had the opportunity to submit their answer through e-mail at their discretion. This assignment served two purposes. First, it was designed to demonstrate how easily information is available through the internet. Second, the assignment attempted to make students connect the concepts discussed in the course about how the Supreme Court functions to an actual court decision.

In the American Politics Honors Tutorial, there was no specific internet assignment per say. Rather, each student was required to make use of the internet as one of their research tools for the final seminar paper. Early in the semester class time was dedicated to explaining the various resources available on the internet, and students examined a copy of the *Internet Yellow Pages*, a 1000 page tome published by McGraw-Hill (2d ed. 1995) that provides references to thousands of internet resources.⁹ As this was an honors seminar, I also held individual conferences with each student and discussed possible research strategies. By not structuring an internet assignment in the same fashion as I did in the Supreme

⁶ All Supreme Court opinions are available through Project Hermes within hours of their release. Decisions are available through e-mail, anonymous ftp, or the world wide web.

⁷ The best way to access these decisions is through Cornell University's Legal Information Institute (<http://fatty.law.cornell.edu>).

⁸ Students were asked to find *Harris v. Forklift Systems*, a 1993 case involving sexual harassment.

⁹ Were I to do this assignment again, I would encourage students to make use of one of the excellent Web sites dedicated to searching for information. I have found the "Webcrawler" site (operated by America On-line) to be one of the easiest - and quickest ways to surf the net in search of information. The URL is <http://webcrawler.com>.

Court class, I would have to say that the outcome was generally less successful. Although the honors students wrote acceptable research papers, the amount of materials taken from the internet was minimal. This was a consequence of several factors. First, the subject-matter being researched was not always appropriate for "cyber-research."¹⁰ For example, two students chose to write their papers on issues involving the founding of the Constitution - practically eliminating opportunities to use the net. Second, without providing students with specific instructions - and given them a concrete task to accomplish - using the internet as a research tool may have been more foreboding. Even though the class included several computer literate students, the majority were still novices at surfing the net. My experience this spring has taught me that in the future, more detailed instructions and guidance may be necessary for such assignments.

VAX Notes

The final component of the two semester experiment involved the use of electronic conferencing program called VAX Notes.¹¹ VAX Notes is a fairly simple program that allows students to engage in a collaborative computer mediated conference - or what has been referred to as CMC. VAX Notes enables the class to discuss issues of relevance to the course in a sort of computer journal. Students become members of a "conference" (in this case either Supreme_Court or American_Politics). The conference is composed of several topics and replies. I created several topics for discussion. Usually each topic was a several paragraph

¹⁰ I have higher hopes for my American Presidency course being offered this fall - as there is a wealth of information available on the presidency. See <http://www.whitehouse.gov> or <http://thomas.loc.gov>.

¹¹ Unfortunately, Vax Notes is only available on the VMS operating system. For professors at institutions with only UNIX machines, the opportunities for CMC are limited. Having just migrated to such an institution, I am now forced to adapt by conferencing efforts to the local USENET News server. For an analysis of the uses of USENET in the political science classroom, see Martha Bailey, "Usenet Discussion Groups in Political Science Courses," Proceedings, Annual Meeting, American Political Science Association, September 1-4, 1994.

question or issue I wanted the students to probe in depth. The students would read this topic and then reply to it. Their reply would then be read by every other student. This enabled students to reply to me - and then preferably - engage each other's ideas. An average conference topic would have been 15 and 20 replies in the fall semester and 10 or 11 in the honors seminar. Throughout each semester I would post a new topic approximately once every two weeks. Students in the Supreme Court course were required to participate once per month, while the honors students were required to participate in each topic. Students were encouraged to create their own topics for discussion, but this only happened once in the Supreme Court class.

VAX notes was a very valuable part of both classes I used it in, although it requires a substantial amount of work on the part of the instructor. At the beginning of each semester I needed to dedicate a substantial amount of time to explaining how to navigate the VAX computer, and how to use VAX Notes. Once students became familiar with the program, however, most students seemed to think it was easy to use.¹² Appendix 1 includes a copy of the six-page hand-out that I distributed to all students on VAX Notes.¹³

Reflections on Using VAX Notes in the Classroom

VAX Notes and CMC in general, are potentially a very valuable tool in the political science classroom. There are several lessons that I have learned from my two-semester experience using VAX Notes. First, it is fundamentally important that the instructor is very familiar with the program. If you are contemplating using a CMC - on VAX Notes or any other software platform - it is crucial that adequate time is given to gain proficiency with the software. Take the time to learn the commands that the students will have to know to use the program. Create a

¹² When asked how easy Vax Notes was to use, 37.9% of the two classes said "very easy," while 51.7 % said "easy," and only 10.5% said "somewhat difficult."

¹³ This document was adapted from a hand-out written by Dr. John Hughes, Ph.D. at Saint Michael's College in Vermont.

practice topic and experiment by "writing" a topic, and then "replying" to it. Learn how the directory structure works in VAX Notes. The conference directory is extremely important as it can show you what topics are available, and who has replied to each topic.¹⁴ You should also learn how to use the moderator commands - those program functions that only the person in charge of the conference has access to. Especially important are the commands to delete topics or replies. Occasionally a student might post an inappropriate message, and you may need to delete it. Unwanted messages could range from the lewd and offensive to mere mistakes. By exercising some "file management" over the conference, you can ensure that it is kept orderly and easy to use.

