I must confess, rather shamefacedly, to having picked up this book with some apprehension. Political science is occasionally prone, I find, to concealing perfectly straightforward ideas behind obscurantist terminology. Effusive dust-jacket endorsements notwithstanding, my heart sank when I scanned the contents page and saw chapter titles like “A Dyadic Theory of Subconstituency Representation.” The following review should stand, therefore, as testament to the fact that assessing a book by its contents page is no more instructive than judging it by its cover.

Kristina Miler, an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Illinois, has produced a remarkable and intriguing book. The question motivating this study was first posed by the political scientist Richard Fenno in 1978: “What does the representative see when he or she goes home to look at the represented?” (1). Miler’s conclusions are not wholly encouraging. The central contention is that legislators do not represent a single unit known as ‘the district’, but rather a multitude of perceived subconstituencies, whose prominence varies according to the policy context. The legislative office (i.e. legislators and their staff members) therefore engages in a series of bilateral relationships with a succession of subconstituencies (that ‘dyadic theory’). Drawing on the latest cognitive psychology research, Miler asserts that as it is unreasonable to expect a legislative office to conduct exhaustive research into the interests of their district’s multiple subconstituencies as each bill arises, legislators and their staff must instead rely on ‘cognitive heuristics.’ Consequently, their mental picture of the constituency they represent is intrinsically biased. Thus, despite the best intentions, cognitive limitations prevent legislators from fully representing their districts.

Miler’s researches focus on the House of Representatives in the 107th and 108th Congresses (2001-05), and specifically on health and energy policy. These policy areas have been chosen for the breadth of interested subconstituencies, and the fact that one (energy...
policy) has a regional element (the ‘Western perspective’) that is generally lacking in the other. A confident grasp of the intricacies of these issues, combined with impressive data analysis and extensive personal interviews with legislators and their staff members, give Miler’s persuasive arguments a convincing empirical grounding. Her prose is always lucid, if a little unwieldy at times.

Miler argues that, above all, two factors will greatly increase the likelihood that a subconstituency is remembered by the legislative office: regular contact and money. The more frequently a subconstituency contacts its representative, the more likely that representative will recall the subconstituency’s interests in committee participation, floor debates, and other arenas of law-making. Therefore, contacting a legislative office constitutes “a meaningful form of political action that is available to all citizens and has relatively low barriers to participation” (97). Likewise, financial contributors are significantly more likely to be perceived by the legislative office than non-contributors. This should not, however, be confused with the grubby quid pro quos that excite reformists. Miler is not suggesting that Capitol Hill is swarming with undetected Tom DeLays. Rather, the impact of campaign contributions, in her schema, is far more subtle and insidious: “By buying mental access, financial contributions shape the pre-conscious stage of representation and can have a corrupting influence on constituency representation even when legislators are not active accomplices” (128).

Miler’s book concludes by suggesting some radical reforms to correct the biases engendered by this reliance on cognitive heuristics. It may, for example, be necessary to increase the total number of representatives in the House, which has been fixed at 435 since 1911. At the current rate of population increase, each legislator will soon be representing over a million constituents, which will only exacerbate an already flawed system. On campaign finance, Miler suggests that only a move towards public financing would fully correct the advantage in “mental access” that subconstituencies which finance a political campaign have over those that do not. While never swerving toward political manifesto, Miler argues that the data gathered for this study makes such reforms at least worthy of consideration.

One of Miler’s best insights is that representation is performed not by a single lawmaker, but by a “legislative enterprise,” which includes not only the legislator but their professional staff as well. While legislators serve as “the CEOs of their office . . . much of the everyday work in Washington is by professional staff members” (26). Making this distinction is especially important to understanding Congress since the institutional reforms of the early 1970s. These reforms were the culmination of a multi-decade congressional movement,
largely spearheaded by liberal Democrats, which was given a sudden boost by gross abuses of executive prerogative in Vietnam and Watergate by presidents of both parties. The result was the proliferation of subcommittees and the democratisation of committee appointments, which in turn ensured a considerable expansion of each legislator’s personal staff. Even the most junior member of Congress could become a well-resourced, well-staffed policy entrepreneur.

Despite the title, conspicuously absent from Professor Miler’s book is any discussion of the Senate. However, this objection is a small one, and perhaps even churlish at that. The advantage of comparing House members is that each represents a district of approximately 700,000 citizens. Furthermore, the Senate is perhaps better thought of as a deliberative, rather than a representative, body. Broadening the scope to the Senate would therefore have required Professor Miler to control for the different institutional context as well as the immense variation in constituency sizes. Nonetheless, a contrast would certainly have been instructive.

‘Constituents matter’ is the consensus of the literature on congressional representation. By the end of her fascinating study, Miler has revised this to “perceived constituents matter” (155). The much-needed inclusion of cognitive psychology into the study of congressional representation offers a mild corrective to rational choice theory, currently dominant in political science, though Miler cautiously stresses that her conclusions are “not incompatible with political scientists’ models of legislative elites as rational strategic actors” (31). All those interested in understanding the process of congressional representation would be well-advised to seek out a copy of this book.

And don’t forget to Write Your Representative.