



Communicating with Congress

How Capitol Hill is Coping
with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy

This report was made possible through grants from Capitol Advantage,
BlueCross BlueShield Association, and Chevron

About this Project

This report is the first of a four-phase *Communicating with Congress* project undertaken by the Congressional Management Foundation to improve communications between citizens and Congress. This first report will include the results of extensive research on congressional staff attitudes and practices for dealing with constituent communications, including grassroots advocacy campaigns. The second report will document the motivations, perceptions, expectations, and practices of constituents and grassroots organizations who communicate with Members of Congress. The third report will synthesize acquired information into best practice recommendations for congressional offices. The fourth and final phase of the project will be the creation of a task force comprised of House, Senate, citizen, and grassroots representatives. The objective of the task force will be to identify new processes, rules, or standards that could result in: reducing the administrative burden on both the senders and receivers of these communications; enhancing the quality of the communications process; and genuinely improving the dialogue between the public and Congress.



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**This report was written by Brad Fitch and Kathy Goldschmidt,
with contributions from Ellen Fulton and Nicole Griffin**

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CMF also had the help of a small, bipartisan group of House and Senate Chiefs of Staff who quietly and expertly guided us through this initial phase of our research. We promised them anonymity, so we'll keep their identities secret, but we're nonetheless very grateful for their advice and counsel. We also relied on data from the institutional offices of the Congress, which are instrumental in acting as conduits of the flow of communications between citizens and Congress. We appreciate the assistance of the Office of the House Chief Administrative Officer, House Information Resources, Office of the Senate Sergeant at Arms, and the Senate Postmaster.

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Brad Fitch and Kathy Goldschmidt

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Summary of Key Findings

Findings and Analysis

- **Congress received four times more communications in 2004 than 1995—all of the increase from Internet-based communications.**¹ Congress received 200,388,993 communications in 2004: the House received 10,400,000 communications by post and 99,053,399 via the Internet; the Senate received 7,935,594 by post and 83,000,000 via the Internet. During this decade, the staffing levels of Members' personal offices have not changed.
- **Congressional offices are devoting more resources to managing the growing volume of constituent communications.** Of managers surveyed, 73% say their offices spend more time on constituent communications than two years ago. Half of House and Senate senior managers surveyed also report their offices have reallocated resources to responding to communications over the last two years. However, only 17% of House offices and 38% of Senate offices answer all incoming e-mail with e-mail. The large majority of offices respond to some or all of their e-mail with postal letters.
- **The Internet is generally having a positive effect on the discourse between citizens and Congress.** A large majority of congressional staff surveyed, 79%, believe the Internet has made it easier for citizens to become involved in public policy; 55% believe it has increased public understanding of what goes on in Washington; and a plurality of 48% believe it has made Members more responsive to their constituents.
- **Many congressional staff doubt the legitimacy of identical form communications, and want to know whether communications are sent with constituents' knowledge and consent.** Half of congressional staff surveyed believe identical form communications are not sent with constituents' knowledge or consent. Another 25% are unsure about the legitimacy of these communications. Additionally, 89% would like the ability to differentiate form communications generated from membership lists from those sent through direct constituent action.
- **Personalized or individualized messages to Congress have more influence on Members' decision-making process than do identical form messages.** Only 3% of staff surveyed say identical form postal mail would have "a lot" of influence on their Member of Congress if he/she had not reached a decision. In contrast, 44% report individualized postal letters would have "a lot" of influence.
- **People who engage in political activities online or who write to their elected officials are very likely to be active members of their communities.** Citizens who write or call their elected officials are about six times more likely than the general public to belong to a group trying to influence public policy or to attend a political rally, speech or protest; three times more likely to write an article for a magazine or newspaper; and four times more likely to work for a political party. Consequently, constituents who write Congress tend to be politically active and have disproportionate political influence in their communities.²

Implications for Citizens and the Grassroots Community

1. **Quality is more persuasive than quantity.** Thoughtful, personalized constituent messages generally have more influence than a large number of identical form messages. Grassroots campaigns should consider placing greater emphasis on generating messages of higher quality and reducing form communications.

¹ Includes only postal mail and e-mail communications. Aggregate data on faxes and phone calls is not available.

² The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet, *Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign* (2004) <http://www.ipdi.org/UploadedFiles/political%20influentials.pdf> and unpublished data collected for this report.

2. **The organization behind a grassroots campaign matters.** Grassroots organizations should consider identifying the source of each campaign.
3. **Grassroots organizations should develop a better understanding of Congress.** The quality and impact of constituent communications would increase if organizations generating mass mail campaigns better understood Congress and the legislative process and adapted their efforts to the way congressional offices operate.
4. **There is a difference between being noticed and having an impact.** Bad grassroots practices may get noticed on Capitol Hill, but they tend not to be effective in influencing the opinions of Members of Congress, and sometimes damage the relationship between congressional offices and grassroots organizations.

Implications for Congress

1. **There is a new communications environment to which Congress will need to adapt.** The Internet has gone far beyond simply providing new tools to perform old tasks. In order to adapt to the new environment that the Internet has created, Congress must adopt an entirely new communications paradigm.
2. **Congress must improve online communications.** Members of Congress should improve the timeliness of their responses, reach out to grassroots organizations to help identify better means for communicating, and answer e-mail with e-mail.
3. **Managing in the new environment may require new capabilities and new thinking.** Congress should consider: providing Members with additional staff and resources to manage the rapidly growing volume of constituent communications; expanding the use of technology; adopting new management policies and/or establishing a task force to identify solutions to the growing communications challenges.
4. **The new environment provides benefits that Members of Congress and their staffs have not yet fully appreciated.** By embracing new communications tools, each Member could: connect to thousands more constituents; better connect to politically active citizens; save money; improve their image; and learn to better operate in the Information Age.

Introduction

The Internet and e-mail have made it easier and cheaper than ever before for citizens to communicate with their Members of Congress. However, because technological developments have been so rapid, neither citizens (the senders) nor congressional offices (the receivers) have learned to use these new communications tools truly effectively. Many citizens and grassroots organizations have focused more on finding the *easiest*, rather than the *best*, way to use the Internet to communicate with Congress. At the same time, many congressional offices have focused more on the *burdens* associated with these communications than on the inherent *benefits* of new and more frequent constituent interactions. Nonetheless, despite the many problems that currently exist, there is a general sense on Capitol Hill that the Internet and e-mail have had a positive impact on their interactions with constituents. To fully reap the benefits these technologies can offer, however, both sides will need to better adapt to this new world of political communications.

Online tools, such as Web sites, e-mail, Web logs, and instant messaging, have given citizens the ability to learn, discuss, and organize more quickly and easily and in greater numbers than previously possible. These tools are also being used by established advocacy organizations, such as associations and interest groups, to engage citizens in policy debates and to generate action on key legislation. They are enabling citizens – especially a growing grassroots community – to be more aggressive in their efforts to organize and to lobby Congress. As a result, more people are sending more messages to Congress than ever before.

In the last decade, the volume of e-mail and postal communications to the House and Senate has increased by nearly 300% and has doubled in the last five years alone. In 2004, the House and Senate, combined, received more than 200 million postal and e-mail messages. However, a large percentage of the communications to Congress are now mass form messages – multiple copies of exactly the same text sent under different constituents’ names. This has led a majority of congressional staff to feel that e-mail and the Internet have reduced the overall quality of constituents’ messages. Additionally, many staff believe that these mass form messages are sent without the constituents’ knowledge and approval. Thus, while more messages are being sent to Congress than ever before, it seems that less actual communication is occurring.

Another problem facing Member offices is that while the volume of communications received by congressional offices has multiplied over the last few years, the number of staff employed by Senators and Representatives has remained approximately the same for more than twenty years. In other words, congressional offices are trying to do more work with roughly the same number of staff they had in the late 1970’s.³

Despite the increasing burden of rapidly rising volumes combined with no growth in staff, the large majority of Hill staff still view responding to constituent communications to be a high priority. Most also feel that e-mail and the Internet have increased the number of constituents who communicate with their offices and made it easier for constituents to become involved in the public policy process. Many also feel that e-mail and the Internet have increased constituents’ understanding of what goes on in Washington and made it easier for staff to communicate with constituents.

Democracy is surely strengthened when citizens have the will and the ability to engage in the policy-making process through easier and more frequent communication with their elected representatives. Clearly, citizens want to be engaged in the democratic process and Members want to hear from, and be responsive to, their constituents. The challenge facing the senders and the receivers is to understand and address the problems raised by today’s new communications technologies so that both parties, and the nation at large, may reap the benefits.

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³ Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann and Michael J. Malbin, *Vital Statistics on Congress 2001-2002* (Washington, DC: The AEI Press, 2002): 126.

As e-mail and the Internet have become increasingly integrated into our society, all institutions are being forced to respond and adapt.

This challenge is not unique to Congress. As e-mail and the Internet have become increasingly integrated into our society, all institutions are being forced to respond and adapt. Businesses went through this in the 1990's, and the result was e-commerce. Government agencies are in the late stages of a transformation to e-government. In neither of these cases has the transformation been easy. However, businesses and agencies have, in many ways, improved their services to their customers, streamlined many of their processes, and increased efficiency. Legislatures and political campaigns are only just beginning to feel the pressure from their "customers" for improved online services and interaction. There is little doubt, however, that a similar transformation will occur in these arenas as well.

In fact, in the political arena, the transformation to "e-politics" took significant strides recently. During the 2004 campaign the Internet was, for the first time, acknowledged to have been a "key force" in politics. During that time, 75 million Americans used the Internet to stay informed of and engaged in politics.⁴ Though the campaign is over, it seems reasonable to assume that many of those citizens now want to keep informed of policy developments online. The political Web logs and online political communities that gained prominence during the campaign are still active, and they have turned their attention to the legislative arena. Clearly, these online political activists will want to influence Congress and how it operates in the future, but how it will happen still remains to be seen.

This report is intended to provide both Congress and citizens, including the grassroots community, a better understanding of the impact the new political communications environment is having on Capitol Hill. It is the hope of the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) that this report will assist congressional offices in better adapting to the challenges and opportunities of the Information Age. CMF also hopes that this report will provide citizens and grassroots organizations with a better understanding of the impact their communications are having on the Congress and how to most effectively engage in meaningful communications with congressional offices.

This report is the first phase of CMF's *Communicating with Congress* project. The overall objectives of this project are to identify the perceptions, expectations, and practices of both sides of congressional communications and to provide information and guidance that will lead to better and more meaningful communications between Members of Congress and those they represent. This report focuses on the congressional side of these communications. CMF's next report will examine the other side: the perceptions and practices of citizens and grassroots organizers.

⁴ Lee Rainie, Michael Cornfield, and Michael Horrigan, *The Internet and Campaign 2004* (2005) http://207.21.232.103/pdfs/PIP_2004_Campaign.pdf.

Research Methodology

Conducting research in the House and Senate is always somewhat challenging. Staff are very busy and often wary of research. For this reason, to ensure we were able to obtain the depth, breadth, and reliability of data we required for this study, we employed a variety of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. Although none of our research yielded representative data, the information we obtained through each methodology validated information obtained through the others. The same themes emerged with approximately the same degree of interest or passion. Below, we briefly describe each of the research methodologies we employed.

Focus Groups with House and Senate Staff

In January 2004, we conducted focus group research to learn the perceptions and interests of key staff who manage and process constituent communications. We met with:

- **House and Senate Chiefs of Staff.** Chiefs of Staff manage the staffs and the political operations in House and Senate offices, and they oversee and direct the work of their offices, including their offices' mail systems.
- **House Legislative Directors.** Legislative Directors manage legislative work and staff. They usually review draft correspondence and enforce correspondence policies.
- **Senate Correspondence Managers.** Correspondence Managers supervise all constituent correspondence operations in Senate offices.
- **House and Senate Systems Administrators.** Systems Administrators manage the technological operations in their offices, and they typically oversee data entry, databases, and correspondence workflow in House and Senate offices.

With each group, we discussed what makes constituent communications credible, their impressions of grassroots advocacy campaigns, how communications volumes have changed, how their offices manage constituent communications, and what advice they would give to constituents and grassroots organizations interested in communicating with their offices.

Surveys of House and Senate Staff

Between August 2004 and May 2005, we conducted four online surveys, each targeting different House and Senate staff positions. All surveys were conducted through senior managers in House and Senate offices (House and Senate Chiefs of Staff and Senate Legislative Directors and Office Managers). All senior managers were invited to participate and House Chiefs of Staff were invited to identify which correspondence staff in their offices would be most appropriate to participate in the House correspondence staff survey.

- **House Chiefs of Staff.** We invited all Chiefs of Staff in House Member offices to respond to a survey of their perceptions of constituent communications and how their offices are managing them. We received responses from 99 Chiefs of Staff, or 22.5% of all House Chiefs of Staff.
- **House correspondence staff.** House correspondence staffers were surveyed regarding their perceptions of constituent communications, their offices' practices for managing constituent communications, and their needs and interests with respect to constituent communications. We received 187 responses from staff in 104 offices, or 23.6% of all House offices.
- **Senate senior managers.** We invited either the Chief of Staff or the Legislative Director in each Senate office to respond to the same survey fielded to House Chiefs of Staff. We received responses from 29 Senate offices, or 29% of all Senate offices.