Second, it is important for you to prepare some introductory materials for students on how to best utilize the program. As many students are still terrified of computers, having a hand-out will go a long way towards easing them into the information age. The hand-out included in Appendix 1 is illustrative of the type of materials which can be useful. Feel free to adapt this material to your own needs. You might also want to include some of this material in an introductory topic in your VAX Notes conference. Designate the first topic (1.0) to explaining what the goals of this endeavor is, and providing students with as much information as you think is valuable. I have also made it a practice to designate the second topic (2.0) as a "sample topic," where students can try out VAX Notes for the first time. Let them practice by describing themselves to the class in the conference. This puts them at ease, and makes them feel much more comfortable with the program. If it is possible, have the entire class meet in a computer lab, where they can view each other's comments as they are posted. Table 1 includes excerpts of the sample topic I used for the Supreme Court conference. Although clearly lighthearted, it served as a good ice-breaker to the conference.

¹⁴ Crucial here is the ability to make use of wildcards. The VAX Notes directory command (DIR) function very much like the Directory command found in MS-DOS. By typing "dir *.*" a complete listing of the conference will be generated. Typing "dir 2.*" will show all of the replies to topic 2.0.

Table 1. A Sample VAX NOTES Topic

```
=====
Note 2.0                A sample topic -PLEASE READ                17 replies
ALBANY::MG1419                30 lines                7-SEP-1994 09:50
=====
```

This is a sample topic. Beginning next week, the instructor will add a new topic for discussion on a weekly/bi-weekly basis. A topic is the basis for a new discussion. I will often provide some background information and pose a question for you to consider. After reading a topic note (which is identified by a whole number, i.e. 2.0; 3.0; 4.0) you can REPLY to the topic and add your thoughts to the discussion. A reply can try to answer a question, focus on a specific aspect of the topic, or ask a new related question. Each reply will be numbered sequentially as 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, etc...

You can also create a new topic for discussion on your own. If you are confused by something in class or in the readings - or if something strikes your fancy -feel free to add a new topic. If someone poses a question and YOU think you have an answer, throw in your own two cents.

If you have a question which you would prefer isn't shared with everyone in cyberspace -then send an e-mail message. IF you think, however, that other members of the class could benefit from a notes discussion on your question, then please write a note!

As this is a sample topic, please feel free to post a reply. What I would like you to do is REPLY to this message and add a paragraph of your own introducing yourself to the class. Take a few minutes and tell everyone something interesting about yourself! (This will help us get to know each other -and will help you learn how notes works!)

```
=====
Note 2.3                A sample topic -PLEASE READ                3 of 17
ALBANY::PL8644                2 lines                8-SEP-1994 10:59
                                -< Hi from Pauline >-
=====
```

Hi! My name is Pauline Charlebois. I am a BA/MA student in Criminal Justice. I will be done with my BA in December. (Yeah!)

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=====
Note 2.8                A sample topic -PLEASE READ                8 of 17
ALBANY::PR1795                4 lines                8-SEP-1994 10:59
                                -< Greetings from Paula! >-
=====
```

Hello! My name is Paula Reinhart. I am in my fourth year here at Albany. I am a Criminal Justice major, but my main interests are in law. When I graduate I plan to attend law school. I am looking forward to participating in this discussion!!!

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=====
Note 2.9                A sample topic -PLEASE READ                9 of 17
ALBANY::ER1489                7 lines                8-SEP-1994 11:00
                                -< hello >-
=====
```

Hello! My name is Elizabeth (Liz) Rule. I'm an English major and Poli. Sci. minor. I'm from Kingston N.Y. which is in the middle of no where! I have no idea what I want to do in life, however I think I might want to be a lawyer! I am sharing my computer with someone else. Here he is ! Hello. My name is Eric Kaplan and I am a senior from Merrick Long Island. I turn 21 in a few hours so I am really not thinking about class right now. See you later.



Third, it is crucial in a VAX Notes conference to stay abreast of the conference at all times. Make sure that topics are regularly posted. One of the problems I encountered was getting so caught up in other work that I would occasionally forget to post a new topic when I said I would. This is a sure-fire way to diminish participation. If you say a topic will be posted by a certain date - be sure to post one. Many students will only log-in to the conference when they know there is a new topic to respond to.

The Fourth lesson is related to the previous one. Many students will gauge their participation in the conference to what they are required to do (understandably). If you tell them they have to participate in the conference every two weeks, then many students will log-in every two weeks - and no more. More importantly, many students will simply read the topic you (the instructor) posted, and reply to it. They won't always engage themselves in the conference by reading what other students have written, and craft their response to take into account their classmate's ideas.¹⁵ One way to minimize this problem is to actively participate in the conference, replying to comments made by students, and asking them additional questions. Although this isn't always successful, it can generate an interactive discussion - the goal of the entire exercise.

