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*Email, Social Media and
More: How Constituents
Communicate with their
Members of Congress in
the Digital Age*

Tempest Edward

Abstract:

*M*embers of Congress and their congressional staff have always valued the views and opinions of their constituents. However, with more people having access to the internet and the increasing use of social media, the ways constituents communicate are changing. The traditional forms of communicating to Members of Congress like postal mail are being replaced by newer forms of communicating like email. With so many communication tools available to constituents to use, it is hard to pick the most effective way of getting the Member's attention on an issue. My research looks into the different communication tools that constituents and Member of Congress use to communicate with each other. Based on my research I gathered that while there is no one perfect method to communicate with Congress, what matters the most is the content of the message being sent. The findings also showed an increase in the use of social media sites such as Facebook from both Members of Congress and constituents to communicate to each other, however email reigns as the most used form of communication.

Introduction

Members of Congress and their congressional staff communicate with constituents through different communication tools. Members no longer rely on older forms of communication, which include postal mail and phone calling, to communicate with their constituents. Members now heavily use new communication tools, which are internet-based means of communication such as email and social media to connect to constituents. Social media refers to sites like Facebook and Twitter in which “forms of electronic communication are used through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content.”¹ Due to the rise of internet-based communication, more people communicate with their Member of Congress than they have in the past. The ways Americans communicate is changing and Members of Congress are adopting new forms of communication to connect with their constituents.

However, are the new means of communication effective in changing the Member’s views and opinions on a bill or issue? If they are effective in changing a Member’s view, constituents’ should know the best means of communicating with a Member and their congressional staff. It would be pointless for a constituent to send a message to their representative through a communication tool that does not influence a Member’s opinion. Constituents want to be a part of the political process and by contacting their Member constituents are engaging in their civic duty as citizens. Constituents believe that if they can get through and communicate with their Member then their views are being heard.² Constituents want to be heard by their Member of Congress.

The Goal for Members of Congress

Members of Congress communicate with constituents for reelection purposes. Members understand that in order to stay in office they have to please their voters. This explains why Members puts so much effort in keeping the public informed on their activities in Congress. Members want to let constituents know their representative

is working on the issues important to the district and that they listen to the constituents that contact their offices. From a Member's perspective, the only way an incumbent will lose their seat in office is if the Member loses touch with their district.³ Therefore, keeping communication open with constituents is key if a Member wants to stay in touch with their district. According to scholar David Mayhew, "Members of Congress are single-minded seekers of reelection who engage in advertising, position-taking, and credit claiming."⁴ Members view re-election as the main goal once elected into office. Therefore, every interaction a Member has with their constituents is done for re-election purposes.

As Mayhew mentioned, Members engage in advertising to demonstrate to their constituents why they should be re-elected. Members engaging in advertising refer to the ways Members get their name out to constituents and this includes activities such as attending district events, making speeches, and sending newsletters.⁵ Now with the Internet and social media, Members have new avenues to reach a broader range of potential voters. However, the basic idea of advertising for re-election purposes remains the same. Members can use Twitter and Facebook to show their constituents that they are working on the issues important to the district the same way they use newsletters.

The second activity Mayhew mentions Members engage in, credit claiming, happens when a Member acts as if they were personally responsible for causing a positive policy outcome or passing an important bill.⁶ Members engage in credit claiming because they think if constituents believe their Member of Congress can pass bills that will help the district, then constituents would want to keep that Member in office longer. Therefore, Members can use communication tools such as websites and social media as a way to show their constituents that they are getting bills passed in Congress that will benefit the Member's district. Engaging in credit claiming is another opportunity for Members to communicate to constituents that they should be re-elected for another term.

The last activity Mayhew says Members of Congress engage in, position-taking, occurs when Members take a specific stance on a certain issue.⁷ This is usually done in order to show the Member

taking position on an issue that reflects the interest of his/her constituents. By engaging in position taking, Members demonstrates that they do listen and respect their constituents' opinions. By taking a specific stance on an issue, Members show that they pay attention to the constituents who contact their offices expressing their view about a particular issue. All of the activities Mayhew discusses are ways Members of Congress promote themselves to their constituents. Members promote themselves to their districts because they want to tell constituents why they should remain in office. Therefore, Members and their congressional staff are willing to use the means of communication they believe will help the Member connect to their constituents.⁸ The question remains, however, whether social media are used by the Members and their staff to understand constituents' views.

In today's society, the means of communication are changing and Members of Congress are adopting new communication tools in order to connect to their constituents. New communication tools such as email and social media, shortens the information gap between Congress and their constituents because a message sent over the Internet can be received instantly. The shorten gap between Congress and their constituents has promoted more dialogue between the two groups. Sending an email to a congressional office or posting a message on a Member's Facebook page is much faster than writing out a letter and sending it through the postal services. Members and their staff can see what their constituents care about in real time. This suggest that the new means of communication can be better for the democratic process since Congress and staff can use these tools to ensure that their Member's office views are reflective of the district the Member represents. Members not only can use the Internet to promote themselves, they can use it to gauge constituents' views and opinions on issues.

