

POLITICAL ★ INSIDER

From the internal politics of Congress to political party influence and presidential elections, David W. Rohde '67, PhD, is a renowned academic and scholar on the inner-workings of the U.S. government.

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PHOTOS BY LES TODD, DUKE UNIVERSITY





Not since 1952 has an American presidential election been held without an incumbent president or vice president on the ballot. It may be an anomaly but it's only one of several distinctions energizing the electorate this 2008 presidential season.

The next president will be the first since Richard Nixon to inherit an unpopular war. Economic and energy anxieties have generated unprecedented interest in the election among American voters. And for the first time in history an African American, Senator Barack Obama (D-IL), is the presidential nominee for a major political party. One person with a particularly close eye on the 2008 campaign is **David W. Rohde '67, PhD**.

"David Rohde is one of a handful of the best known scholars on the U.S. Congress and elections – period," says **Michael V. Haselswerdt, PhD**, professor of political science at Canisius College.

Rohde is the Ernestine Friedl Professor of Political Science at Duke University, where he studies the complex politics and policies that take place atop Capitol Hill. His research encompasses everything from Supreme Court decision making to the internal politics of Congress, political party influence and yes, contemporary American elections. His expertise led him to become a nationally-acclaimed commentator and political contributor for such media outlets as National Public Radio (NPR) and *The New York Times*. Most important, Rohde's research has changed the way political science scholars, elected officials and even their constituents look at politics.

"The very nature of politics is that there's either an election going on or one that's just finished therefore I'm either looking at the after effects of one election or preparing for the next," says Rohde.

A self-described "scientist, who studies political behaviors - scientifically," Rohde is most renowned for his 1991 theory, entitled *Conditional Party Government*, which challenged conventional wisdom about the influence of political parties. Rohde's peers and predecessors long contended that national political parties were weak and inconsequential, both in the electoral process and in government. "His colleagues believed that members of Congress cared only about their own reelection - not policy - and that they preferred a committee system, rather than political parties, to help them meet the needs of their districts," explains Haselswerdt, who studied under Rohde at Michigan State University.

But congressional reforms were enacted in the 1970s to weaken the committee system and to provide for a larger role for the political parties. "David argued that this proved members were as concerned with policy as they were with their own reelections," explains Haselswerdt. "Otherwise why would they change a system from which they personally benefited?"

Rohde's theory went one step further. "As a result of the congressional reforms, the situation that Americans know today developed: increased party loyalty and increased party conflict," says Haselswerdt. "No one was able to explain these trends before David and his theory remains important today."

Rohde's history of progressive research dates back to his post-graduate school days in the early 1970s, when he was an assistant professor of political science at Michigan State University. Rohde was one of the first to theorize and later argue that Supreme Court justices are primarily motivated by their policy views.

Haselswerdt explains, "It was David's research that dispelled what had long been known as 'the myth of the robe,' which was the assumption that judges are neutral arbiters of cases, who rely on precedent and legal philosophy for their decisions. This has ultimately influenced how Supreme Court judges are nominated and how they are confirmed." Rohde detailed his theory on Supreme Court justices in his first book, entitled *Supreme Court Decision Making*.

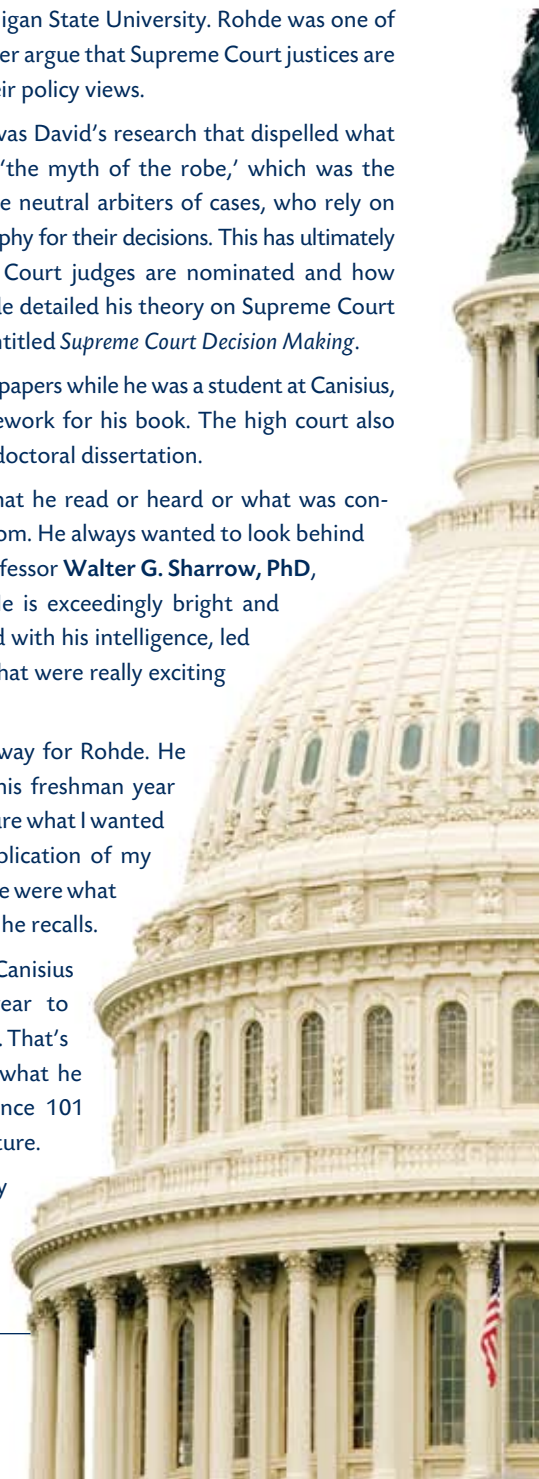
Rohde wrote two research papers while he was a student at Canisius, which served as the framework for his book. The high court also served as the basis for his doctoral dissertation.