Finally, I have learned to let each VAX Conference be measured on its own merits. What worked one semester, may not work the next semester. If the conference caused some students to think about political ideas and concepts outside of the classroom - and to write down their thoughts - the whole exercise may be worthwhile. Most teachers of political science believe firmly in the need to get students to write and think critically. Often times journals are useful tools to accomplish this. Unfortunately, to assign a class journal can often result in a substantial amount of outside reading for the professor - often forcing him or her to try to make out the student's chicken-scratch. On-line conferencing can have the same benefits, but without the chicken scratch!

¹⁵ I suspect this is less of a problem with a USENET news discussion, as the threads are not organized by topic.

For those still trying to understand the value of a program like VAX Notes, I have included two complete and unedited topics from my spring honors tutorial in Appendix 2. Although we all would wish that all our students were honors students, this topic is a good example of a VAX Notes conference. These topics include both serious commentary, as well as some ideological bickering among students.

Some Resources and Concluding Thoughts

Cyberspace offers the political science teacher a wealth of opportunities to enhance a classroom experience, whether it be introducing e-mail as a communications tool, using a computer-mediated conference, or having students "surf the net" as part of a research project. The problem for many faculty members, however, is learning how to best access these resources, without spending hundreds of hours learning UNIX line commands. Luckily, the commercialization of the Net - while troubling to many who yearn for the days when university's were the primary users of such services - has simplified access to much that is available in the on-line world. As a conclusion to this paper, I will mention two different types of resources that you - the political science teacher - can turn to.

Written Materials

First, in the past year there has been an explosion of written resources on the internet. There are literally hundreds of books available on using the internet. These books range from the telephone book-like *Internet Yellow Pages* to the *Netter's Guide to Trek* (a \$20 book dedicated solely to finding on-line information about Star Trek!). There are even "Internet for Dummies" books available. Of the computer books, I would strongly recommend the *Internet Yellow Pages* as a good starting point for general perusing of net resources. Any one of the numerous "how-to" books, such as *The Whole Internet Catalog* (O'Reilly & Associates 2d ed. 1995) or *The Internet Companion* (Addison Wesley 1994), or one of the beginners books like

Internet for Dummies or *Finding it on the Internet* (Wiley 1994) are good starting points. There is even a *Internet 101 for College Students* (Osborne 1995) book available .

There are several good books on the computer culture of the 1990s that are worth reading. Of this genre, Nicholas Negroponte's *Being Digital* is one of the best reads on the potential impacts of cyberspace. Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Harper 1994) is probably the best book available on the computer cultures that have emerged in the past decade in the United States and abroad. For a "Generation X" perspective on cyber-culture from a recent Harvard grad who has apparently spent most of her waking hours the last three years on-line late at night, J.C. Herz's *Surfing the Net* (Little-Brown 1995) provides a popular - definitely non-academic - look at the lives of Netheads.¹⁶ For a look at the legal aspect's of cyberspace, Lance Rose' *The Law of the Net* (Osborne 1995) is invaluable. Finally, there are actually books available on finding materials relevant to political science on the internet. Congressional Quarterly has recently published its *Guide to the Federal Government on the Internet* (1995). This book, to be regularly updated, provides a fairly comprehensive listing of federal government resources available through the internet. There is also a version available for finding federal government information on computer bulletin boards.

On-Line Resources

I conclude this brief survey with a discussion of crucial on-line resources for the political scientist seeking to provide resources for students. Given my background in American politics, these listings will be more oriented towards domestic issues, although several of these resources include materials of interest for those in other areas. There are three crucial places to look for political science. First, the American Political Science Association's gopher (apsa.trenton.edu) is one

¹⁶ Although less valuable than Negroponte or Rheingold, *Surfing the Net* can be useful to better understand how many students relate to cyberspace.

of the best starting points for political science materials. Here you will find not only information relevant to the Association (such as an Annual Meeting program applicant's database), but topical material on all substantive fields in political science. Many of the sub-menus include valuable pointers to other non-APSA sites. The American Government gopher includes links to numerous net resources, including the presidency, congress, and the courts.

Second, the Library of Congress' website (<http://marvel.loc.gov>) and the Congressional website "Thomas: Legislative Information on the Internet" (<http://Thomas.loc.gov>) provide even the introductory student with ample resources. The Library of Congress' site provides links to a variety of resources, not the least of which is the ability to view some of the Library's electronic photo library. "Thomas," which is one of the only positive aspects to come out of the 104th Congress, is the brain-child of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and provides access to the complete text of every bill introduced in the 103rd and 104th Congress, plus the full-text of the Congressional Record. Future enhancements are going to include free access to bill digests.

The Web search programs like Webcrawler, Yahoo, or Netscape's Net Search are very important tools for finding specific items of interest. During the past few weeks, I have found a variety of resources such as an eight-page digest of the New York Times available free of charge (invaluable material for a New Yorker who has been recently transplanted to Western Colorado!). More and more newspapers are offering on-line editions - most free of charge, some for a small fee. The *San Jose Mercury* has such a detailed on-version that it is possible to subscribe to a customized comics page. One of my colleagues, an Ohio State alum, was able to find a web site dedicated solely to the Ohio State football team! Perhaps more relevant to political science, the search programs discussed here, can also provide a great deal of information of economic development, state and local governments, and much more.