The Congressional Staff

While the Member of Congress wants to hear from constituents, it is impossible for one person to hear the concerns of the thousands of people in the district. This is where the congressional staff comes

in. Congressional staffers are the link between the Member and their constituents. A major duty of being a Member of Congress involves handling constituent requests.⁹ By taking the time to listen and help individual constituents, Members can engage in credit claiming since the Member will be able to take credit for helping the people in his/her district. The majority if not all Members feel it is their responsibility to serve and represent their district.¹⁰ Since one Member cannot handle all of the requests made by constituents, Members of Congress have congressional staff help the constituent on the Member's behalf.

Staffers spend about 50 percent of their time in a congressional office on communicating with constituents.¹¹ Even though staffers usually respond to constituent inquires, the Member is ultimately responsible for every piece of information sent out to his/her constituents. Therefore, while Members are not directly involved in reading and answering mail, they do care about views of their constituents. The Member has their reputation on the line, not the staffer's if the wrong message is sent to constituents. With constituents turning towards different communication tools to connect with their Member, congressional staff have to keep up with the changes in technology to keep in touch with constituents.

Technological Advances in Communication

In today's society, more people communicate online. According to Pew Research Center, 85% of adult Americans use the Internet daily.¹² The majority of adults that go online use email on a daily basis. Even with newer forms of communication coming out, email dominates as the most used form of communication online.¹³ The high usage of email has been reflected in Congress as well. Constituent communication through email has far surpassed postal mail in recent years and explains why communication sent to Members of Congress in general has risen.¹⁴ Since the introduction of the Internet constituents communication has increased 300% between 1995 and 2005. That is about 50 million more constituents contacting their Member than before the popularity of the Internet.¹⁵

A major reason for the rise in email, not discussed often, is the anthrax scare that occurred on October 15, 2001. Senator Thomas Daschle and Senator Patrick Leahy's Washington offices were among others that received mail infected with anthrax spores, which resulted in 5 deaths and 17 people being infected.¹⁶ Since the anthrax scare, all postal mail sent to Congress has to be screened through one of two facilities located in Ohio or in New Jersey to be irradiated.¹⁷ It now can take up to four weeks for a letter sent from a constituent to reach their Member of Congress's office. Due to the delay in postal mail, the Members who were reluctant to use email and other electronic communication began to adopt these forms during this time period.¹⁸ Email messages from constituents soared immediately following the incidents.

Email is not the only form of online communication available. Today, over half (66%) of adult American use social networking sites like Facebook and 15% use instant messaging sites like Twitter to communicate.¹⁹ These growing audiences give Members of Congress incentives to adopt social media as a means of communication with constituents. The Pew Research Center also found that Facebook users tend to be more politically engaged than non-Facebook users.²⁰ This would be another cause for Members of Congress to use social media as a communication tool. By connecting to constituents on Facebook, Members will be able to reach the constituents in their district that are more politically involved. In fact, many Members of Congress in both the House and the Senate already have their own Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. Many Members have been quick to adopt social media as a form of communication, but since this is a recent phenomenon, there has not been major studies done on the effects of social media influencing the opinions of Members and their staff. If Members seriously use Facebook and other social media to seriously engage with constituents, then constituents can benefit by using social media as a means of getting their views across in Congress.

One of the few studies done on Member's use of social media examines the content of the message sent by the Member and congressional staff. According to author Jennifer Lawless, the content of Members of Congress communication through Twitter and Facebook tend to be consistent with Mayhew's thesis of Members

goals on reelection.²¹ These new communication tools provide the Member with new ways to send the same messages that they send to their constituents through more traditional forms of communication. Lawless found that the majority of the content sent through Members of Congress via Facebook and Twitter pages involved advertising, position-taking, and credit claiming.²² Members use Facebook and Twitter to transmit the same messages they would through newsletters and franked mailing. Since more Members are starting to use Facebook and Twitter to promote their image, it would be interesting to find if Members use these social media sites to gauge their constituents' opinion on issues.

There has been little research done discussing the ways constituents communicate to their Member of Congress and the impact of the message on a Member's opinions on an issue. This research will get actual congressional staffers views on the use of social media and other communication tools that staffers use to gauge constituents opinions on issues.

Communication Tools Used between Constituents and Members of Congress and their Staff

Members communicate with constituents to increase the likelihood of re-election.²³ This explains why Members of Congress place a big emphasis on responding to constituents' communication. While there are many communication tools available, each tool has its advantages and disadvantages. Furthermore, there are major differences between the older forms of communication and the newer forms of communication.