"David never accepted what he read or heard or what was considered conventional wisdom. He always wanted to look behind things," recalls History Professor **Walter G. Sharrow, PhD**, of his former student. "He is exceedingly bright and his inquisitiveness, coupled with his intelligence, led him to all kinds of places that were really exciting academically."

But it wasn't always that way for Rohde. He says he struggled during his freshman year at Canisius. "I just wasn't sure what I wanted to do and neither the application of my talents nor my performance were what I thought they should be," he recalls.

Rohde withdrew from Canisius during his sophomore year to consider his career options. That's when he discovered that what he learned in a political science 101 class held the key to his future.

"The subject matter really intrigued me. So much so that during those nine months I was off, I must



have read a dozen political science books.”

Rohde returned to Canisius the following fall and enrolled in the political science program. That’s when he also met the person who would have a profound impact on his future: Walt Sharrow.

“I knew I wanted to study political science but how, where and under what circumstances were not yet clear to me. Professor Sharrow spent a great deal of time with me, outside of class. He helped me to realize my potential and determine precisely what I wanted to do.”

In gratitude, Rohde dedicated *Supreme Court Decision Making* to Sharrow. As a professor, Rohde now mentors his students in much the same way that Sharrow mentored him. Mentorship is also a key element in the graduate academic programs he created, first at Michigan State and later at Duke. Political Institutions and Public Choice (PIPC) provides extensive research training to PhD students in a collaborative setting.

“I am convinced that the way to teach people how to do research is to do research with them,” says Rohde. “Our graduate students start out as observers and then become research assistants and ultimately collaborators.”

Since 1994, when he first created the PIPC program, Rohde has co-authored numerous book chapters, journal articles and papers with students. That type of mentorship gives graduate students a significant headstart in their careers. Rohde says all of the students who completed the PIPC program at Michigan State went on to receive tenure-track appointments as assistant professors in PhD-granting departments. And although PIPC is only in its third year at Duke, the university is already seeing the returns.

“Having David and the PIPC program at Duke has made the university that much more competitive against the Harvard and Stanford-type schools, for the best graduate students in the field,” says John H. Aldrich, PhD, the Pfizer-Pratt University Professor of Political Science at Duke. “Not too many graduate schools can boast about having programs where senior faculty are so closely integrated with their beginning graduate students.”

And it certainly isn’t often that first-year graduate students are afforded the opportunity to study under



David W. Rohde '67, PhD, meets with students in his PIPC program at Duke University. The program provides research-training experience to PhD students in a collaborative setting.

one of the leading researchers in the field, at one of the most exciting times in political history. While Rohde underscores that his classes are about the scientific study of politics and not personal political preferences, the very nature of his work enables him to provide students - and the voting public - a glimpse as to how the November elections might play out.

Rohde predicts that the Democrats will gain seats in both the House and Senate. He foresees that Ohio, Florida, Virginia and Colorado will play starring roles in the quest for the 270 electoral votes. And he asserts that the vice presidential picks of both candidates will have relatively little affect on voters, “unless something unusual occurs.”

Rohde refers to the Democratic presidential primary, as an example.

“Super Tuesday was the day that most analysts anticipated would bring clear results as to who would become the Democratic presidential nominee. Well, it was about as close to a tie as you could get, in terms of the number of delegates won,” says Rohde. “It was like flipping a coin but instead of it landing on heads or tails, the coin landed on its side. There’s always some probability that may happen, it’s just very, very small.”

One thing is certain. When the 2008 political campaign culminates on November 4, Americans will select new leadership - from Capitol Hill all the way to the White House.

“We know from past experiences that we can’t necessarily trust what voters tell us, to enable us to discern how they’re going to vote,” says Rohde, who notes that this may or may not be a problem for Obama. “We just won’t know until the election.”

What lessons can be drawn from the 2008 election and how they will apply to the 2010 contest also remains to be seen. And they are questions best left studied by experts like David Rohde, while the rest of us, watch, listen and learn. ■