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention the commercial on-line services like America On-Line, CompuServe, or Prodigy. Although I am partial to AOL, each of

these services provides a great deal of easily accessible information - if you are willing to invest a minimum of \$10 per month. America On-Line actually has a forum dedicated to college teaching and political science in specific. Particularly interesting resources on AOL include Congressional Quarterly and C-SPAN, although there are many other relevant areas available.

This is just a small sampling of the resources that are available to the political scientist. Cyberspace can be a great way to enhance the political science classroom - as long as we remember that it is only an enhancement. At the very minimum, by learning how to access these resources, we can expand the opportunities for our student's learning.

Appendix 1.

Introduction to Computer Conferencing with VAX Notes

**Professor John Hughes
Saint Michael's College**

**and revised by
Professor Michael Gizzi
Mesa State College**

An important part of our course activities this fall will involve participation by all students in a computer conference, using a utility on the VAX called VAX Notes. In the online documentation, VAX Notes is defined as

...a computer-mediated conferencing system that lets you conduct online conferences or meetings. Using VAX Notes, you can communicate conveniently and economically with people in different geographical locations. Anyone connected to the system can participate, making it possible for you to receive input from many people without costly, time-consuming meetings.

While this description seems aimed primarily at commercial users, the possibilities of VAX Notes are attractive for this seminar for several reasons.

- 1) Online conferencing supplies a comfortable, asynchronous medium for all participants to exchange views on readings, class discussion, cases, or other assignments. Because participation is at your own time, absent the pressures that reticent students may feel in class, VAX Notes offers a more egalitarian format in which all students may be heard.
- 2) Similarly, the informality of VAX Notes should encourage participants to explore ideas in a more flexible, spontaneous, even playful way. This might unlock creativity that would be submerged in the more formal structures of communication that dominate academia. Writing your own notes, and reading others' contributions, should broaden your thinking about American politics. VAX Notes will be similar to a journal, only communal and interactive.
- 3) Computer environments are increasingly ubiquitous as the medium through which the business, political, and I forecast, scholarly communities will communicate. It can only be to your advantage to tell prospective employers come graduation time that you have experience working in a computerized environment.
- 4) Best of all, if we all take seriously our individual responsibilities for participation in the conference, this should be fun.

This document will explain the conference attached to this seminar, as well as introduce you to the fairly simple commands you will need to master in order to participate. Our conference will be known, without irony, as "American_Politics." An important point to remember is that in Conference, we are all equal.

Substantive Requirements

You will be expected to add a minimum of ONE conference note per week. I would anticipate that a significant note would take up about a screen, or more. Length, however, is not as important as quality. This conference is an experiment, so of necessity, this handout is rather vague regarding content. More precise requirements can be worked out in practice. I will ensure that you receive feedback on your conference participation at regular intervals, either in class, in private conference, or via e-mail.

Writing an effective conference note is a minor art form. Like a miniaturist, you must create an essay that conveys a complete thought, but within a minimum of space. It will be necessary to pare your prose down to the barest essentials. Make your point, but avoid excessive elaboration. Remember, a note is not filed simply for the purpose of filing notes. It should address some question, perhaps something not clarified for you in the readings, class discussion, or in a previous note, in a way that contributes to the conversation. Make sure you state this clearly. Your thoughts might well be tentative, even a bit uncertain. However, like any good conversationalist, one should observe a few common sense rules of etiquette. (Some of the following is freely excerpted and adapted from Timothy O'Neill's "Ten Suggestions" for seminarians, American Political Science Association)

- 1) Do not bull shit! Your opinions and observations are valued in this course, but they should reflect an understanding, at some inchoate level, of the subject matter under discussion. A willingness to examine your own premises, as well as those of others with whom you might disagree, makes for a top drawer conference. However, while you are expected to be informed, in this course it is safe to admit what one does not know. Certainly, it is preferable to trying to bluff your way through a conversation. When you have said enough to fairly represent your thoughts at this time, stop. Someone else may add important insight to your ideas, but only if you give them the chance. I suspect that all useful knowledge is really co-authored anyway.
- 2) Although disagreement, challenge, protest, even occasional ranting, is perfectly acceptable in a computer conference, do not attack the personality of an author or a speaker. No one is "wrong" simply because of who he or she is. A statement might be wrong (or more likely, weakly defended), but the individual who wrote or said it is not. This goes for distinguished Chief Justices and for the most confused conference participant. In this course, we honor each other and the insights each of us brings to the table. In short, THERE WILL BE NO FLAMING in this conference. I tend to be more protective of students than the current Chief Justice, but personal attacks will be deleted from the discussion.
- 3) Popular opinion is not the test of truth or falsity in this seminar. Do not attack or defend a position by saying "everyone knows that..." "Everyone" does not know squat! Besides, nothing useful is learned until someone has the courage to flout popular opinion, and try out a new idea. This and the previous note suggest that ideas may be evaluated and criticized on the basis of their own merits, and not on the basis of their pedigrees.
- 4) Read assigned material! Also read prior notes carefully, and make sure you represent accurately what another author has said. While writing replies, maintain the thread of discussion. If you find you positively must drift off topic because you have this really neat idea that you want to share, create a new discussion topic. Choose a title for your note that accurately describes its content--you want people to read it, and not to be irritated for having been misled. This is important!
- 5) You are here to teach as well as to learn. You are expected to help each other (and your instructor) to understand not only the texts assigned, but also how these cast light on the broader issues of American politics--and of life. Try to draw on what you have learned

throughout your college career, as well as the very different life experiences each of you brings to the seminar, to help us understand what is at stake in our discussion about American politics.