Older forms of communication includes to face-to-face communication, postal mail, and phone calling. Older forms refer to traditional communication tools constituents use to communicate with their representatives. Face-to-face communication includes town hall meetings with constituents, district events the Member attends, and meetings scheduled with constituents and advocacy groups in the congressional offices.²⁴ Many Members prefer this mean of communication with constituents because they like to interact in person with their constituents. However, the Member cannot meet

with every concern constituent in the district as they would like. Therefore, other forms of communication are used for those that cannot meet with the Member in person.

Postal mail refers to written messages sent through postal mail services to congressional offices. Before the Internet and email, postal mail was the main tool of communication between Members and their constituents. Many older legislators still prefer postal mail to email believing that constituents who send an email do not invest the same amount of time and thought it takes to send postal mail.²⁵ Despite some Members beliefs, the volume of email sent to congressional offices has skyrocketed in the past years.

Grassroots organizations and advocacy groups typically send postcards and petitions to Members of Congress. Postcards and petitions are usually sent to policymakers during a mass campaign on an important issue. Postcards and petitions are letters written from the same template and contain the same message and are also known as form letters. Congressional staffers that received these types of communication tally up the total amount sent in and tells the Member how many postcards/petitions about an issue was received each week.

Telephoning is another popular means of communication used by constituents. Members like this form because staffers can have actual conversations about issues with constituents.

New communication tools refer to Internet-based means of communication that “promote immediacy of communication and information gathering.”²⁶ These forms of communication seem to be preferred from constituents as a form of contact with their representative. Email is likely the most used form. Email is an electronic message sent over the Internet. Constituents use email because it is inexpensive to use and a message sent online can be sent and received instantly.

Congressional websites provide information about the Member of Congress. Members like websites because they are extensions of regular congressional offices.²⁷ Members have a “Contact Me” page on their website where constituents can email their representative. They can also provide good resources for constituents who want

stay up to date on the Member's activity while in Congress. Another way constituents can stay up to date on their Member is through social media. Social media is increasingly becoming popular among Members of Congress. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are some of the types of social media sites that Members use to communicate messages and inform their constituents.

Hypotheses

Congressional staffers use communication tools to promote their Member of Congress to their constituents. Everything a Member does is for re-election purposes and explains why Members highly value constituent communication. By engaging with constituents, Members show that they care about the views of the people in their district. Therefore, I hypothesize that Members of Congress and their staff prefer to communicate with constituents through face-to-face communication. Members prefer face-to-face communication because the constituents who show up to district events and set up meetings are politically active. Members care about the politically active citizens the most since they are more likely to vote in elections than other constituents.

However, the way constituents communicate with their Member may be different from how their Member would prefer. As mentioned previously, new forms of communication are increasingly becoming popular among American adults. Therefore, my second hypothesis is that constituents prefer to communicate with their Member of Congress and their staff through email as a communication tool. Since the majority of Americans are using email, it can be suggested that constituents would rather send an email to their Member of Congress than use other forms of communication.

If both hypotheses are supported then it shows how Members of Congress are not communicating as effectively with their constituents as they should. This demonstrates miscommunication between Members and their constituents. If Members of Congress and their staff indeed prefer to communicate using older forms of communication, they are leaving out a

growing amount of the voting public that would prefer to communicate their views through newer forms of communication. On the other hand, if constituents knew that Members would prefer to communicate face-to-face, they are losing out on the opportunity to communicate in a way that can actually change a Member's opinion on an issue.

Methodology

For my research methods, I used data obtained from the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) to gauge an understanding from both congressional staff and American citizens on their thoughts and habits of communicating with Congress. I began by researching the reports CMF has done through their Communicating with Congress project and then accessed the survey results used in their reports. I restricted my search to the most recent reports released. I picked out the survey data that related to my research question:

- *What are the communication tools Members of Congress and their congressional staff use to communicate with their constituents?*
- *What are the communication tools constituents use to communicate with Members of Congress and their congressional staff?*

To answer my first hypothesis I used data results from a 2010 survey, CMF conducted for their Communicating with Congress Project. The results from this survey were released in three reports in 2011. Two of the three reports were used for this study: *Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill* and *#SocialCongress: Perceptions and Use of Social Media on Capitol Hill*. The survey asked House and Senate congressional staffers about the rise of interaction with constituents through the Internet and the impact new communication tools have between constituents and the Member of Congress. CMF sent out

an online survey created by the online survey tool SurveyMonkey to send out a survey between October 12, 2010 and December 13, 2010. 260 House and Senate staffers responded to the survey with 187 congressional staffers from the House of Representatives and 72 staffers from the Senate.