- **Senate Office Managers.** In Senate offices, Office Managers are usually responsible for overseeing office processes, administration, and operations, often including overall mail operations. We invited all Senate Office Managers to participate in a survey about their offices' practices for managing constituent communications. We received responses from Office Managers in 25 Senate offices, or 25% of all Senate offices.

Interviews of House and Senate Staff

To better understand the processes that House and Senate offices use to manage incoming communications from receipt to response, we conducted interviews with House Legislative Directors and Senate Correspondence Managers. Staff in both of these positions generally have the broadest perspective in their offices of all the processes involved in responding to constituent communications because they oversee these processes from end to end. We identified the staffers to interview by including a question on our surveys requesting volunteers. We interviewed five Senate Correspondence Managers and 13 House Legislative Directors.

Data Collection from the House and Senate

To identify trends in the volume of communications received by House and Senate offices, we requested reports from a number of offices of all communications they had logged into their correspondence management databases over the last four years. We received data from five Senate offices and 14 House offices.

We also collected data from the House and Senate regarding aggregate postal mail and e-mail volumes received by each institution since 1995. We were able to obtain annual postal mail volumes extending back to 1995. The House began tracking aggregate e-mail volumes in 1998, and the Senate in 1999, so no data prior to those years is available.

The New Environment

Citizen Use of the Internet for Politics and Public Affairs

The environment in which Congress operates in 2005 is not the same environment in which they operated in 1975, or even in 1995. The transformation that is occurring now is similar to the transformation that occurred with the advent of television. The Internet is changing the way Americans work, interact, access information, and participate in politics. In June 2004, more than 60% of American adults were Internet users. By the end of 2004, about one third of all American adults were online on any given day.⁵ The demographics of Internet users still do not mirror those of the overall population, but the gaps are narrowing as the Internet is increasingly integrated into our society. In fact, trends in Internet penetration into U.S. households are similar to trends in the early days of television. Between 1950 and 1957, the percentage of American households with televisions went from 9% to 79%. The percentage of American households with Internet access increased from about 19% in 1997⁶ to 75% in 2004.⁷

The Internet is also becoming integrated into Americans' experience of government, politics, and public policy. By the end of 2004, approximately 46% of American adults had visited a government Web site, which is more than had sought health information or purchased a product online.⁸ During the 2004 campaign, 37% of Americans used the Internet to get political information, discuss candidates, volunteer for campaigns, or contribute to campaigns.⁹ Additionally, by the end of 2003, 25% of American adults had used the Internet to research public policy issues, 18% had used the Internet to send e-mail to government officials to try to influence public policy decisions, and 11% had participated in organized online lobbying campaigns¹⁰. On a typical day, approximately 11% of American adults go online to access political news and information.¹¹ These politically-active Internet users are not only beginning to grow in numbers, they also appear to be thought leaders in American communities.

By the end of 2004, approximately 46% of American adults had visited a government Web site.

A 2004 report by The George Washington University Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet (IPDI) found that people who use the Internet to become politically engaged are far more likely than average citizens to be "Influentials." Influentials – a term coined by the RoperASW market research firm – are people who "tell their neighbors what to buy, which politicians to support, and where to vacation."¹² They are characterized by their answers to a set of 11 RoperASW survey questions about civic and political activities. Influentials are thought leaders in their communities. They join organizations, attend meetings, try to persuade others of their points of view, and become engaged in political action. Typically, about 10% of the general public can be considered Influentials. Among Internet users, 13% can be considered Influentials. Among politically active Internet users – or Online Political Citizens – 69% can be considered Influentials.¹³

⁵ Pew Internet and American Life Project, *Internet: The Mainstreaming of Online Life* (2005) http://207.21.232.103/pdfs/Internet_Status_2005.pdf; 58. Percentage calculated using raw numbers from Pew and population 18 and over from 2000 Census, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kprof00-us.pdf>.

⁶ U.S. Department of Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration, *Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide* (1999) <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/fttn99/part1.html#c>.

⁷ NetRatings, Inc. "Three Out of Four Americans have Access to the Internet, According to Nielsen/NetRatings." (18 Mar 2004) http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/pr/pr_040318.pdf.

⁸ Pew Internet and American Life Project, *Internet: The Mainstreaming of Online Life* (2005) http://207.21.232.103/pdfs/Internet_Status_2005.pdf; 58. Percentage calculated using raw numbers from Pew and population 18 and over from 2000 Census, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kprof00-us.pdf>.

⁹ Lee Rainie, Michael Cornfield, and Michael Horrigan, *The Internet and Campaign 2004* (2005) http://207.21.232.103/pdfs/PIP_2004_Campaign.pdf; i. Percentage calculated using raw numbers from Pew and population 18 and over from 2000 Census, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kprof00-us.pdf>.

¹⁰ Pew Internet and American Life Project, *Internet: The Mainstreaming of Online Life* (2005) http://207.21.232.103/pdfs/Internet_Status_2005.pdf; 66. Percentage calculated using raw numbers from Pew and population 18 and over from 2000 Census, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kprof00-us.pdf>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹² Ed Keller and Jon Berry, *The Influentials* (New York: The Free Press, 2003).

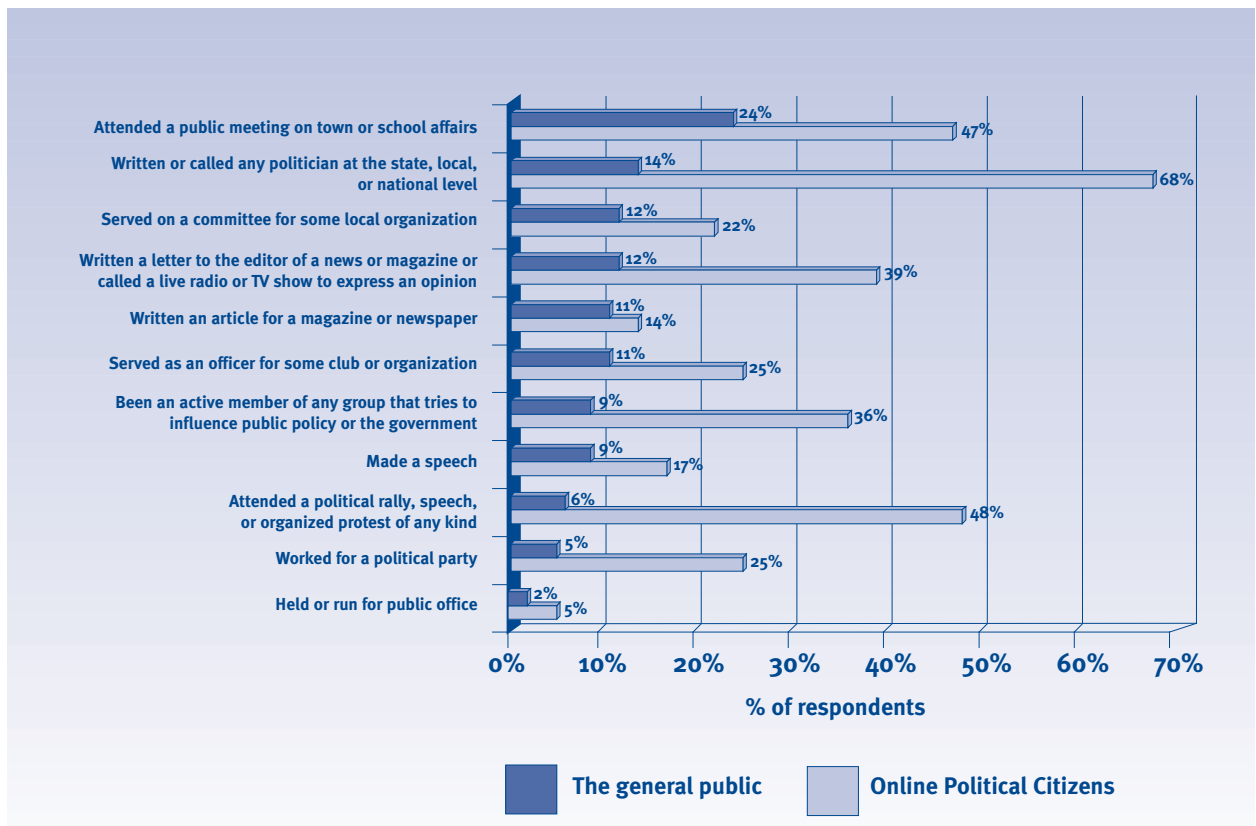
¹³ The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet, *Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign* (2004) <http://www.ipdi.org/UploadedFiles/political%20influentials.pdf>; 15.

IPDI identified Online Political Citizens through survey research conducted by RoperASW and Nielsen//NetRatings. They defined Online Political Citizens as people who had, within the two to three months prior to their participation in the research, visited the Web site of a candidate or political party and taken part in at least two of the following online political activities:

- Made a contribution to a candidate or political organization online,
- Received political e-mail,
- Forwarded or sent political e-mail,
- Visited or posted comments on a political Web log,
- Participated in a political chat room, or
- Visited a news Web site for news about politics and campaigns.

Although IPDI estimated that only about 7% of the general population are Online Political Citizens, Figure 1 illustrates how Online Political Citizens' involvement in the activities that characterize Influentials compares with members of the general public. The data demonstrates that Online Political Citizens are far more engaged – and, as a result, more influential in their communities – than the general public.

Figure 1. The 11 Influentials Questions
“In the past year, have you ...?”

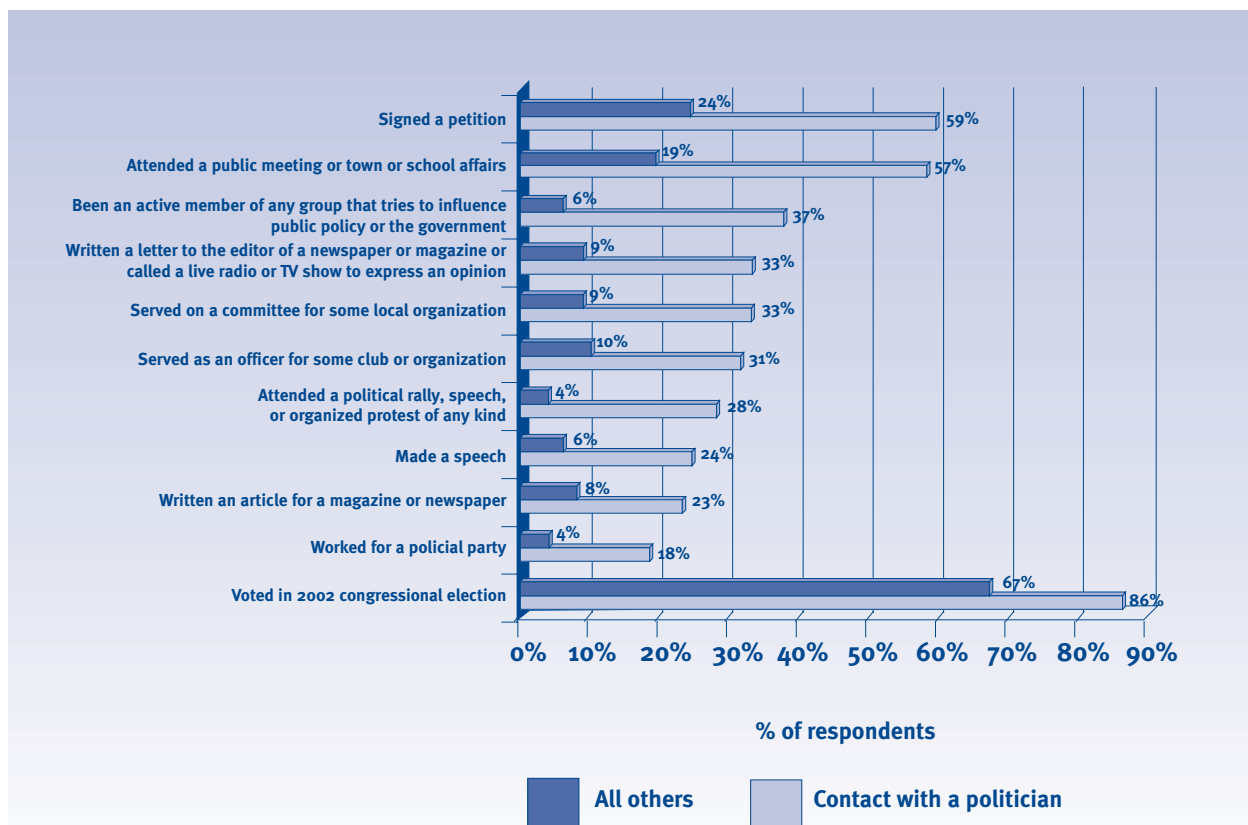


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Online Political Citizens are much more likely than the general public to have attended a public meeting or political event, written a letter to the editor, been an active member of a group that tries to influence public policy, and – more than anything else – to have written or called a politician within the last year. The IPDI study also found that 44% of Online Political Citizens were relatively new to political participation. They had never before worked for a campaign, made a campaign contribution, or attended a campaign event.¹⁴ In short, it appears that the Internet has brought some new people into the public policy process and, more importantly, that these new people are among the Influentials in their communities.

Interestingly, IPDI also found that those who called or wrote to a politician at the federal, state or local level within the last year were much more likely than the general public to have been engaged in other civic activities within the past year, as well, as illustrated in Figure 2.¹⁵

Figure 2. Contacting Politicians
“In the past year, have you...?”



