

Model Congress
By Ilana Strauss

A couple hundred high school students, one auditorium, and instructions to act as the government. A recipe for... well, who knows? Part of the excitement was not knowing what would occur.

The First Annual Tenth Congressional Model Congress brought in students from all around the Chicago area. Freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors entered Stevenson High School in suits and neck ties, ready to represent a Congressperson and debate potential laws.

The bill choice was a good one. Everyone knew about global warming and energy issues. As a result, nearly everyone had an opinion on what to do with the environment.

Of course, few were able to express their personal opinions, since every student represented an actual member of the Congress and had to learn to comply with the views of that individual. It was a challenge that forced students to see the issue from another point of view. Possibly as a result of this learning process, many students did not shift from their representee's view, even when given the opportunity during the second half of the simulation.

The most interesting trend was that the students did not just sit back and pretend to play the roles of Congress people. They individually ended up settling into their own niches – niches that really do occur in the real Congress. There were official party leaders, and there were self-appointed party leaders. There were individual committees who created themselves in opposition to the party as a whole.

People did not just stare blankly at the podium, speaking when called on and listening the rest of the time. Instead, most students grew surprisingly active. It was uncanny that every one of these Congress people had been an ordinary high school teen a day before. Maybe it was just the suits and ties, but the Model Congress managed to bring out the elected official in everyone.

The simulation was not a play. People did not stick to their roles and limit their actions to those described by the staff. It was politics, which meant that winning would often override other, more obvious concerns. The parties – Republicans especially, since they were the minority and at a loss for support – would sneak over to the other side to negotiate with opposing leaders when worried their bill lacked a few votes. Members of the Democratic Party tried to appoint a new party leader when the old one was judged not sufficiently involved with the committee chairs.

The 'politicians' had to keep their vigor balanced. Assertive was good – but hostile was dangerous, and could result in isolation or near expulsion from the party. Then again, failing to speak up was no way to get any support either.

After the Model Congress had ended, members came up to the microphone and spoke about their experiences. Naturally no two people had the exact same thing to say, but one comment seemed to reside within every speaker: this had given them a good idea how the actual Congress worked, and some valuable firsthand experience.