The respondents were Chiefs of Staff, Legislative Directors, Communications Directors, Correspondent Directors, and mail staffers. Chiefs of Staff manage the congressional staffs and they oversee and direct the work of their offices, including their offices' mail systems.²⁸ Legislative Directors manage legislative work and they usually review draft correspondence.²⁹ Correspondence Directors supervise all constituent correspondence operations.³⁰ Communication Directors manages and coordinates activities, including media contacts, and they develop communication strategies for the Member of Congress. Mail staffers are legislative and administrative staffers with responsibility for researching, writing, and/or processing constituent communications.³¹

To answer my second hypothesis, the latest data pertaining the constituents' perspective of communicating with Congress was from a CMF study released in 2008 titled *How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement*. For this survey conducted in 2007, CMF commissioned the polling firm Zogby International to conduct two surveys -- one was conducted via the Internet and the other by telephone. 9,536 adult Americans responded, and they were asked questions on whether or not they had contacted a Member of Congress and their preferences for obtaining information from their Member of Congress.

To supplement the data used, I included research obtained from the events I attended while working at CMF regarding the use of the online tools to communicate with Congress. I attended panels where current congressional staffers spoke about their views on using the Internet and social media to communicate with constituents in their Member's district. The first I event I attended was the *E-Advocacy Summit* held on October 19, 2012. The purpose of the summit was to bring together advocacy groups in the healthcare field and to teach these organizations how to effectively affect policy through social media. The panel I attended was the "Federal Workshop on

Medicare and Entitlement Reform” with Jay Khosla as the panelist. Jay Khosla is a Legislative Director for Senator Orrin Hatch and he discussed his experience using social media to communicate with constituents.

The second event was *Navigating the First 90 Days: A Workshop for Aides of Members-Elect* held on November 14 and 15, 2012. The purpose of this event was to prepare potential Chief of Staffs of New Members-Elect of the 113th Congress on how to set up a congressional office. The panel pertinent to this research was the “Engaging Constituents Through Your Websites, Mail System, and Social Media” panel. The panel had four current Chiefs of Staff, Mary Beth Carooza, Glen Downs, Maisha Leek, and Minh Ta discussing the communication tools used to communicate with constituents.

Results and Analysis

Congressional Staff Perspective of Communicating with Constituents

Members of Congress and their staff have many communication tools through which their constituents contact them, but not all of these tools are treated equally in terms of influencing a Member’s opinion. House and Senate staffers were asked: “If your Member/Senator has not already arrived at a firm decision on an issue, how much influence might the following advocacy strategies directed to the Washington office have on his/her decision?” Not surprisingly, face-to-face interaction had the most influence on a Member’s opinions on an issue. 97% of respondents stated in-person visits from constituents had some or a lot of influence on the Member’s opinion (See Appendices, Figure 1).³² In-person visits include things like the Member holding a town hall meeting or attending a district event. These are the types of communication that involves face-to-face interaction with constituents.

While many staffers value in-person visits over other forms of communication, it is not the most common way constituents communicate since it takes a lot of time and effort to set up a

meeting at a Member's office. Therefore, constituents must find other means to communicate such as calling or emailing their Member of Congress. Members understand, as well, that it is not feasible to meet with every concerned citizen in the district, so they highly value forms of communication that do not require face-to-face contact. This is demonstrated since Members have staff dedicated to answering constituents' communication. Therefore, they realize understanding the constituents' perspective is an important aspect of the function of the congressional office. This all goes back to the re-election motivation of Members of Congress. Members of Congress want to know the preferences and concerns of their constituents - especially registered voters - since they may want to consider their constituents preferences when he or she is voting on legislation.

Looking at the other forms of communication 86% of respondents to the same question said phone calling had some or a lot of influence on the Member's opinion. This is compared to the 88% of respondents who said individualized emails had some or a lot of influence on the Member's opinion.³³ This demonstrates how staffers realize that constituents using the Internet to communicate with their offices have valuable opinions. Furthermore, this suggests emailing (a newer form of communication) is more effective than phone calling (an older form of communication) in influencing a Member's opinion. Members of Congress and their staff see the benefits of newer forms of communications and from the data, it can be suggested that congressional staff embrace these new forms of communication.

The results from the survey also found that form letters do not have a lot of influence on Member of Congress opinions regardless of its format. Form letters refer to written correspondence from a generic template that does not have a personalized message. They can be in form of postcards, petitions, and email messages. 54% of respondents stated form postal letters has some or a lot of influence on the Member's opinion on an issue and 51% of respondents stated form email messages has some or a lot influence on the Member's opinion on an issue (See Figure 1). Comparing these numbers to 90% and 88% of respondents who said individualized postal letters and individualized email messages, respectively, have some or a lot influence on the Member's opinion on an issue shows how staffers do not value form letters. These results demonstrates that content is key

as many staffers reading the messages want to be able to visualize a person behind the letter. Staffers place more emphasis on the content of the message than they do the medium of the message. This is hard to do with a form letter, especially in email, since a person can easily type in a name and click the send button.