The people who are calling or writing politicians to express their views are also more involved than the general public in influencing public policy in other ways. They sign petitions, attend public meetings and are active members of advocacy groups. They express their opinions by writing letters to the editor or calling radio or TV shows. They are engaged. Although only a small percentage of a Member’s constituents call or write in a given year, these constituents appear to be Influentials in their communities.

¹⁴ Ibid., 2

¹⁵ The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet, unpublished data (2004).

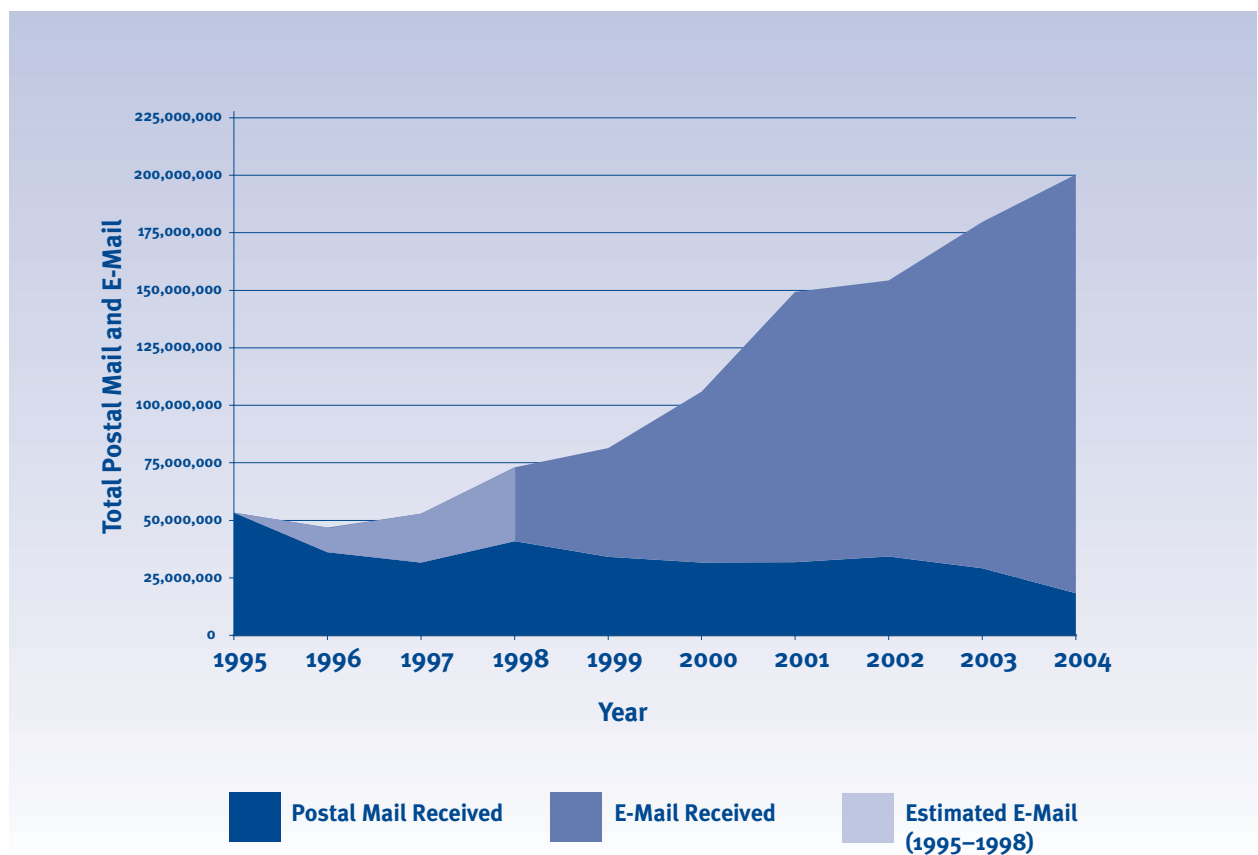
Constituents who communicate with their elected officials or who are politically active online tend to have disproportionate political influence in their communities.

This data is contrary to conventional wisdom on Capitol Hill. Although Members and staff value their communications with their constituents, they do not tend to view the people who call or write as having particular influence in their communities. Additionally, Members and staff tend to view constituents who are politically active online as somewhat outside the norm. The IPDI data suggests, however, that constituents who communicate with their elected officials or who are politically active online tend to have disproportionate political influence in their communities.

The Internet's Impact on Capitol Hill

The Internet has contributed to a significant increase in communications to Congress. Combined postal and e-mail communications to the Congress have gone up nearly 300% since the introduction of the Internet to Capitol Hill in 1995. As Figure 3 shows, the volume of postal and e-mail communications received by the House and Senate has increased from about 50 million in 1995 to 200 million in 2004.¹⁶

Figure 3. Postal and E-mail Communications to Capitol Hill: 1995 – 2004



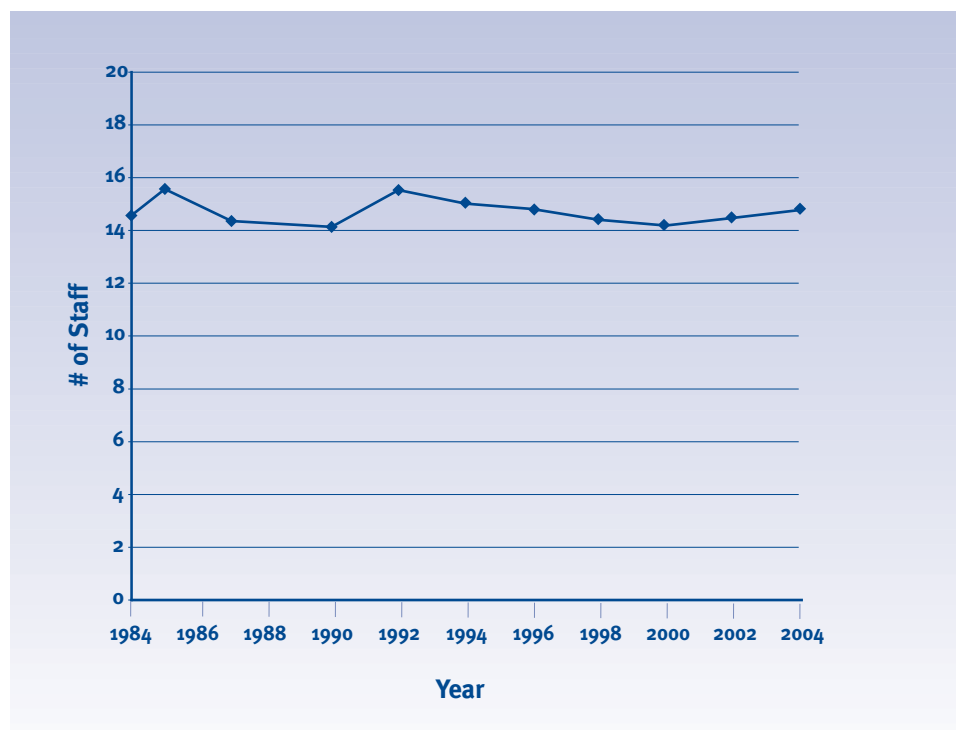
¹⁶House e-mail and postal mail data provided by the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer of the House of Representatives. Senate e-mail data provided by the Office of the Senate Sergeant at Arms. Senate postal mail data provided by the Office of the Senate Postmaster. These volumes do not include faxes or phone calls to House and Senate offices, which cannot be measured in aggregate. E-mail data prior to 1998 in the House and 1999 in the Senate was not available and is only an estimate.

Although e-mail messages account for most of this increase, there have also been increases in faxes, telegrams, and postcards generated through online efforts, such as grassroots organizations' e-mail outreach using action alerts and other interactive Web site features. In fact, a review of incoming communications to a sample of House and Senate offices indicates that most of the increase in volume has resulted from citizens working through some kind of organized campaign, rather than on their own.

While the volume of communications received by Congress has increased dramatically, the total number of staff employed in the personal offices of Members of the House and Senate has not changed appreciably in more than 20 years. In 1979, approximately 7,000 staffers were employed in House Members' personal offices and 3,600 were employed in Senators' personal offices. In 2001, the numbers were only negligibly different, about 7,200 in House personal offices and 4,000 in Senate personal offices.¹⁷ Additionally, as Figure 4 shows, the average number of staffers in individual House Members' personal offices changed very little between 1984 and 2004.

The total number of staff employed in the personal offices of Members of the House and Senate has not changed appreciably in more than 20 years.

Figure 4. Average Number of Staff in House Personal Offices¹⁸



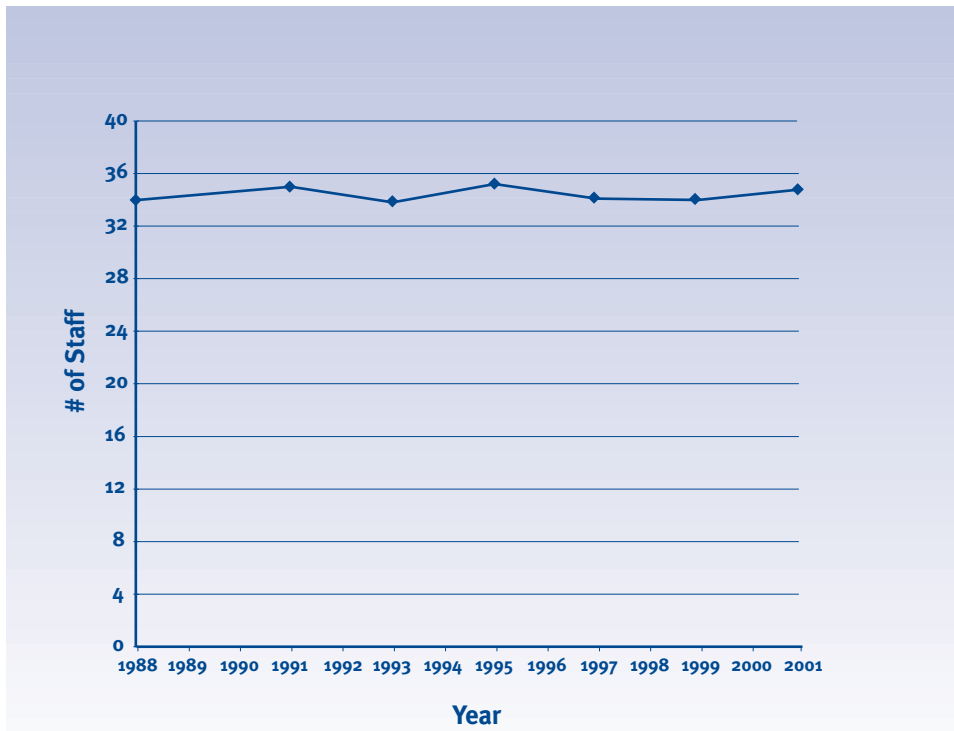
¹⁷ Norman J Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann and Michael J. Malbin, *Vital Statistics on Congress 2001-2002* (Washington, DC: The AEI Press, 2002): 126.

¹⁸ Biannual House Staff Employment Studies, 1984 – 2004, produced by the Congressional Management Foundation. The 2002 and 2004 editions were produced for the Chief Administrative Officer, U.S. House of Representatives.

The average House office currently employs 15 staffers, of which approximately six are located in his or her district offices.¹⁹ Of the nine staffers in the Washington, DC offices, approximately three-quarters are involved in managing constituent communications on a part-time or full-time basis.

Senators' budgets are calculated, in part, according to the populations of their states and the distances of their home states from Washington, DC. Consequently, their budgets and staff sizes vary widely. However, the average staff size of a Senator's office in 2001 was 35, which is the same as what it was in 1988.

Figure 5. Average Number of Staff in Senate Personal Offices²⁰



¹⁹ 2004 House Staff Employment Study: Guide for the 109th Congress. Produced for the Chief Administrative Officer, U.S. House of Representatives, by the Congressional Management Foundation (2004): 47.

²⁰ Biannual Senate Staff Employment Studies, 1988 – 2001, produced by the Congressional Management Foundation. No data is available for 1990 or since 2001.

Other Factors Contributing to Increased Congressional Workloads

In addition to the growth in constituent communications, a variety of other factors have contributed to growing congressional workloads. The population of the United States has grown significantly, which means that Senators and Representatives are representing more people. Since 1970, the population of the country has grown by nearly 80 million people.²¹ As a result of this population growth, the average population per congressional district has more than tripled since 1911, when the total number of Representatives was set at 435. Between 1990 and 2000, the average population of a congressional district grew by more than 74,000.²²

Between 1990 and 2000, the average population of a congressional district grew by more than 74,000.

Increased lobbying activities on the Hill and the advent of the 24-hour news cycle have increased congressional workloads, as well. Members of Congress are being lobbied more than ever before. Between 1998 and 2003, the number of companies or organizations that lobbied the House of Representatives increased by 52% – from 6,488 in 1998 to 9,850 in 2003.²³ The 24-hour news cycle places Members and Congress under continuous media scrutiny and puts more stress on staff.

In any other industry, increases in workloads of these magnitudes would warrant commensurate increases in staff and resources. In Congress, however, this has not been the case. Congressional office buildings are already filled to capacity. Significant increases in staff would not only require significant increases in resources, but also significant increases in office space. These changes would be difficult to fund and oversee, even in a less contentious political atmosphere than recent Congresses have experienced. As a result, congressional offices have had to identify other means for coping with the increasing volumes with the staff and resources they have.