6) Take risks. Try out an idea, even if it is only tentative. What is the worst thing that could happen? You might sound like a blathering idiot--I've done this lots of times, and survived to tell the story. Alternatively, you might provoke a great discussion, learn, and teach at the same time. Learning and teaching are not passive exercises. Both require imagination--and imagination requires that we expose ourselves to the critical judgment of others. Perhaps that is why many of us manage to restrain our imaginations so well. This conference is a safe environment in which the benefits clearly outweigh the risks, so do experiment.

7) Although the VAX displays the address of all authors who post notes, it will be a requirement in this conference that all notes be signed with your full name. We will all take responsibility for our ideas, openly, and with pride.

Using VAX Notes

First, some conventions: a CONFERENCE is essentially a bulletin board with any number of postings concerning an agreed upon SUBJECT. Thus, we are a conference, and our subject is the United States Supreme Court. Our conversation will focus upon a number of TOPICS pertaining to many aspects of the Supreme Court, its structure and organization, its personnel, its role in the legal and political systems, its possible defects and alternatives, whether the basketball court located on the third floor of the Supreme Court building really is "the highest court in the land" and the medical ramifications of Sandra O'Connor's aerobics classes held there each morning, or whatever else might strike our collective fancy. Many topics will be supplied by the instructor, but all of you are free to start discussions of pertinent topics of interest to you--and you are encouraged to do so. A topic will consist of an essay raising some theoretical problem or issue, possibly posing questions for others to think about, and to which someone else might attach a REPLY. Topics and replies are both referred to as NOTES. A topic and its associated replies (a passel of related notes) will be called a DISCUSSION. The idea of a computer conference, of course, is that others will attach their own replies, and replies to replies, and so forth, resulting in an extended list of notes that constitute a lively and thoughtful conversation. The possibilities here are endless!

I hope you are clear about this vocabulary. To minimize confusion, I will try to follow it faithfully. Discussions are given sequential numbers, as are replies within each discussion, according to the format, Discussion#.Reply#. For example, our first discussion will be an introduction to the conference, with guidelines for participants. Suppose, however, our conference next contains a discussion entitled REHNQUIST'S LUNCH. It would be numbered by the VAX as topic 2.0, while the various replies might be: BACON, LETTUCE & TOMATO 2.1, WHITEBREAD 2.2, DILL PICKLE 2.3, CHIPS 2.4. If the next discussion is THE EFFECTS OF CHOLESTEROL ON JUDICIAL TURNOVER, it will be numbered 3.0. A reply to this topic entitled ARTERIOSCLEROSIS would be numbered 3.1. SYNERGISTIC EFFECTS OF SODIUM (CHIPS) might be numbered 3.2. CORONARY THROMBOSIS would be 3.3, while SINISTER LIBERAL CONSPIRACY would be 3.4. (Note: it works both ways--while hospitalized for minor surgery, Thurgood Marshall received a polite inquiry as to his well-being from the Bush White House. The Justice, known to be curt, sent back the reply, "Not yet.")

Joining a Conference

This all seems abstract, but will become clear with experience. Lets try it: after logging onto your account in the VAX, type NOTES <enter>. You have now entered VAX Notes. Look over the screen for a while, noticing the prompt NOTES> at the top left hand corner of your screen--quite different from where you are used to seeing prompts, at the bottom of the screen. If you have never entered VAX Notes before, you will not be a member of any conferences yet, but not to worry. Type at the prompt DIR /CONF <enter> for a directory of available conferences. Use the Enter key if the list exceeds a single screen. To add a conference to your notebook, type at the prompt ADD ENTRY <enter>. The computer will ask you which conference you wish to add. Type AMERICAN_POLITICS <enter>. You are now a member of the discussion group, and fully entitled to all rights, honors privileges and responsibilities implied therein! Henceforth, when you enter NOTES, your personal notebook will show that AMERICAN_POLITICS is available. You may, of course enter other conferences that interest you. May I recommend you try SAMPLE_CONFERENCE for more coaching and practice of these skills? Use ADD ENTRY for each conference you wish to join.

To join the discussion, you must now type OPEN AMERICAN_POLITICS <enter>. Later, to leave the discussion, you will use CLOSE <enter>. You do not need to use ADD ENTRY again, but each time you enter or leave the conference, the OPEN and the CLOSE commands are necessary. Note that this is also true if you want to leave one conference and enter another. You can use EXIT <enter> to leave VAX Notes and return to the VAX \$ prompt, and perhaps log off and go home, but only after you have closed any conference that you have opened. If at any time you become hopelessly confused, do not panic. CTRL-Z <enter> will get you out of any jam, and take you to the next highest level of prompt. Used repeatedly, CTRL-Z will get you out of VAX Notes. Unfortunately, CTRL-Z will not get you out of debt, unhappy love affairs, college, the military, or taxes. CTRL-Z only works on computers.