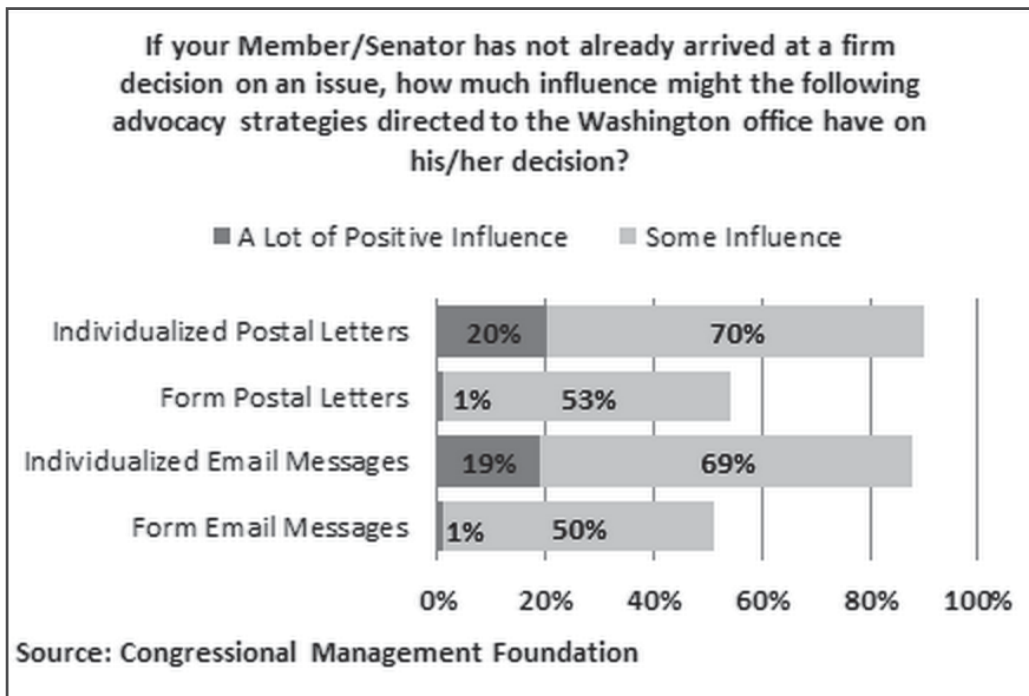


Figure 1:
Influence of Postal Letters vs. Email Messages

At the Federal Workshop panel, Jay Khosla stressed his dislike for form letters because many of the people sending them in have do not know what they are signing.³⁴ Sending a form letter takes very little effort and many staffers believe that most of the people do not understand the issue they are claiming to support or not support. Writing a personalized letter shows the Member and their staff that this person cares deeply about an issue enough that they took the time to write out their thoughts. Staffers know that constituents that write a personal letter, whether through the postal services or email, are the politically active constituents who are likely to vote in elections.

The findings also suggest new communication tools are as effective as old communication tools to communicate with constituents. In

this case, effective means the amount of impact the message has on influencing the Member's opinion on an issue. While Members would prefer to interact with constituents in person, they do not have the capacity to listen to every concern of citizens in their district; therefore, they turn to other means of communication to interact with their constituents. Members' preference to have personal interaction with their constituents can be seen based on the type of responses they pay attention to. As mentioned previously, the type of communication tool used is not as important as long as the message is personalized. Congressional staffers do not value form letters and the data reinforces this idea that they value personalized message regardless of the type of communication tool used. Even though Members cannot have the one-on-one interaction with their citizens as they would like, they have other ways of having that personal connection with their constituents.

For many congressional offices the staffers compile all of the postal mail, emails, phone calls, and messages on social media sites sent to the office and report the final amount to the Member.³⁵ At the Federal Workshop, Jay Kholsa discussed how 20 personalized phone calls would have more of an impact on the Member than 80 postcards sent in. Kholsa gave these examples to show how staffers look at the content of the message. This further demonstrates how content of the message is more important than the actual form of communication. While more offices are using new communication tools, their effect on changing the Members opinion is small unless personalization of the message is shown. The same is said for the traditional forms, just because a constituent calls in 5 times in a row about the same issue does not mean it will be weighted any more than one email from a constituent who took the time to explain their concerns. The amount of messages on an issue is not as important as what the constituent is actually talking about. Staffers know that while 80 people may sign a postcard, it is unlikely that all of them will vote in an upcoming election. Therefore, staffers would rather take the time to pay attention to those constituents they feel are likely to vote or likely to influence their peers to vote for the Member in an upcoming election. Members of Congress do not have a specific preference in communicating with their constituents, but they care about the content of the message.

Constituents Perspective on Communicating with Members of Congress and their Staff

While it has been discovered that Members of Congress and their staff would prefer to communicate with their constituents face-to-face, the reality is constituents are more likely to use other forms of communication such as postal mail and email to contact their Representative. In the past, postal mail dominated as the main form constituents choose to communicate with Congress. Members of Congress value written letters when gauging the constituents' opinions. However, in today's digital age online communication tools - especially email - can be as effective as postal mail in influencing the Member's opinion on an issue. It appears that constituents do not focus on meeting with their Member face-to-face; instead, they prefer to use online communication tools to reach out to their Member. CMF asked respondents the following question: "Which of the following formats did you last use to contact your U.S. Senator or Representative?" Emailing was the format most used from constituents with 32% of respondents stating they contacted their Member through email (See Figure 2).³⁶ However, older forms of communication are still widely used as 24% of respondents called their Member of Congress followed by 18% of respondents that used postal mail to contact their Member of Congress.