²¹ Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, *Demographic Trends in the 20th Century: Census 2000 Special Report* (U.S. Census Bureau: 2002) <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-7.pdf>: 11.

²² Karen M. Mills, *Congressional Apportionment: Census 2000 Brief* (U.S. Census Bureau: 2001) <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-7.pdf>.

²³ Center for Public Integrity, “LobbyWatch,” <http://www.publicintegrity.org/lobby/>.

Findings and Data Analysis

Through our research, we amassed a great deal of information about congressional perceptions of constituent communications and their practices in managing them. Through our analysis of the data, we reached five major conclusions:

1. The Internet is generally having a positive effect on the discourse between citizens and Congress.
2. Congressional offices are devoting more resources to managing the growing volume of constituent communications.
3. Personalized or individualized messages to Congress have more influence on the decision-making process of Members of Congress than do identical form messages.
4. Many congressional staff doubt the legitimacy of identical form communications, and want to know whether communications are sent with constituents' knowledge and consent.
5. Congressional staff are seeking particular information to help them better understand, process, and respond to constituent communications.

1. The Internet is generally having a positive effect on the discourse between citizens and Congress.

A strong majority (79%) believe the Internet and e-mail have made it easier for citizens to become involved in the public policy process.

Congressional staff surveyed strongly indicated that the Internet and e-mail have had a positive impact on democracy. A strong majority (79%) believe the Internet and e-mail have made it easier for citizens to become involved in the public policy process. A majority (55%) believe that e-mail and the Internet have increased public understanding of what goes on in Washington. A plurality (48%) believe the Internet and e-mail have made Members of Congress more responsive to their constituents. Most staff surveyed (91%) think that the Internet has increased the number of constituents who interact with congressional offices. While this has increased the workload of congressional staff, a majority of the House and the Senate staff surveyed (53%) agreed that advocacy campaigns directed at Congress are good for democracy. These data indicate that Capitol Hill staff recognize that the Internet and e-mail have contributed to an active and constructive dialogue between elected officials and the electorate.

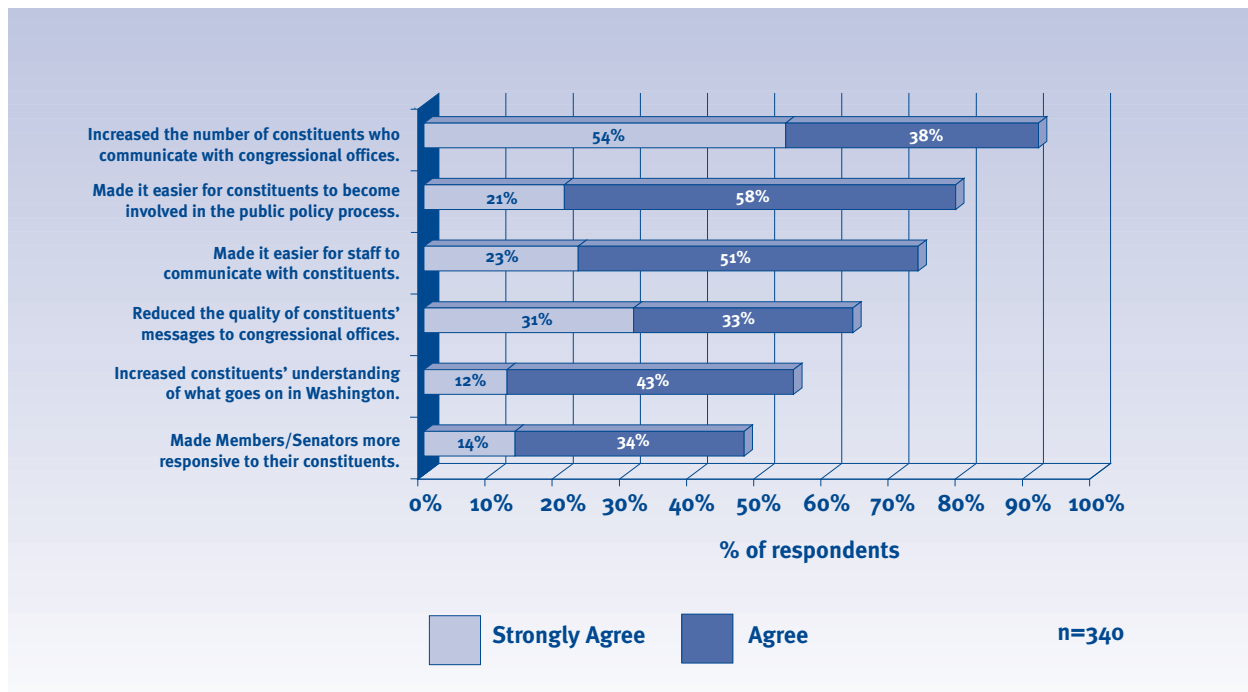
“People have given [my boss] very positive feedback on the letters they’ve received. Responding to constituents is important – even if it takes a little while. The frustration is that it just keeps getting more and more.”

—House Legislative Director

They are, however, somewhat ambivalent about the fact that more constituents are communicating with Congress. Although they generally feel that the interaction is good for democracy, they also feel frustrated by the additional work it creates. “People have given [my boss] very positive feedback on the letters they’ve received. Responding to constituents is important – even if it takes a little while. The frustration is that it just keeps getting more and more,” said one House Legislative Director. While most of those surveyed believed that the overall effect of increased communications has been positive, a majority of staff surveyed (64%) believe that the Internet has reduced the quality of constituents' communications to Congress. Many staff expressed frustration that the organizers of grassroots campaigns merely coax citizens to send messages to Congress, rather than making more of an effort to educate either citizens or themselves about how to be effective advocates.

Figure 6. Effects of the Internet on Congress

“Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree that e-mail and the Internet have...”

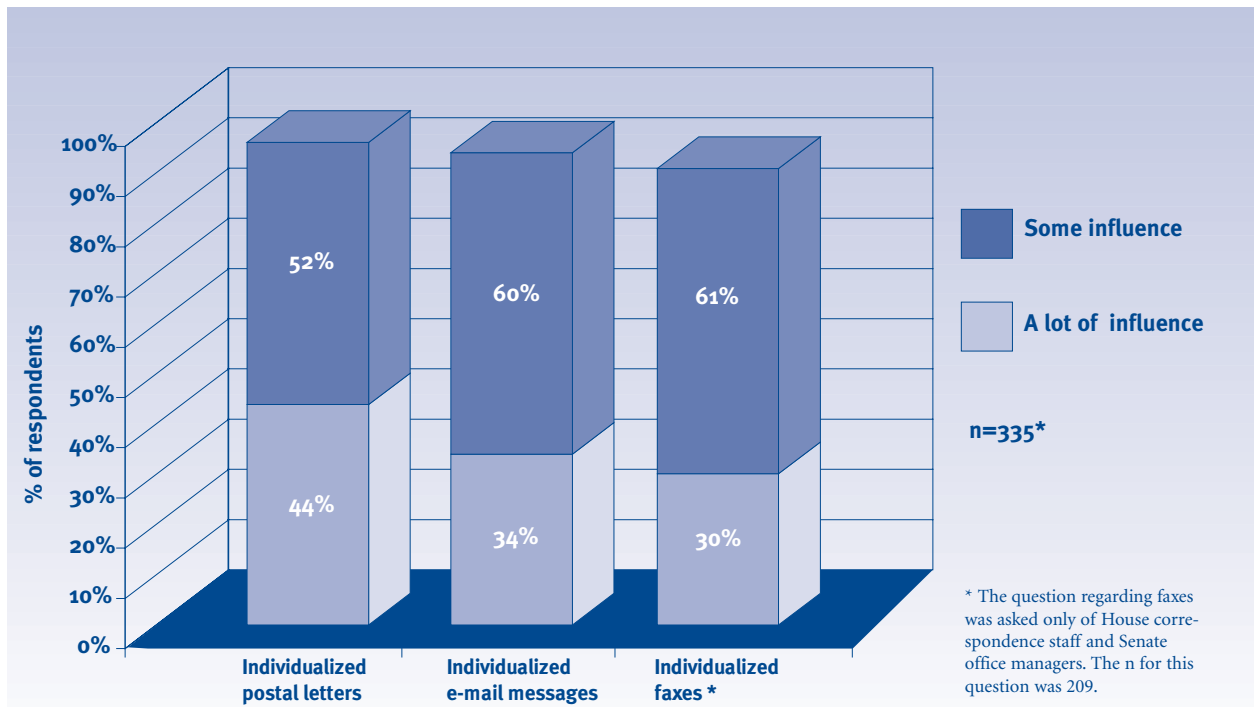


Regardless of the seeming decline in the quality of the communications that are being sent, they are, nonetheless, largely having their intended impact of informing and influencing the decision-making of a Member of Congress. This is particularly true of communications that are individualized in some way. Nearly all staff surveyed (96%) reported that if their Member of Congress had not arrived at a firm decision, individualized postal letters would have “some” or “a lot” of influence on the Member’s decision, and 94% believed individualized e-mail messages would have “some” or “a lot” of influence. While the percentages are lower for identical form messages, 65% indicated that form postal letters have “some” or “a lot” of influence on undecided Members; the analogous figure was 63% for form e-mail messages.

Nearly all staff surveyed (96%) reported that if their Member of Congress had not arrived at a firm decision, individualized postal letters would have “some” or “a lot” of influence on the Member’s decision.

Figure 7. Influence of Individual Communications

“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?”



Focus group participants indicated that constituent communications were particularly helpful or influential early on in a decision-making process, when Members and staff are researching and developing policy positions. Staff reported that well-reasoned letters from constituents often helped them assess the impact of pending legislation or proposals on a particular group, or on the district or state as a whole.

It is important to note that responding to constituent communications is important to congressional offices. Nearly all senior managers in Congress (97% of House Chiefs of Staff and 100% of Senate Chiefs of Staff and Legislative Directors) agreed in the survey that responding to constituent communications was a “high priority” in their offices.

2. Congressional offices are devoting more resources to managing the growing volume of constituent communications.

As noted in “The New Environment,” the Internet has contributed to a significant increase in constituent communications to Congress. Total e-mail and postal communications to the Congress have gone up nearly 300% since the introduction of the Internet to Capitol Hill in 1995. From 1995 to 2004 the total volume of e-mail and postal communications received by Congress increased from about 23 million to 109 million in the House and 30 million to 91 million in the Senate. These data represent all incoming e-mail and postal communications to the Congress, not only communications from constituents to their elected representatives. However, most offices have experienced comparable growth in constituent communications.

Figure 8. Aggregate Communication Volume to Congress²⁴

	POSTAL MAIL		E-MAIL		TOTAL MAIL		GRAND TOTAL
	House	Senate	House	Senate	House	Senate	
2000	14,800,000	16,755,939	47,991,851	26,325,825	62,791,851	43,081,764	105,873,615
2001	13,800,000	17,923,945	85,499,583	32,123,118	99,299,583	50,047,063	149,346,646
2002	13,000,000	21,230,568	80,093,354	40,000,000	93,093,354	61,230,568	154,323,922
2003	12,700,000	16,485,744	92,575,753	58,000,000	105,275,753	74,485,744	179,761,497
2004	10,400,000	7,935,594	99,053,399	83,000,000	109,453,399	90,935,594	200,388,993

As Figure 9 demonstrates, different offices have experienced drastically different levels of growth in their communications volume over time. Individual House and Senate offices have seen their communications increase by anywhere from 14% to 184% in two years. In this regard, there is no such thing as an average office.

²⁴ Source: Office of the House Chief Administrative Officer, Office of the Senate Sergeant at Arms.