Reading Notes

Now that our conference is open, you may want to look over a table of contents, indicating topics and the number of replies each topic has generated to date. Type DIR <enter>. Notice that each topic is accompanied by the date of the most recent entry--a date your instructor will be watching carefully--the number of replies, and the VAX address of the person who created the discussion. Nothing is done anonymously on the VAX, a fact you ought to keep in mind. How do you get a directory of replies? Ah, recall that topics are numbered, ie. 2.0. If you want to see a list of replies to topic 2, type DIR 2.* <enter>. The * is called a "wild card" and it does exactly what a wild card does-- it substitutes for any number that could be in that spot. Thus, if topic 2.0 has twelve replies, DIR 2.* <enter> will list 2.1, 2.2, 2.3...until the last entry, along with the titles supplied by the authors of each entry. Of course, if you already know that you want the third reply to topic 2 (Dill Pickle), you need only type 2.3 <enter> to get it. When you do this, you are actually using the READ command. However, if you do not supply another command, VAX Notes defaults to READ, so you do not have to type it (unless, of course you just want the practice).

After you have worked in VAX Notes for a while, you will notice that a little > will appear next to certain entries in the directory. If you are astute, you might also notice that this > appears at the first entry following the last note you read! Well, isn't that special! VAX Notes supplies its own little bookmark! Furthermore, if you simply type a topic number, ie. 2 <enter>, VAX Notes will take you immediately to this first unread note!

Unless you tell it to do otherwise, VAX Notes always starts you where you left off the last time you were logged onto VAX Notes. To read another topic, or another reply to the same topic, simply type the number followed by <enter>. 4 <enter>, or 4.5 <enter>, are valid commands for reading notes, assuming that such notes exists. You can also use the BACK or NEXT command to read the previous reply within a topic, or the next sequential reply or topic. These can also be used with extensions, ie., BACK REPLY, BACK TOPIC, BACK NOTE, or NEXT REPLY, NEXT NOTE, NEXT TOPIC. Get to know these commands--they are your friends.

You can also print a note or a entire discussion. This may prove helpful if you want to take a note to the library, or to your room to prepare a reply, or to bring it to class for discussion. If you are in the note you wish to print, simply type PRINT <enter>. You can pick up your hard copy later, at Computer Services. PRINT can also be used with qualifiers, such as PRINT 2.* for a complete exegesis of Rehnquist's lunch (topic note and all replies), PRINT 2.1-4 for a topic note and the first four replies, PRINT 2-4 for a range of topic notes, or 2.*-4.* for a range of complete discussions. We saw previously that these qualifiers also work with DIR.

Posting Notes

Now it is time to put your own two cents in. Suppose, after reading the previously described conference, you have something to add concerning the Chief Justice's choice of mayonnaise. You must be within topic 2, The Chief Justice's Lunch. Type REPLY <enter> to bring up the VAX Notes editor in a window. Well, the folks who wrote the software call it an editor. Alas, it is a pretty weak one. As you type your reply, you will find that the BACKSPACE still deletes the character to the left of the cursor, and the ARROW keys still move the cursor around, but not much else works. We will not be too persnickety about style and the niceties of expression. It would help if you think about your reply a bit before you begin to type it, perhaps making a few notes on paper. Do your best to be neat, clear and thoughtful, typing as much as you need to. If you screw up royally, you can bail out. Remember, you must sign all notes with your name.

After you have finished typing your reply (or it has finished off you), type CTRL-Z. You will be asked to supply a title to your reply, followed by <enter>. This title will then appear in the directory, and will be used by others to decide whether they want to read it or not. Choose a title that is descriptive of its content ("Mayonnaise: Silent but Deadly") and perhaps indicating that it is a reply to Note 2.3. A title may be as long as 63 characters, which should be plenty. After you have typed the title, you will be asked if you wish to enter your note in the conference. If you want to bail out, here is your last chance: N <enter> and nobody but you will ever know. If you are satisfied that you have said something useful, type Y <enter>. Just like that! Do a DIR 2.* <enter> to see if it worked.

Now, if you are creative, and you want to start a new discussion, you must type WRITE <enter>. Note the different function of REPLY and WRITE. The former is to work within a topic, while the latter is to start a new topic and invite others to add replies. After writing an appropriate introduction to the discussion (which should contain one or more questions about the topic), type CTRL-Z <enter>, supply a catchy but descriptive title and press <enter>, and then choose Y/N <enter>. Do a DIR at the NOTES> prompt to see if it worked. Your discussion should have a number, and after the passage of a short time, replies by other participants should start appearing, also numbered sequentially.