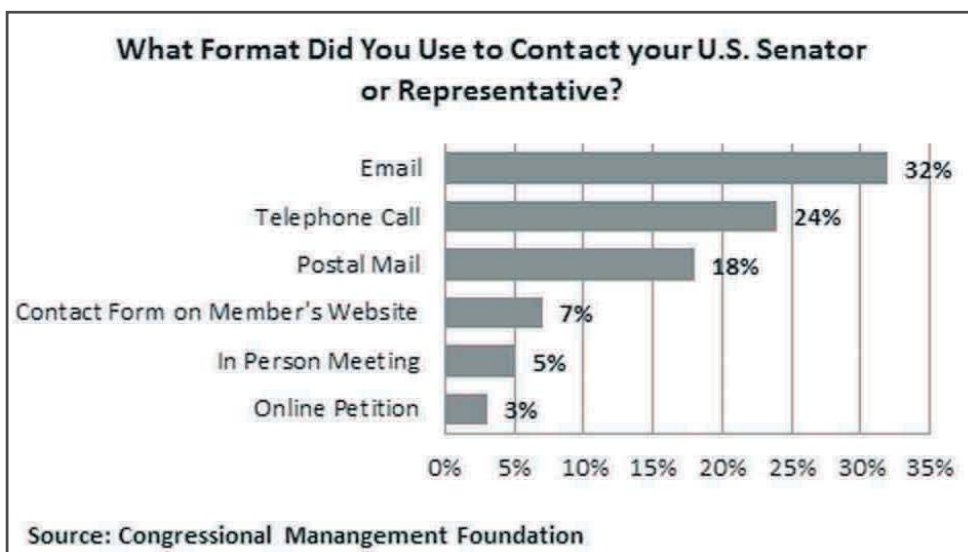


Figure 2:
Format Used to Communicate with Member of Congress

The high usage of email and telephone calls demonstrates that constituents want to communicate with their Member instantly. Constituents realize they will get a faster response from a congressional office if they send an email over mailing a letter. Calling a Member can even produce a faster response. When constituents take the time to contact their Member they want to get a prompt reply. While this particular survey did not ask if respondents contacted their Member through social media, the results from this survey would suggest that many citizens would choose social media as a way to contact their Member. Social media would be another way to contact the Member in hopes of getting a quick response.

In terms of constituents using old versus new forms of communication to contact their Member of Congress, the numbers are similar. Combining the top three older forms of communication respondents used to contact their Member, 47% of all respondents used traditional forms of communication (postal mail, telephone, and in person meeting). Additionally, combining the top three newer forms of communication respondents used to contact their Member, 42% of all respondents used internet-based means of communication (email, contact form on Member's website, and online petition). This suggests more constituents use newer forms of communication to contact their Member of Congress (See Appendices, Figure 6). The types of people who contact their Member could explain this divide. It can be suggested that older people are more likely to use older forms of communication such as writing a letter, while younger people are going to be technologically advanced; therefore, more likely to use the internet and email to contact their Member. In the Federal Workshop panel, Kholsa mentions how his Member's older constituents are far more likely to communicate through postal mail and phone calls and that their younger constituents uses email and increasingly social media to contact the Member.³⁷ Congressional staffers realize more people are using the Internet to communicate and they do not want to eliminate this growing voting bloc; thus, Members and their staff now give the same weight to newer forms of communication as they would for older forms of communication.

This survey supports the theory that constituents would rather contact their Member through email as a form of communication. This could be attributed to more Americans having access to a computer

and the Internet, also messages via the Internet can be sent faster than postal mail. As seen in the data, email beats older forms of communication such as postal mail and phone calling as constituents preferred method to contact their representative. Therefore, constituents prefer email as a means of communication.

Using Social Media as a Communication Tool

The previous study done in 2007 by Zolby International did not ask respondents questions about using social media as a form of communication. During the time the survey was conducted, social media did not have as much of an impact in communication as it does today. Facebook did not launch until 2004,³⁸ and even then, it was limited to university students while Twitter did not launch until 2006.³⁹ Social media is a relatively new phenomenon as a means of communication. The CMF study in 2010, however, did ask House and Senate congressional staffers about the use of these social media platforms as a means of communicating with constituents. Overall, the findings showed Members of Congress are quickly adopting social media as way to promote themselves to their constituents.