Figure 9. Communication Volume in Individual Offices: 2002 – 2004²⁵

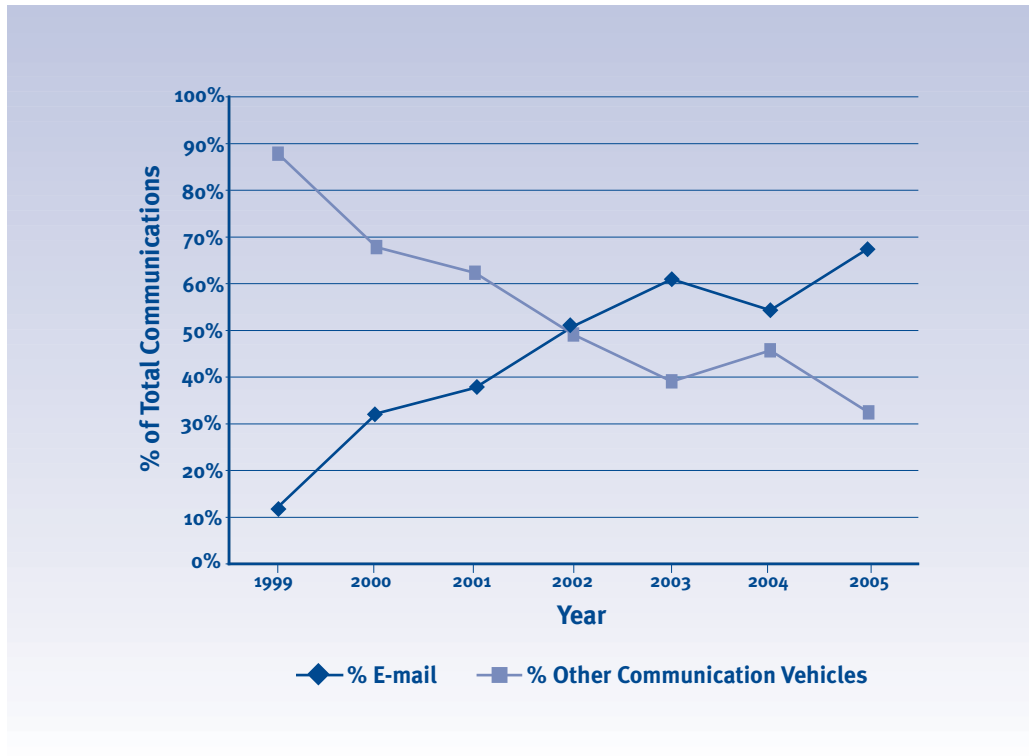
	2002 Volume	2004 Volume	% Increase	Terms	District Description
Member A	29,087	33,159	14%	11	mostly rural
Member B	11,723	15,017	28%	8	mostly rural
Member C	12,615	16,502	31%	3	suburban
Member D	7,356	10,314	40%	7	mostly rural
Member E	15,326	23,600	54%	7	rural
Member F	18,220	29,495	62%	4	small urban area
Member G	17,070	28,301	66%	5	large urban area
Member H	17,579	31,554	79%	5	small urban area
Member I	19,760	36,077	83%	4	small urban area
Member J	20,393	40,941	101%	4	mostly rural
Member K	19,895	42,000	111%	7	wealthy suburban area
Member L	7,580	17,406	130%	7	mostly rural
Member M	17,512	43,846	150%	3	wealthy suburban area
Member N	9,497	24,077	154%	6	mostly rural

	2002 Volume	2004 Volume	% Increase	Terms	State Description
Senator A	47,291	66,405	40%	—	small state
Senator B	219,863	360,669	64%	—	mid-sized state
Senator C	30,540	50,339	65%	—	small state
Senator D	835,844	1,462,974	75%	—	large state
Senator E	25,843	73,429	184%	—	small state

As the aggregate volume data indicate, almost all of this growth in constituent communications is due to the increase in the use of e-mail. Few congressional offices have kept records of the means of communication (postal mail, fax, e-mail, or phone calls) employed by their constituents. However, for one House office that has kept such records, the dominance that e-mail has gained as a communication medium over the past few years is dramatic. As Figure 10 shows, in 1999 only 12% of incoming communications were sent via e-mail. By the beginning of 2005, that number swelled to 68%.

²⁵ CMF collected constituent communications data from 14 House offices and 5 Senate offices to identify trends in constituent communications. It is important to note that offices use various methods and standards for logging, storing, and responding to constituent communications, which affects the data from office to office.

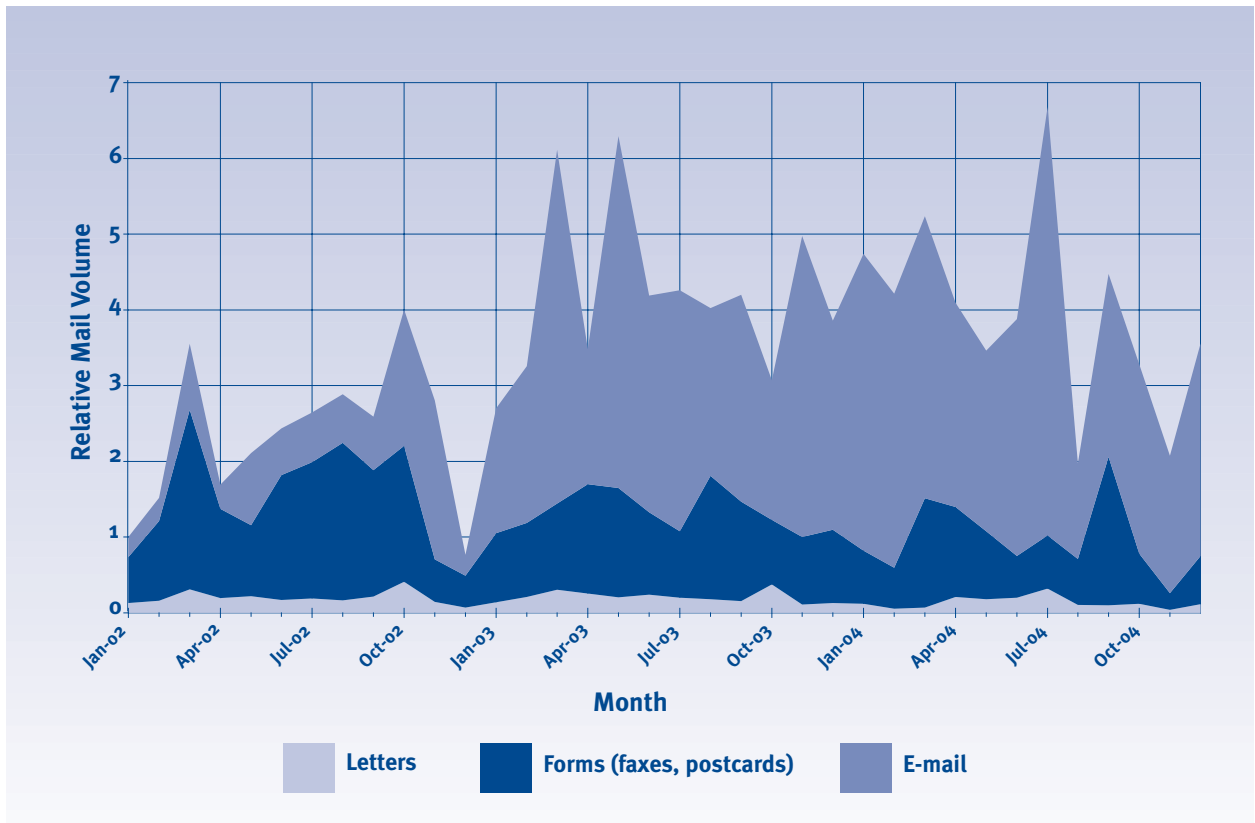
Figure 10. Means of Communication to a House Office: 1999 – 2005



This office has been actively encouraging constituents to communicate with them via e-mail, so it is not representative of all House offices. However, as the aggregate House data suggest, e-mail is not simply substituting for postal mail; it is compounding the number of constituent communications that pour into a congressional office each month. As one House Legislative Director stated: “We just try to keep our heads above the water.”

Figure 11 depicts the experience of one Senate office, and demonstrates the great fluctuations in volume that can occur from month to month. Since congressional offices do not engage in any “seasonal hiring” based on workload, staff must integrate these spikes in work into their regular routines. Moreover, since increases in monthly constituent communications often coincide with legislative activity, these increased burdens usually fall on staff during peak “crunch” times.

Figure 11. Monthly Communications to a Senate Office: 2002 – 2004²⁶



With the rising volume of communications coming into congressional offices, it is understandable that it takes added time for offices to respond. For years, many congressional offices have operated on a “two-week turn-around” rule, meaning that the Member expects that each constituent correspondence will be responded to within two weeks of its receipt. However, this standard evolved during an era when most communications to Capitol Hill came through postal systems. As Figure 12 demonstrates, most congressional offices turn their responses around in three weeks or less.

²⁶ The raw volume of mail received in each month has been divided by the volume of mail received in January 2002. This means, for example, that the volume of mail received by this office in March 2003 was roughly six times that received in January 2002.

Figure 12. E-Mail and Postal Mail Response Times²⁷

“Please estimate the average turnaround time (from receipt to sending response) in your office for...”
(Survey of House correspondence staff and Senate Office Managers)

	< 1 Week		1 – 3 Weeks		3 – 6 Weeks		6 – 9 Weeks		>9 Weeks	
	House	Senate	House	Senate	House	Senate	House	Senate	House	Senate
Existing form text responses to postal letters	41%	36%	45%	60%	11%	4%	2%	0%	1%	0%
Existing form text responses to e-mail messages	43%	44%	42%	56%	12%	0%	2%	0%	1%	0%
New text responses to postal letters	4%	0%	42%	52%	27%	32%	20%	12%	7%	4%
New text responses to e-mail messages	5%	0%	41%	56%	26%	28%	22%	12%	6%	4%

House: n = 187 (from 104 offices)
Senate: n = 25 (from 25 offices)

Moreover, all postal mail to government agencies in Washington, D.C., including postal mail headed to Capitol Hill, undergoes a testing and decontamination process to protect employees from anthrax and other toxic substances. This delays postal mail by one week or more, meaning that under the *best* of circumstances, a constituent will wait three weeks to receive a response from an elected official.

Congressional offices are spending more time on constituent correspondence. A majority of staff surveyed (73%) state that they or their office spends more time on constituent communications than they did just two years ago. In addition, a sizable number of senior managers (49%) report their offices have shifted resources to constituent communications to manage the increased work load.

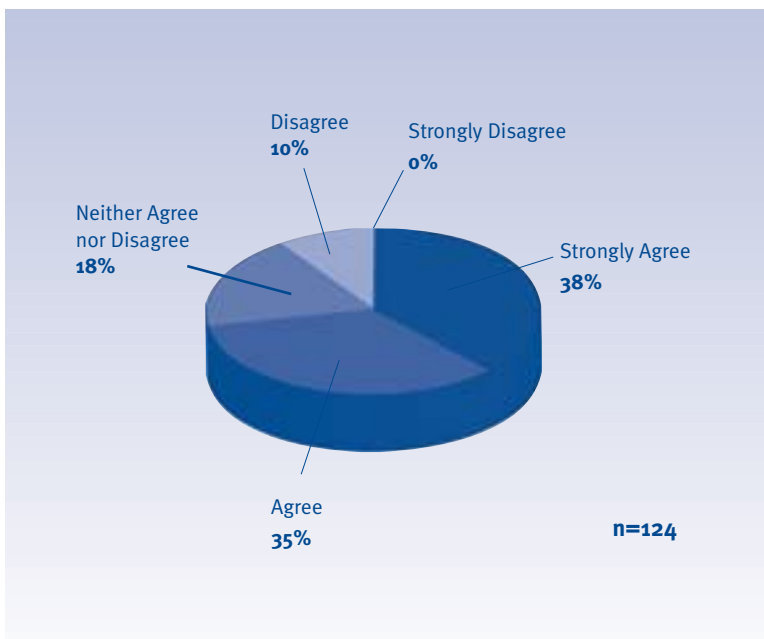


Figure 13. Office Time Spent on Communications
“My office spends more time on constituent communications than it did two years ago.” (Survey of House Chiefs of Staff & Senate Office Managers)

²⁷ Based on whether the office has an existing response to the incoming communication or a new response is required.

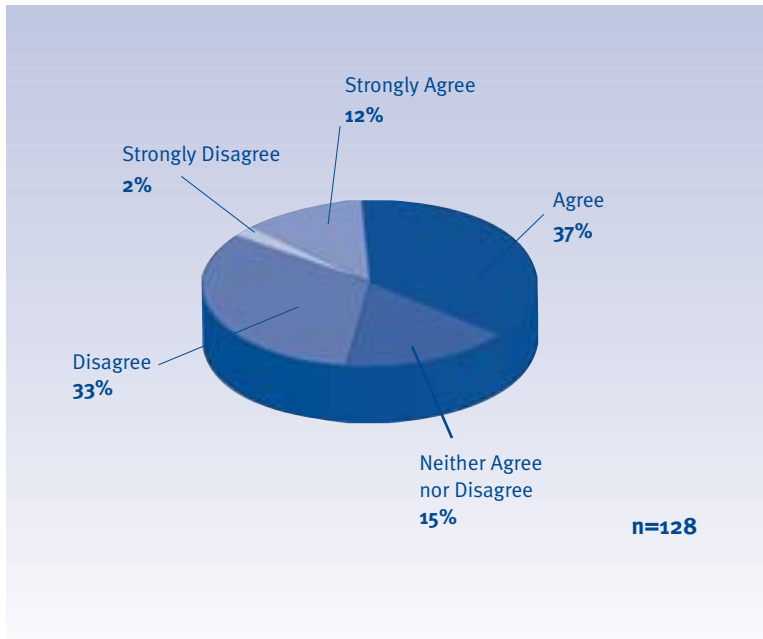


Figure 14. Offices Shifting Resources to Manage Communications

“In order to manage increased constituent communications, our office has shifted resources away from other priorities.” (Survey of House and Senate Chiefs of Staff and Senate Legislative Directors)

“[We’re] really losing sight of the important letters that come in— like the three-page letter from Grandma as opposed to those floods of mail where all they’re doing is clicking a button. It’s insane. I can’t convey exactly how frustrated...it’s just...it’s crazy.”