As moderator of this conference, I will exercise certain editorial powers over the content of the postings. I hope to administer this authority infrequently. I will, however, remove any note that I deem frivolous or offensive, in most cases after consultation with the author of the note. I may also have to delete old notes as we progress, should we start using up disk space faster than I had intended, so if there is a really good note that you want save, PRINT it. Finally, if you make a mistake that you cannot fix, say you use WRITE when you meant to use REPLY, let me know via e-mail (MG1419). I can fix it for you.

One absolutely final note: anything you place in the conference is available to the world--well, okay, to anyone in the world with a computer, but that is still a very large population. It is not a good idea to discuss matters of a private nature in Conference. Should you need to communicate with each other--or with me--in a more discreet manner, use e-mail (but make sure you send it to the correct address!).

We have covered just about all you need to know. For convenient reference, here is a table of VAX Notes commands.

COMMAND	DESCRIPTION
Notes	Invokes VAX Notes (from the VAX \$ prompt--all others from Notes>)
Help	Displays Help for VAX Notes commands--can be used with any command you wish to learn about, ie., Help Write.
Dir /Conf	Displays available conferences
Add Entry	Adds a conference (which you will be asked to name) to your notebook.
Open <conference name>	Opens conference in your notebook, so that you can read or post notes
Dir	Lists topics in open conference
Dir <#>.*	Lists replies in numbered discussion
Read <topic#.note#>	Displays text of numbered note(typing Read is not necessary)
Reply	Lets you post a reply within a topic
Write	Lets you begin a new discussion of a different topic
Show Members	Lists participants in a conference
Back	Displays previous reply in a topic
Next	Displays next reply, or if there are none, next topic
Print	To print note you are reading (also works with qualifiers, ie. 2.*)
Close <conference name>	Closes currently open conference
Delete Entry	Resigns from a conference
Exit	Ends your VAX Notes session

Appendix 2.

Un-Edited VAX Notes Topics.

TOPIC 3.0 - The Founding and Human Nature

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Note 3.0	The founding and human nature	11 replies
ALBANY::MG1419		33 lines 31-JAN-1995 17:02

In our examination of the political thought of the founding period, we are going to spend a fair amount of time looking at the different conceptions of human nature held by such individuals as Thomas Paine, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, the Anti-Federalists, and everybody's favorite - Tom Jefferson. These men each had different understandings about mankind's natural inclinations, although it is possible to find similarities among some (i.e., Hamilton and Madison; Paine, Jefferson, and the Antifeds). What is your take on these views of human nature? Who do you think had it right? Why? Should government be designed to promote virtue in its populace, or should it be based on the assumption that all people are selfish and ambitious?

Give it your best shot. Remember, several pieces of advice:

- 1) Read any other replies written by other students. Feel free to respond to each other's comments - even if it takes the conference into unchartered territory.
- 2) Debate is good; disagreement is good; personal attacks on authors is bad!
- 3) Always do a DIR command to make sure there aren't more than one topic currently being held.
- 4) Always sign your name!

Michael Gizzi

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Note 3.1	The founding and human nature	1 of 11
ALBANY::DH2028		52 lines 3-FEB-1995 21:31

-< Assuming Man Is Selfish... >-

The Federalist view held that humans by nature are selfish and ambitious, or as J. Madison stated, people are "much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good." (The Federalist Papers #10). Although I do not agree with all of the views that were supported by the Federalists, I do agree with this. Examples can be found extensively throughout history and litter our present situation with problems today. Crime, social-economic issues political agendas and even capitalism all reflect the human race's tendency to look out for its own self interests. These factors are not limited to our present situation, but of course our past. Shay's Rebellion reflected the Federalist's fears that too much power to the masses (non-elite) would lead to rebellious, unlawfulness; a serious accusation that would serve to discredit the anti-elite, Anti-Federalist's view that people will adhere to "civic virtue". In fact, it did just that; lead the popular democrats to reserve some of the trust they put into the people...

One of the Federalist's strongest concerns was the faction. A faction is what we now know as a "special interest" group. The name describes its purpose; to advocate and work for a specific interest. In Federalist Paper #10, Madison defined the faction (when included in a majority) as something that will: "...sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest, both the public good and the rights of other citizens." (The Federalist Papers #10). His solutions included a small group of elected, educated officials, who would with the help of checks and balances and large republic, run the country effectively. Assuming that this small select group too, could be taken over by the natural tendencies of selfishness, the checks and balances and annual elections would serve to keep them honest. I should add here that I am not advocating either position of elite or democratic democracy, but rather

states..." said Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton thought that not only was war an impetus for confrontations between the states, but so too was commerce. This is a point that I agree with, and that can be understood by examining the most recent history (say the last twenty years or so) of our nation. Rivalries between states have often centered around aspects of business; which state is to be sought after by companies for business activities. We all have heard of companies that moved to other states to cash in upon the opportunities of that other state. If we think of a state as one very powerful individual, we can see that Hamilton was right—that confrontations do, in fact, arise between states. In a sense, his ideas of human nature center more around states as a whole, then around individuals.