It has been shown that Members of Congress and their staff value meeting constituents face-to-face. However, face-to-face communication is not the most effective way for Members to spread their message to constituents. Meeting with constituents in congressional offices is good for hearing in-depth concerns about an issue, but the Member's message is not reaching a wide range of people whereas posting a Member's message online can have a bigger impact as they can reach thousands of people. Congressional staffers were asked: "In your opinion, how important are the following for communicating the Member/Senator's views and activities to constituents?" Many of the new forms of communication had high rates of being very or somewhat important in communicating the Member's message. 91% of respondents said email newsletters (which have replaced mail newsletters for many congressional offices) are very or somewhat important in communicating the Member's message.⁴⁰ Furthermore, 95% of respondents stated the Member's official website is very or somewhat

important in communicating the Member's message (See Appendices, Figure 3). This suggests Members are shifting their communication tools towards newer forms. Congressional offices rely on getting their Member's message out through the Internet. Even though using the local media and attending events in the district is still very important, (100% of respondents stated using the local media was very or somewhat important for communicating the Members views to constituents),⁴¹ newer forms of media are now supplementing the older forms to help get the Member's message across. Staffers realize that by using the Internet to spread the Member's views they can reach a much wider and sometimes younger audience. By reaching a wider audience Members' messages are reaching potential voters.

While not as high as other forms of communication, it is still interesting to note the percentage of staffers who stated social media as important for getting the Member's message across. 74% of respondents say that Facebook is very or somewhat important in communicating the Member's message, while 72% respondents say that YouTube is very or somewhat important in communicating the Member's message.⁴² Significantly lower was Twitter, with only 50% of respondents saying that it was very or somewhat important in getting out the Member's message (See Appendices, Figure 4). These results suggest staffers already adopt social media as a platform to spread the Member's message out to the public. At the panel, Engaging Constituents Through Your Websites, Mail System, and Social Media, all four panelists talked about how using social media is good for getting the Member's message out to the constituents.⁴³ Congressional staffers like using social media because they can control the message that is being presented to constituents. This is something that can be hard to do through more traditional forms of communication such as the local media and newspapers. Having the Member use social media makes the Member seem more available to their constituents, and therefore they are keeping in touch with their district. By using social media, Members can promote themselves in a way that keeps them connected with their constituents.

Members of Congress can also use social media to gauge constituent's opinions. As previously indicated the results show the content of a message matters. Staffers were asked the question: "In

your opinion, how important are the following for understanding constituents' views and opinions?" Respondents overwhelmingly valued personalized messages from constituents regardless of format. 97% of respondents stated personalized messages from constituents (e.g. postal mail, email, phone calls) were very or somewhat important while 98% of respondents stated attending events in the district were very or somewhat important (See Figure 3).⁴⁴ These similar results demonstrate that staffers value the constituents' views on issues. The Member wants to make a connection with the people in the district and they do not like getting flooded with hundreds of generic messages. By having a personalized message staffers feel they are helping actual people who are likely to be politically active. By showing they care about what constituents are saying Members try to ensure that they will have this person's vote in an upcoming election.

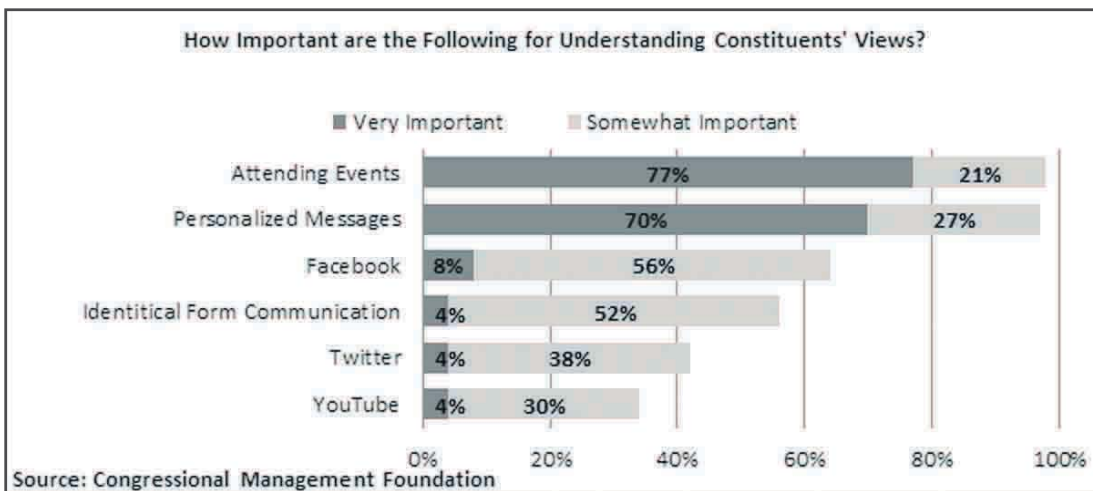


Figure 3:
Understanding Constituents' Views

Current congressional staffers further supported the acceptance of social media as a communication tool. At the Engaging Constituents Through Your Websites, Mail System, and Social Media panel, the panelists talked about how their offices like to use social media because they can see what issues their constituents view as important.⁴⁵ This thought is further shown in Figure 3 with 64% of respondents viewing Facebook as very or somewhat important for

