Congressional Close Up is an automated system, which analyzes votes in the United States Senate. In order to perform this analysis, the Congressional Close Up system *classifies* each congressional vote into one of many political topics, *identifies* unusual political behavior concerning each vote, and *constructs* an explanation for the anomalous behavior depending on the topic of the vote.

Classifying Votes

In order for the Congressional Close Up system to analyze a vote, it must first identify the topic of that vote.   And in order for the system to be *scalable*, it must identify each topic automatically. This classification is achieved by using vector similarity techniques [1] to compare the description of each vote against the Jones/Baumgartner codebook [2], a codebook that political scientists use to classify any bill that is brought forth in congress. Congressional Close Up currently categorizes votes into one of 19 topics and 220 subtopics.

Identifying Unusual Behavior

It is very unusual for congressman to vote against party lines. When a congressman does vote against party lines, he is putting himself in political danger, and must be under the influence of some concern other than his political party.   The system tags each congressman who votes against party, and then constructs an explanation for his unusual behavior.

Constructing an Explanation

Congressional Close Up currently examines three explanations for unusual congressional behavior: constituency concerns [3], local industry, and campaign contributions [4]. Constituency concerns come into play when a congressman has an upcoming election, or is more liberal/conservative than this constituency and can use a cross party vote to put himself more into line with his base.   Congressmen often take into account how a particular vote will affect local industries as this affects their popularity in their district/state.   And last but definitely not least, campaign contributions from companies and private citizens also influence votes, as these dollars are needed to orchestrate an effective campaign.   The particular industries and lobbies, which are examined by the system, depend on the topic of the vote, which the system automatically classifies, as discussed earlier.

1.   Tan, P.N. and Steinbach. Introduction to Data Mining. Pearson Addison Wesley. 2006.
2.   Baumgartner/Jones codebook. http://www.policyagendas.org/page/topic-codebook. June 2006.
3.   Ansolabehere, S. Constituents' Responses to Congressional Roll Call Voting. American Journal of Political Science. 2010.
4.   Smith, Richard A. Interest Group Influence in the U.S. Congress. Legislative Studies Quarterly. 1995.