James Madison believed that people, and especially factions, were inherently evil. "Among the numerous advantages promised by a well constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction" (Fed. #10). Madison fervently believed that factions (the interest groups of today) were bad, and caused many of society's problems. "The instability, injustice, and confusion introduced into the public councils have, in truth, been the mortal diseases under which popular governments have everywhere perished...". This statement epitomizes Madison's views of human nature. He believed that the common questioning of authority, unwillingness of citizens to accept legislative decisions, and the like were the problems that prevented government from running efficiently. Up to this point, Madison and Hamilton seem similar on their views of human nature. Hamilton seems to contribute the problems to states as a whole, especially the business interests of states, whereas Madison attributes the problems to individuals. But for the most part, they are SIMILAR views. However, Madison makes an important statement which begins to distinguish him from Hamilton. "Liberty is to faction, what air is to fire" (Fed. #10). True, Madison believes that factions are evil but he also notes that they are the fuel which keeps this country going. They (factions) act as checks and balances on the activities of government officials. He continues by saying that there is no rational way of getting rid of factions. Madison has identified the problem of factions, but seems to offer little advice on controlling them. I think his intention behind this was to infer that as evil as factions were, they were necessary for the continuation of an advanced democratic society.

My instinct tells me that Madison is "more" correct than Hamilton. I, too, believe that human beings are selfish. I believe that factions are a "dangerous vice" (Fed. #10). Although it sometimes disturbs me that interest groups seem to rule this country (at least in terms of what legislation is passed), I think this might be the most efficient way of getting things done. If you can get through Madison's wordy speech, I think he basically advocates the following: To get rid of factions without forgetting to abide by the "rules" that a just government is supposed to abide by. This balance, although, is probably one of the most difficult things for government to accomplish.

In conclusion, I believe that government should recognize that most individuals are greedy, self-serving, and concerned with only those issues that directly affect them and those they care about, but at the same time understand this can be used to promote efficiency in government. Competition between individual groups, although they may be factious and selfish, is probably what keeps this country going. America was founded on competition and on the desire for quality, and this is how government should be run. The evils of factions are, unfortunately, a NECESSARY evil.

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Note 3.4

The founding and human nature

4 of 11

ALBANY::MG1419

42 lines 6-FEB-1995 14:20

-< some more thoughts >-

Are we all evil, self-seeking brutes? Is self-interest the primary motivation behind our actions? The first three posts to my question suggest that the dim views of human nature espoused by good old Al and Jimmy Madison were completely right - and I am not going to suggest that you are necessarily wrong. I just wonder how such perspectives jive with the empirical evidence of human experience. For example, while I have little doubt that the world is full of losers, of people

Government SHOULD be designed to promote virtue and the participation in government and the awareness of the masses, but at the same time, I also believe that government should assume that people are selfish, because if it doesn't then the government will be left open to benefit the selfish, and not protect itself or the majority from these people. Government should not be exclusive, people should want to make their citizenship count and the government should facilitate that... people(non-elite)will most often rise to the call of their civic duty and do what is best for the public good (especially if it helps them, which most times is the same thing).

TOPIC 5.0 Explaining the Elections of November Past

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Note 5.0 Explaining the elections of November past 10 replies
ALBANY::MG1419 18 lines 1-MAR-1995 09:49
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Considering our current examination of American Ideologies, I thought a nice subject for on-line discussion would be the elections of 1994. Ever since November 8th, we have been told (by both the media and the Republicans) that we have witnessed the beginning of a new Republican era - a conservative era. The conservatives may have taken a beating in 1992, but two years later, the American people voiced their strong agreement with the Republican party and the ideas that the Republican's espouse (see the Contract with America).

The question I want us to explore - and I will put in my own two cents worth as well! - is how would you assess the meaning of the 1994 elections in terms of the ideologies we have studied? Was this a major realignment of the political spectrum towards conservatism? If so, what variant of conservatism? Or is the answer more complicated? This is your chance to play spin doctor! Try to explain your answer.

There is no correct answer to the question. Just give it your best shot!

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Note 5.1 Explaining the elections of November past 1 of 10
ALBANY::JS2382 18 lines 9-MAR-1995 05:43
-< conservative in the 90's? >-
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The 1994 elections are an obvious change in direction towards conservative views... Basically, We had to suffer through 4 years of liberalistic nonsense in which practically nothing was done... Granted, nothing harmful came of our stature in the world's international structure, but what positive came of it? Failed Health care ideas? Welfare Reform?? A bunch of nonsense... Regardless, the conservative switch which we are going to see in the near future is a confusing one...The way I see it, Reform policies are going to be dampered a bit in order to preserve traditional ways of viewing the economy. However, if something isn't done about certain policies, the Republicans are not going to maintain their power for much longer than the democrats...So the real way we can look at the future or near future of politics for the late nineties is a mixture of conservative reform on liberal policies... Do you see what I mean? Jason Samuels...

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Note 5.2 Explaining the elections of November past 2 of 10
ALBANY::DH2028 22 lines 9-MAR-1995 09:41
-< What is so shocking? >-
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It seems a little early to say for sure if the Republicans will remain in power, but I feel that by the next 3 to 4 months we'll be hearing complaints about them(as if we aren't hearing it now). The problem with calling the 1994 elections a major realignment to the conservative side is an overstatement. American ideology has never been so liberal as it now exist today... The elections represent what should have been expected. They include two factors. The first involves