understanding constituents' views and opinions, while only 44% believed Twitter to be very or somewhat important for understanding constituents' views and opinions.⁴⁶ Even though these numbers are lower than more traditional forms, Facebook did get higher acceptance than identical forms of communication from constituents (e.g. letters, emails, phone calls), which only 56% of respondents viewed it as very or somewhat important. This shows yet again that content matters to the Members. This also shows that staffers are seeing the value of checking Facebook and Twitter since they realize that both avenues are new communication mechanisms that more of their constituents use.

At the Federal Workshop panelist Jay Khosla discussed the usefulness of social media for looking at trends.⁴⁷ Now with social media, Members and their staff can get instant feedback on constituents' opinions on the issues. For example, Khosla talked about how social media can have an impact on influencing policy. When a Member releases a press release, the office can put it out on their Facebook page and other social media sites and get instant feedback from the public on their thoughts. This shortens the feedback loop between the Member and their constituents. By having a short feedback loop of information between the Member and the constituents, the staff can tweak the Member's message much faster since they are getting responses from constituents sooner. Staffers can now address constituents' needs at a much faster rate and they no longer have to wait weeks to hear what the constituents concerns are on an issue. Members can change to align to the views of their constituents faster. With social media in the mix as a communication tool, Members of Congress and constituents are beginning to use this as a platform to express their views.

Limitations of Research

The popularity of social media is an example of how technology is constantly changing. A limitation of this research was that the data available on constituents' views on communicating with Congress is outdated from 2007 while data available on staffers' views was outdated from 2010. Since then, Twitter and Facebook has

penetrated deeper into Congress and the majority of the Members have accepted that email has replaced postal mail as the norm of communicating with constituents. Further research should look into the growing effects of the use of social media in affecting the Member's opinions about issues.

Implications of Research

An important finding from this research was that Members and their staff dislike the use of form letters as a communication tool. Many of the staffers said that the majority of emails and letters they receive are form messages. The types of people that send in form letters usually come from advocacy groups. Advocacy groups encourage people to write, but they are going about it the wrong way. Instead, advocacy groups should emphasize to their followers to write personal messages. Constituents should know that the content of the message is important and that it is not enough to just send in a generic message if they want to influence policy. Many constituents who contact their Member are from advocacy groups; therefore it would be useful for advocacy groups to teach their followers the best way to contact their representative. They need to go beyond just giving their followers talking points, but encourage them to relate the issue to their personal life. Members of Congress want to know how an issue will affect a constituent personally. Advocacy groups can encourage their followers to personalize their interactions with Congress.

Another concern from my findings involves the preference between Members of Congress and constituents. Members and constituents prefer to communicate with each other using different communication tools. If Members really want to keep in touch with their constituents they must keep up with the changing communication tools preferred by constituents.

Conclusion

The findings support both hypotheses. For the first hypothesis congressional staff showed a high preference of face-to-face communication as a tool to communicate with the Member of Congress. However, both old and new forms of communication can influence the Member's opinion on an issue. The content of the message is most important. Staffers do not like getting form letters through any communication tool. Instead, they prefer to get personalized messages from constituents because these are the messages that could influence a Member's decision on an issue. Some bills in Congress get started from a personal letter written by concerned citizens. Moreover, people who take the time to write out a personalized message are different from those who just send a generic message. Politically active citizens, who are more likely to vote in elections, are the ones writing and emailing personal messages. These are the people who Members of Congress and their staff want to hear from, since they are the individuals who will vote for their next representative in Congress.

For the second hypothesis, constituents demonstrated their preference of communicating through newer forms of communication with the majority of respondents stating they used email to contact their Member of Congress. Currently email reigns as the most used form of communication due to efficiency of getting to the Member's congressional office at a much faster pace than postal mail. Constituents care about getting a fast response from their Member of Congress. Newer forms of communication in general have shortened the feedback loop between Members and their constituents and have caused more interaction between the groups. The information Members gain from their constituents can help influence policy-making in Congress. Members of Congress and their staffers have adopted new forms of communication because they want to be able to communicate with as many constituents as possible. By keeping in touch with their constituents they are reaching potential voters that were not previously politically involved.

Increasingly Members of Congress and their staff are adopting social media as a communication tool. Members know that a growing amount of their constituents use social media sites like Facebook

daily. Members and their staff use these sites to reach a wider audience. Social media played a big part in the election of President Barack Obama, especially in terms of young voters.⁴⁸ Younger constituents are the ones who communicate online and Members can use social media and other forms of online communication to their advantage. By communicating with constituents through social media and newer forms of communication, Members of Congress can gain potential voters for reelection purposes.

End Notes

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