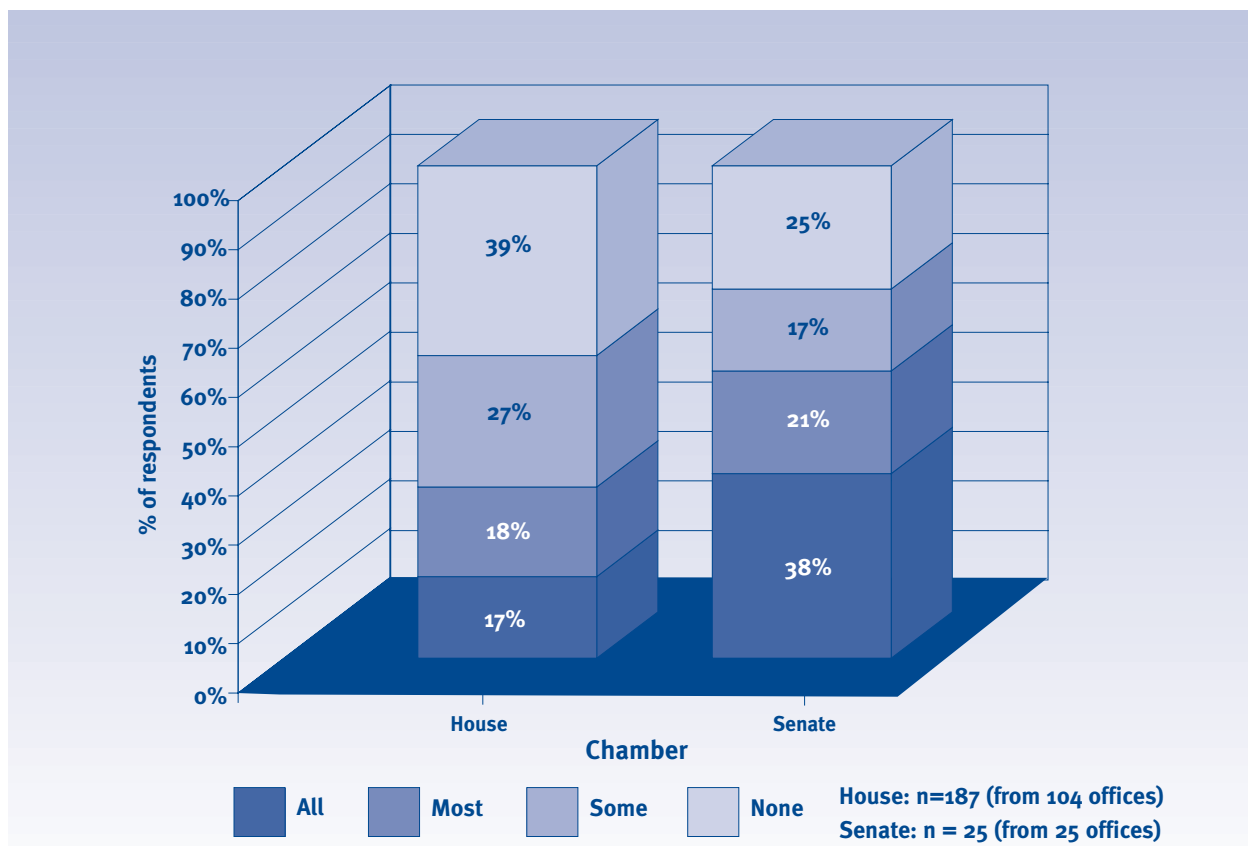
—House Legislative Director

But the survey data alone cannot capture the level of emotional frustration experienced by staff as a result of increased constituent communications. In interviews and focus groups, staff describe the increasing number of communications in desperate terms. One particularly flustered House Legislative Director said: “[There is] too much mail, not enough staff. Not enough time to do it, particularly when in session. [We’re] really losing sight of the important letters that come in – like the three-page letter from Grandma as opposed to those floods of mail where all they’re doing is clicking a button. It’s insane. I can’t convey exactly how frustrated...it’s just...it’s crazy.”

Adding to this challenge is that many offices are not embracing IT tools to address the increase in communications. For example, only 17% of House offices and 38% of Senate offices use e-mail to respond to all e-mail from constituents, according to our survey (Figure 15). For those offices which do not answer constituent e-mail with Member e-mail, most print the e-mail message, process and file it manually, and respond with a postal letter.

Figure 15. Offices Responding to E-mail with E-mail

“How much of the constituent e-mail you receive is responded to with an e-mail message from your office?” (Survey of House correspondence staff and Senate Office Managers)



Those offices which do not predominantly use e-mail to respond to e-mail noted a number of reasons for not making greater use of e-mail, according to the survey of House correspondence staff. The most prevalent concern was that an e-mail message from the Member would be altered and forwarded, which could result in the Member’s position being misrepresented. This same concern was raised by staff in 2001 when CMF conducted its first research on this topic and released the report *E-mail Overload in Congress: Managing a Communications Crisis*. Since that time, we have not discovered any examples of an altered text causing political problems for any congressional office. However, we have received anecdotal data from congressional offices and statistical data from other industries which suggest that there may be some benefits associated with the use of e-mail. This information suggests that congressional and other public affairs e-mail is frequently forwarded by recipients to their friends, thus potentially enlarging the community of people becoming engaged in the political process, and with positive results. Many citizens active in political issues are seeking easy ways to contribute or get involved in the democratic dialogue, and one method is to forward political or public affairs e-mail messages.

The increase in communications, combined with the offices’ reluctance to embrace IT tools, is contributing to significant management problems in congressional offices. But, enhancing efficiencies and upgrading hardware and software are not the entire solution. As one House Chief of Staff noted, “We need more bodies to process the mail. The volume is overwhelming the technology.”

3. Personalized or individualized messages to Congress have more influence on the decision-making process of Members of Congress than do identical form messages.

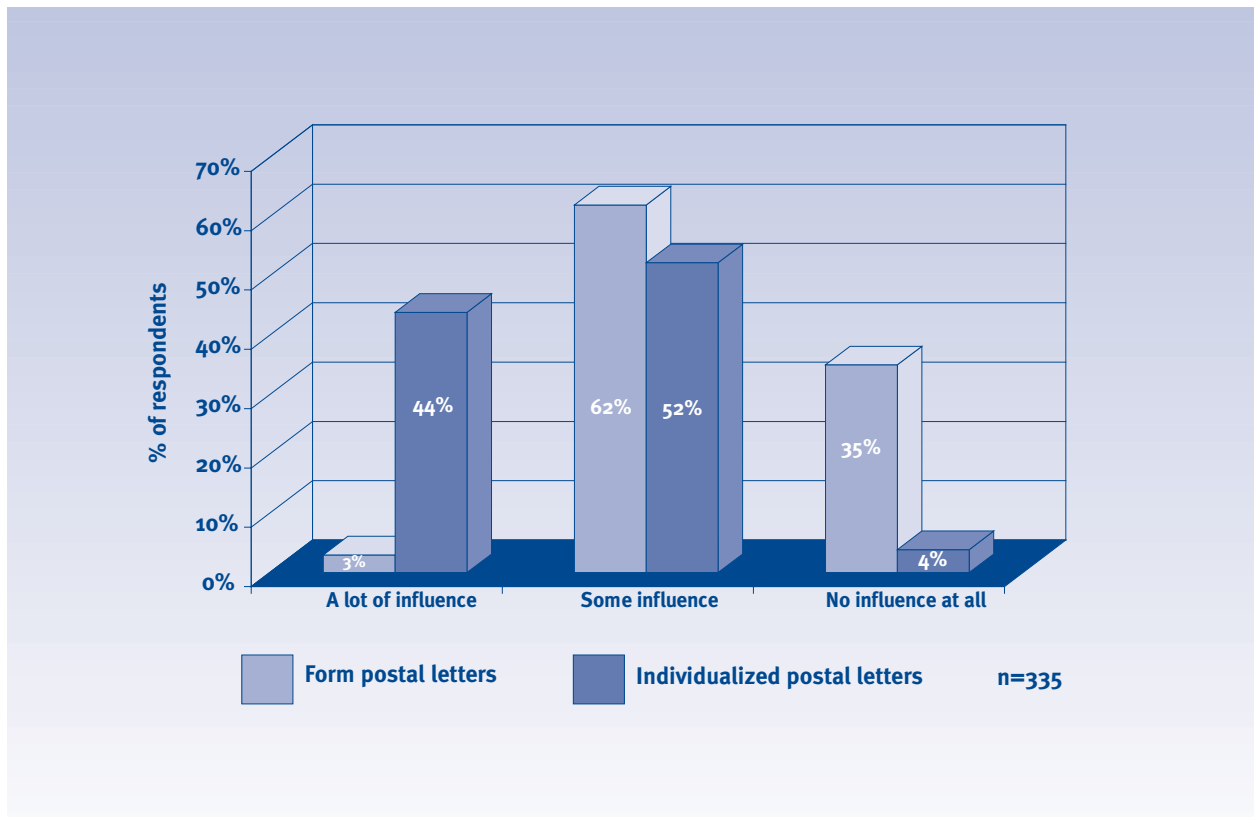
Not every constituent communication influences each office equally. According to staff we surveyed and interviewed, communications that included some unique or individualized information had significantly more impact on the decision-making of Members of Congress than did identical form messages. Interestingly, we did not find there to be significant differences in degrees of influence reported based on the vehicle of communication (postal mail, fax, e-mail).

Communications that included some unique or individualized information had significantly more impact on the decision-making of Members of Congress than did identical form messages.

Figure 16 compares the significant differences in the impact of identical form postal mail with that of individualized postal mail. In cases where the Member/Senator has not reached a firm decision on an issue, 44% of staff surveyed said that individualized postal communications have “a lot” of influence, compared to 3% for identical form communications. As one House staff member noted, personal communications are more effective than form messages “because the recipient knows that the author was truly motivated by the issue.”

Figure 16. Influence of Individual Postal Letters

“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?”



Staff repeatedly emphasized in all our research that form communications have much less impact on the policy process than do individualized communications.

I wish that outside groups would understand that overwhelming our office with form letters does more harm than good for their causes.

—House Correspondence Staffer

One hundred form letters have less direct value than a single thoughtful letter generated by a constituent of the Member’s district.

—House Correspondence Staffer

The contrast in attitudes toward individualized communications versus form communications is also demonstrated in the answers of Senate staff to questions about how and whether their offices respond to constituent communications. Among staff surveyed, 100% reported responding to individualized postal letters, but only 24% responded to form postcards or telegrams. Also, some Senate staff reported that their offices “do not count or respond to” some form communications – in essence, ignoring the messages altogether. Some 16% of Senate staff said they did not count or respond to form e-mail; 24% said the same with regard to form postal letters; 28% said the same of form faxes; and 36% said the same of form postcards or telegrams. In contrast, 3% to 9% of House staff reported that they did not count or respond to various form communications (Figure 17). It is important to note that the Senate sample included 25 Senate offices, and a greater sampling could alter the data.

Among staff surveyed, 100% reported responding to individualized postal letters, but only 24% responded to form postcards or telegrams.

When they do respond to identical form messages, Senate staff reported that they are more likely to respond to form e-mail communications than other types of form communications. Focus group and interview participants provided a common sense reason for this preference: staff do not have to conduct manual data entry when communications arrive in electronic form. They have tools

Figure 17. Office Response Policies and Practices

“How does your office process the following constituent communications when they agree with your Member’s/Senator’s position?” (Survey of House correspondence staff and Senate Office Managers)

	Respond with letter or e-mail		Count but do not respond		Do not count or respond	
	House	Senate	House	Senate	House	Senate
Individualized postal letters	99%	100%	1%	0%	1%	0%
Individualized e-mail messages	98%	100%	1%	0%	1%	0%
Individualized faxes	97%	40%	3%	32%	0%	28%
Form postal letters	95%	48%	3%	28%	3%	24%
Form e-mail messages	91%	64%	5%	20%	4%	16%
Form faxes	83%	32%	8%	40%	9%	28%
Form postcards & telegrams	78%	24%	13%	40%	9%	36%

House: n = 187 (from 104 offices)
Senate: n = 25 (from 25 offices)

Personal interactions with constituents, either in person or in writing, have more influence on Members when they have not reached a decision than do form communications or visits from lobbyists.

