Student Examines Cases of Wiretapping

How does congressional oversight of the executive branch in the case of wiretapping during the Watergate scandal differ from today’s National Security Agency surveillance program? Lauren Rice, a senior political science and socio-legal studies major, is working on that answer for her senior thesis.

Rice is analyzing congressional oversight patterns of the executive in the cases of wiretapping starting in the 1940’s. She’s using New York Times data from articles on government wiretapping of citizens and comparing the data to the number of hearings conducted by Congress. Patterns are emerging that Rice calls “incredibly interesting.”

“Until recently, Congress has followed a ‘fire alarm’ model of oversight that is reactive to scandal or public opinion, particularly as seen during Watergate,” said Rice. “However, starting in the early 2000’s the congressional oversight model switches to a more passive form of oversight in relying on sunset legislation to check the executive. This means Congress will evaluate a program and either allow it to expire or reauthorize the program. This particular method is passive compared to the upfront confrontation Congress had during Watergate with President Nixon.”

From an in-depth analysis of Watergate and the NSA wiretapping programs post 9/11, Rice notes that the conversations in Congress are similar, yet the outcomes are “wildly” different. “My next step is to explore what motivates Congress to act in these ways. I’m looking into the reelection motive in relation to the political climate being affected by not only war but war on terrorism as a possible explanation,” she said.

“Lauren has demonstrated that Congress responded in sharply different ways to revelations of wiretapping in the 1970s and today,” said Peter Hanson, assistant professor in political science. “Her research is especially interesting because it challenges a longstanding view in political science that congressional oversight mirrors public attention to an issue. She’s making a real contribution to our understanding of Congress.”

Rice was selected by the political science department to represent DU at the Air Force Academy Assembly in February. Student delegates from universities around the country attended the three-day conference which focused on U.S. relations to India. Experts provided background information, and then the delegates broke into small groups to discuss the issues and America’s role going forward. “It was a great exercise in discussing real solutions to complex world issues,” Rice said.

During spring quarter, Rice will finish her thesis and intern in the Governor’s Office of Community Partnerships and Special Initiatives. After graduation, she plans to pursue a master’s in public policy at Georgetown University.

“While an undergrad I have really focused on two passions, homelessness and early childhood literacy rates, especially among low income children. Caring for the underserved and overlooked portion of our population has become a bit of a passion of mine,” she said.
“With my political science degree from DU and this master’s degree, I hope to work towards influencing education and basic needs policy in some way or another, whether through lobbying, in a think tank or directly through creation of legislation.”