Politics is inherently fascinating, and no state surpasses South Carolina for the drama and excitement of its political history. South Carolinians have played important roles in the government of the country from its inception. The South Caroliniana Library’s Modern Political Collections Division strives to collect materials that chronicle the role and impact of South Carolinians in government at the state and national levels and document all manner of political experience for the post–World War II period. Its collections include the papers of Sol Blatt, Bryan Dorn, Fritz Hollings, Olin Johnston, Isadore Lourie, Dick Riley, Floyd Spence, The League of Women Voters of South Carolina, and the Democratic and Republican state parties. These collections form a tremendously important resource documenting the modern era. As Sir John Seeley wrote, “History is not politics, and politics present history.” (The Growth of British Policy, 1895.)

The collections of Dorn, Hollings, and Johnston are among the largest ever received by the library. The library’s John C. Calhoun papers occupy approximately 12 linear feet. While an extensive body of papers for its time, they represent a tiny fraction of what is available for a contemporary statesman such as Fritz Hollings. To date, the library has received over 1,350 linear feet of material documenting Hollings’ life and gubernatorial and Senate service. Modern records also come in diverse formats. Senator Hollings’ records include papers, photographs and photographic negatives, audio recordings, film, videotape in a variety of formats, and computer tapes and disks.

The breadth of research opportunities presented in these political collections is extraordinary. They document all aspects of modern society, not just government or political affairs. Johnston’s papers include remarkable material on the civil rights movement in South Carolina.
while Hollings' hold important documentation on the war with Vietnam and the federal budget. Constituent letters on a wide variety of subjects, such as civil rights, religious freedom, and gun control, provide incomparable insights into the mood of the public and the form of their concerns, unfiltered by the biases of the press or the haze of personal recollection. The difficulty for researchers in dealing with such collections is not finding documents to study and cite; it is finding, among the mass of documentation, records of high informational quality pertinent to their subject. This places a premium on the work of the Library's staff in arranging and describing these very complex collections.

Modern Political Collections maintains an active and broad collecting program. Its oral history project is designed to supplement the documentary record; typical interview subjects include legislators, staff members, and political activists. The division is garnering a national reputation for its collections and the manner in which it is administering those holdings. Herb Harswook, curator of Modern Political Collections, recently completed a three-year term as Chair of the Congressional Papers Roundtable of the Society of American Archivists. He also conceived and presents a workshop that the Society offers archivists interested in acquiring and working with legislative collections. The workshop builds on and shares the experience gained in inaugurating a major legislative collection and has focused additional national attention on the fine work being carried out at the South Caroliniana Library.