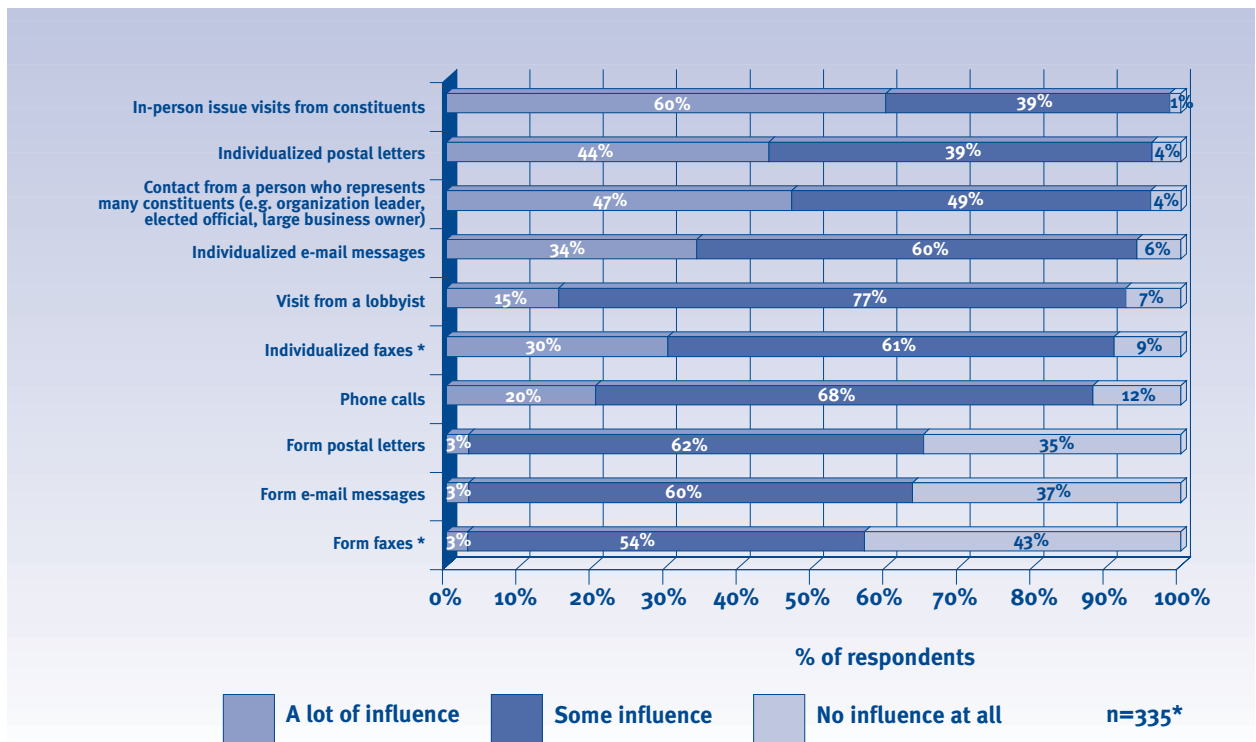
that can automatically identify constituents' names and addresses and enter the information into appropriate fields in their databases, which makes e-mail much easier to process than paper-based communications.

Even considering variances in the data, it appears that Senate offices are less likely to respond to form communications than House offices. Our research further suggests that Senate offices representing states with larger populations have greater difficulty in responding to the increase in volumes.

Additionally, as Figure 18 indicates, staff surveyed report that personal interactions with constituents, either in person or in writing, have more influence on Members when they have not reached a decision than do form communications or visits from lobbyists.

Figure 18. Influences on Member Decision-Making

“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?”

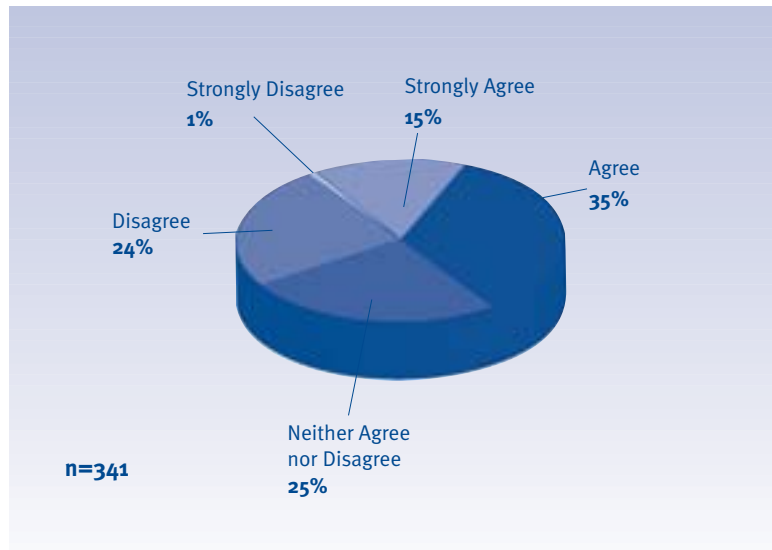


* The question regarding faxes was asked only of House correspondence staff and Senate office managers. The n for this question was 209.

4. Many congressional staff doubt the legitimacy of identical form communications, and want to know whether communications are sent with constituents' knowledge and consent.

Congressional staff often seriously doubt that identical form communications are actually sent by constituents. Instead, the prevalent belief expressed in our surveys, interviews and focus groups is that grassroots organizations are creating these communications from membership lists, rather than through direct constituent action. When asked whether they thought identical form communications were generated “without the knowledge or consent” of a constituent, 49% agreed or strongly agreed and an additional 25% responded “neither agree nor disagree,” suggesting that they have some doubts.

Figure 19. Staff Views on Form Communications
“Most identical form communications campaigns are sent without the constituent’s knowledge or approval.”



In their comments, staff were especially passionate in expressing their doubts about the authenticity of identical form communications, and denounced the practice of sending communications based on membership lists.

Stop sending form letters/faxes/e-mails that the constituent doesn't even know he/she is sending. It's a waste of time and resources and does not influence the Member's stance on the issue in any way.

—House Correspondence Staffer

I don't believe that many of the people who belong to the advocacy groups know that the letters are being sent out with their names on it.

—House Chief of Staff

It's very frustrating for offices to go through a lot of time responding to form letters, only to find out the constituent didn't even send the letter. This reduces our ability to respond to constituent concerns, and reduces the legitimacy of the organization's claim and standing.

—House Chief of Staff

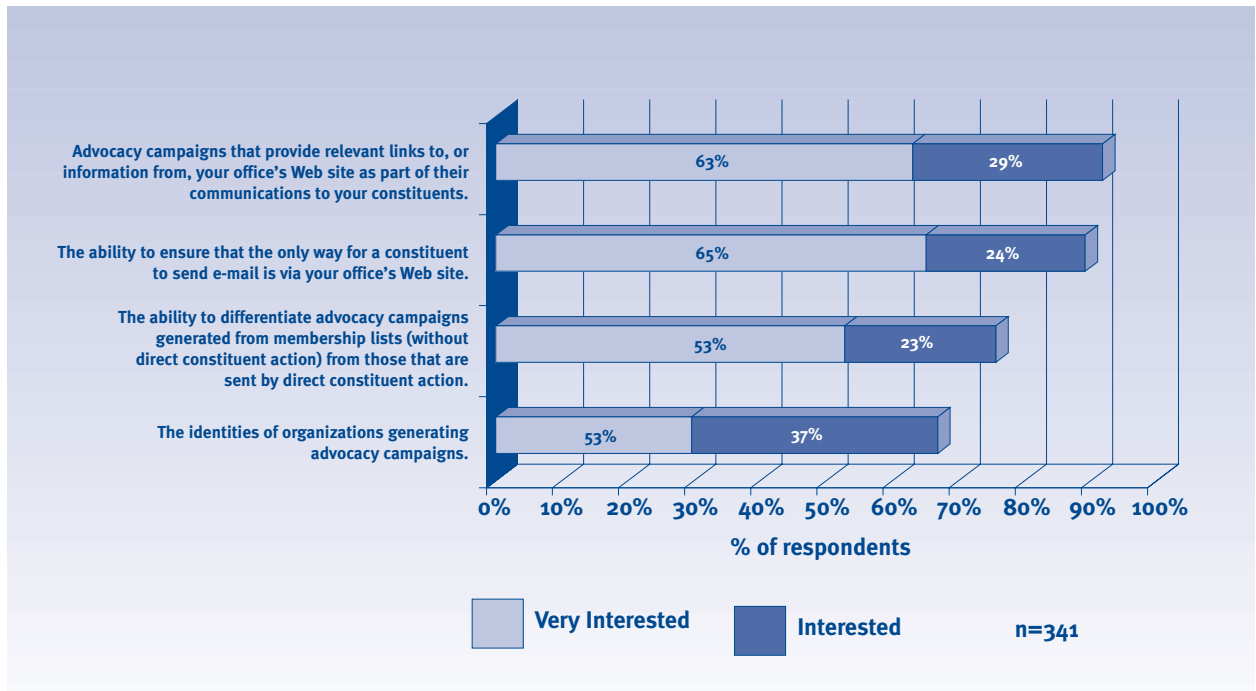
In our next *Communicating with Congress* report, CMF plans to investigate further the assertion of staff that “most” identical form communications are sent without the constituent’s knowledge or consent. However, from preliminary research we have conducted on this topic, this does not appear to be the case. Many staff appear to have formed this opinion based on a few experiences in which their offices responded to constituents who then claimed to have no knowledge or recollection of contacting them. Staff then assume that, if this occurred with one or two constituents, then most form communications probably are not authentic.

CMF preliminary research suggests that most of the communications sent to Capitol Hill are authentic communications from constituents, or at least include the consent of the constituent at some stage in the process. There is some anecdotal evidence of groups temporarily holding communications in reserve so they can be sent *en masse* to an office. We also have heard of groups sending multiple messages to an office based on one interaction with a constituent, such as a constituent “signing” a single online petition which results in repeated e-mail messages or faxes sent to an office. However, our research suggests that these practices seem to be exceptions not the norm.

Because of this mistrust, staff signaled strong interest in the implementation of any methods that could confirm the authenticity of messages they receive. A strong majority of staff responding to our survey (89%) indicate that they would be “interested” or “very interested” in the ability to differentiate between list-generated campaigns and those created by direct constituent action. In addition, 76% want the advocacy groups to send copies of the constituent’s own messages back to the constituent to further confirm the communication.

Staff also expressed strong interest in knowing which groups are generating the messages they receive (92% were “interested” or “very interested”), and focus groups suggested two reasons for this. First, administrative staff want to be able to contact these groups when thousands of communications (often fax or e-mail) are generated through a single group or company. They want to be able to go directly to the source should technical delivery problems arise. Second, some staff point out that knowing the identity of originating groups could help with crafting a reply. As one Senate Chief of Staff said, “I’m going to reply differently to a health care message sent by [a seniors group] than one sent by [a health insurance company].”

Figure 20. Staff Views on Ideas to Improve Communications
“How interested would you be in the following?”



5. Congressional staff are seeking particular information to help them better understand, process, and respond to constituent communications.

Overall, it appears that staff are looking for information to help them process the communications. Specifically, staff who work on mail and responded to our survey said it would be “very helpful” or “helpful” to have constituents include a reference to specific legislation (98%); a bill number or title (98%); and the e-mail address of the sender (80%).

Having specific bill numbers in the body of the letter is very helpful and will probably result in a faster response rather than a general issue letter.

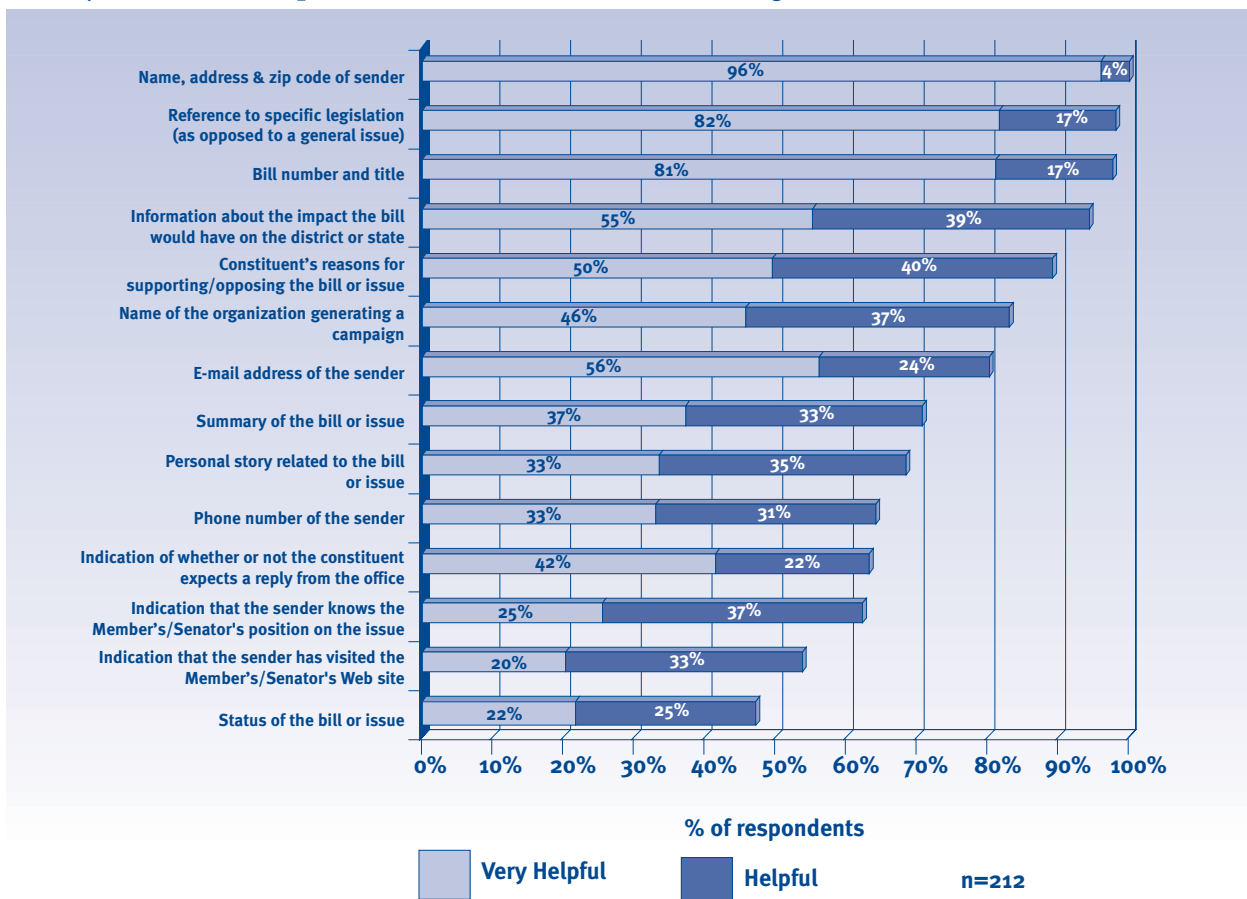
—House Correspondence Staffer

Additionally, staff are seeking information that will help them inform the Member of Congress about constituent views. Staff reported that it would be “very helpful” or “helpful” for constituents to provide their reasons for supporting a bill or issue (89%), the constituent’s perspective on how the bill would affect his or her district or state (94%), and even a personal story related to the bill or issue (68%).

Personal notes from constituents are more effective than sending a form letter from your database, especially if it finds an angle in which it deals with the district.

—House Chief of Staff

Figure 21. What Staff Want in Constituent Communications
“How helpful is it for messages from constituents to include the following?”
 (Survey of House correspondence staff and Senate Office Managers)



Implications of This Research

As discussed in the introduction to this report, the goal of our project is to help improve communications between the public and Congress. However, because our research to date has focused on the perspectives of congressional staff, we currently know more about the impact the new communications environment is having on Congress than we do about the impact it is having on citizens and grassroots organizations. In the next phase of our research, we will focus on the other side of the communications equation: the perceptions and practices of grassroots organizations and citizens. Through that research, we will learn more about the impact the new communications environment is having on the public and on grassroots organizations.

That said, from our current research we can draw some clear implications for both sides of the congressional communications equation. These implications are discussed below.

Implications of This Research . . .

To Citizens and Grassroots Organizations:

1. Quality is more persuasive than quantity.
2. The organization behind a grassroots campaign matters.
3. Grassroots organizations should develop a better understanding of Congress.
4. There is a difference between being noticed and having an impact.

To Congressional Offices:

1. There is a new communications environment to which Congress will need to adapt.
2. Congress must improve online communications.
3. Managing in the new environment may require new capabilities and new thinking.
4. The new environment provides benefits that Members of Congress and their staffs have not yet fully appreciated.

Implications for Citizens and Grassroots Organizations

1. Quality is more persuasive than quantity.

If there is one theme that clearly came through during every step of our research, it is this: thoughtful, personalized constituent messages generally have more influence than do a large number of identical form messages.

Numbers aren't that important, it's reasoning and impact on constituents that matter.

—House Legislative Director

Form letters are a waste of everyone's time. What we care about is that a constituent not only took the time to write a communication to us, but that he/she understands the fundamentals of the issue at hand and makes a rational, well-conceived argument for the position.

—House Correspondence Staffer

Sending a letter to a Member of Congress is not equivalent to casting a ballot or answering a survey, where the choice with the most responses “wins.” Sending a letter to a Member of Congress is more like giving a speech at a town meeting or writing a letter to the editor. The content matters. The operating assumption of many congressional staff is that the more time and effort constituents take to communicate, the more passionately

they care about the issue. This is not to say that there is no value to grassroots campaigns or that large quantities of identical form messages are never persuasive. This is simply to say that quality messages almost always trump quantity on Capitol Hill. Quality messages are those that are:

- **Personalized.** Even just one relevant and personalized sentence or paragraph in an otherwise generic message conveys some sense of a constituent’s sentiment. The more personalized the message, the better. It significantly helps the communication if one’s personal views, experiences, and the reasons for one’s opinions are included in the message.

If a form letter has SOME type of constituent interaction (a signature, etc.) on it, we will respond. Otherwise, it is useless to us. We do not respond to databases generating letters. We only respond to real people.

—House Correspondence Staffer

Telling a story is the most effective way of getting attention.

—Senate Mail Manager

- **Short.** House Legislative Assistants and Senate Legislative Correspondents review hundreds of letters every week, so covering an issue in a few short paragraphs helps them immensely.
- **Targeted.** Messages that convey knowledge of specific legislation, the Member’s stance on the issue, and the impact the legislation will have on the Member’s constituents, district, or state tend to be much more persuasive than generic messages.

If a Senator agrees with an advocacy group on the issue, do not mass mail the Senator. It’s a waste. They already agree with you.

—Senate Mail Manager

- **Informative.** Congressional offices do not have the resources to research and track every bill, so they focus on legislation being considered in their Members’ committees or by the full House or Senate. Often constituents bring new legislation to their attention, requiring staff to do research so as to be able to discuss and respond to it. For this reason, quality messages contain specific information about the legislation in question.

2. The organization behind a grassroots campaign matters.

Grassroots organizations play a fundamental role in our representative democracy. Members and congressional staff depend on them to provide important policy information on issues and legislation, and citizens depend on them to provide guidance on when, how, and why to become activists. These organizations must thus earn the trust of both citizens and policy makers, and be accountable to both for their actions.

It would appear from our research, however, that congressional trust of grassroots organizations is waning. A thread that ran through all of our research was that congressional staff do not trust mass form communications generated by grassroots organizations.

Organizations must... earn the trust of both citizens and policy makers, and be accountable to both for their actions.

Most staffers believe that pressure groups are less interested in conveying the legitimate views of constituents than they are in generating contributions and demonstrating that they’re “doing something.” Since they tend to measure their effectiveness in terms of volume than actually getting anything constructive done, no one really expects the amount of third-party-generated contacts will ever decrease.

—House Chief of Staff

We see organizations that generate this type of mass spam as adversaries, especially when they go out of their way to avoid identifying themselves in the form communication.

—House Correspondence Staffer

They report that few grassroots campaigns are up front about the organization behind them. As a result, many staffers have learned how to identify the sources of such campaigns on their own, and they do so before they respond to their messages. In other words, failing to include in a message the name of the organization behind it does not usually prevent staff from finding this out. It just takes time – time that might be better spent researching the issue and generating a response.

It would be extremely helpful if grassroots groups and advocacy organizations would identify themselves when sending form letters on behalf of constituents so that those people responding to the constituents could know who is sending the letter, as well as where (i.e. website) to check the information in the letter and provide links to find the original form letter.

—House Correspondence Staffer

3. Grassroots organizations should develop a better understanding of Congress.

The quality and impact of constituent communications would increase if organizations generating campaigns better understood Congress and the legislative process.

A third theme that emerged in our research was that congressional staff become frustrated when the organizations running grassroots campaigns clearly do not understand how Congress works. In many cases, staff indicated that the quality and impact of constituent communications would increase if organizations generating campaigns better understood Congress and the legislative process. It would help for grassroots organizations to factor the following concepts into their campaigns.

- **Communications should only come from constituents.** Although it has tapered off, there are still citizens who send messages to Members who do not represent them. Also, there are still grassroots organizations that encourage and facilitate this practice. The reasons for this practice are usually sincere. Perhaps the constituents' Member and Senators do not serve on the appropriate committee; perhaps the message is in reaction to something a Member said on a television program; or perhaps the issue is so important to the citizen or group that they want to be heard by someone in Congress, no matter whom. However, Congress is a representative body whose Members are beholden to their own constituents. As a courtesy, some Members forward messages to the appropriate Members, but few read or respond to messages not from their own constituents.
- **Timing in the legislative cycle matters.** The actions a Member can take are different at different points in the legislative process, so it is important for a grassroots organization to know the status of a bill, understand the possible actions a Member can take at each stage, coordinate its campaign around an appropriate action, and craft its message accordingly.

Timeliness is key. Letting us know the day of the vote is about 3-5 days too late, in general.

—House Chief of Staff

Wait until the bill is introduced before alerting the grassroots. We have gotten constituent input on legislation that doesn't show up in the computer because it hasn't been introduced, so we have to send a "there is no bill" type of letter, which either makes the Member look stupid or the organization look stupid.

—House Correspondence Staffer

Grassroots organizations need to be timely. It is senseless to send the Member an e-mail urging a vote for a bill, when the vote happened 3 weeks or 3 months ago.

—House Correspondence Staffer

- **The chamber in which a bill was introduced matters.** House Members cannot vote on Senate bills or court nominations, and Senators cannot vote on House bills, so campaigns urging a Member of one chamber to take action on legislation from the other chamber cannot yield results. Often, companion legislation to a bill may be introduced in the other chamber, but when grassroots campaigns do not identify the companion legislation, staff must either ignore the messages or spend significant time researching it.

Don't send a House Member a communication about an amendment in the Senate or a nomination.

—House Correspondence Staffer

- **Members may already have positions on the legislation.** Congressional offices are often subject to grassroots campaigns requesting – or admonishing – the Member to support legislation he or she already supports. Using the Internet, it is fairly easy to determine a Member's stance on a bill or issue simply by checking information on his or her Web site, or by studying the sponsors and co-sponsors of the legislation and the roll call votes of similar legislation or versions of the same legislation introduced in previous Congresses. Identifying at least the sponsors and co-sponsors of a bill can save resources and enable grassroots organizations to target only Members who need persuading.

Know what the Member is doing on the issue. If the Member is already on board the bill, don't send a letter or send a different letter.

—House Mail Manager

If a Senator agrees with an advocacy group on the issue do not mass mail the Senator, it's a waste. They already agree with you.

—Senate Office Manager

- **Members' office resources are limited.** As discussed previously, Members of Congress and their staffs have significant and diverse demands on their time. Responding to constituent communications is not the only way in which they represent and serve their constituents. They also advocate for legislation, secure funds and support for local programs, and coordinate national strategy with local interests. Grassroots organizations that understand this, and coordinate their communications efforts accordingly, are generally looked upon more favorably than those which do not.

Unless we start triaging contacts, it's hard to see how we can decrease the workload. We've already taken several steps to streamline our process, especially with e-mail.

—House Chief of Staff

Grassroots organizations need to be educated on the resources available to us versus the deluge of mail – e-mail and snail mail – that they generate. It's been my experience that when they understand congressional processes, the quality of their communications improves, while the quantity decreases, i.e. they write or call when they really have something to convey.

—House Chief of Staff

- **Offices have processes and systems to manage constituent communications.** Congressional offices must establish procedures that enable them to be as efficient and productive as possible in managing high volumes of communications. A problem in any part of the process for handling congressional mail can bring the whole system to a grinding halt. As a result, it helps for grassroots organizations to understand and work with an office's processes and systems, instead of trying to work around them. This includes sending communications to the Washington office, rather than the district or state office; properly formatting e-mail messages that are not sent via the Members' Web forms; and providing constituents' names, addresses, and zip codes in each message.

Advocacy groups should work with offices to send information the way they are best able to receive and process it.

—Senate Chief of Staff

The advantage of doing what Congress needs is that they earn more respect. An indication that they know and care what's going on in Member offices makes them looked upon more positively by offices.

—House Legislative Director

■ **Form e-mail messages are easier to manage and are usually more effective than form faxes.**

In the wake of the 9/11, anthrax, and ricin scares, getting timely postal mail to Capitol Hill has become a challenge. Decontaminating and processing postal mail adds at least a few days, often more, to the time it takes an office to receive a letter. As a result, grassroots organizations have sought faster alternatives for getting messages to Capitol Hill, especially fax and e-mail. For a variety of reasons, including that e-mail can be automatically filtered and that paper creates a nice pile in a congressional office, many grassroots organizations have opted to send form messages via fax rather than via e-mail. However, most congressional offices prefer form e-mail to form faxes. When formatted correctly, form e-mail is easy for congressional offices to process, count, and respond to. Form faxes require a lot of data entry and administrative work, in addition to requiring a lot of toner and paper, which can get expensive.

Most congressional offices prefer form e-mail to form faxes.

Everything is dictated by how fast they can be responded to. Paper campaigns take longer because they have to be processed. It doesn't get lower priority, but it takes longer.

—Senate Mail Manager

Mass faxes are also a waste of paper and money. It's much better to gather names and send it as a petition or mass e-mail the person.

—Senate Mail Manager

Electronic means are becoming the most effective way to get our attention positively. Blast faxes and phone-banking are not effective.

—House Systems Administrator

You can get your message across by delivering two cases of paper mail with a CD-ROM on top. It has the impact, but it also enables efficiency.

—Senate Mail Manager

4. There is a difference between being noticed and having an impact.

Bad grassroots practices may get noticed on Capitol Hill, but they tend not to be effective at influencing the opinions of Members of Congress.

Bad grassroots practices may get noticed on Capitol Hill, but they tend not to be effective at influencing the opinions of Members of Congress, and sometimes damage the relationship between congressional offices and grassroots organizations. The grassroots community, by and large, wants to engage in a constructive dialogue with Members of Congress and rarely uses tactics or methods that could be classified as bad practices. However, almost every congressional staffer to whom we spoke told stories of grassroots campaigns that had frustrated, overwhelmed, or even attacked their offices through targeted operations. These campaigns usually get an office's attention, but they are far more likely to anger the Member and staff than to persuade them to support their causes.

Groups whose objectives are to be combative and annoying, flooding offices with correspondence, will ultimately have little influence.

—House Systems Administrator

Although bad practices may not be the norm, they have caused offices to develop a skepticism that makes it more difficult for any grassroots campaign to be trusted or viewed as credible. Some of the worst practices that offices reported are:

- **Misrepresenting the Member’s position.** As previously mentioned, because many grassroots campaigns generate the same message to all Members, Members are often asked to take positions they have already publicly taken. For example, Members are sometimes subject to grassroots campaigns encouraging them to support legislation of which they are sponsors or co-sponsors. Other times, Members are scolded for supporting a position that they clearly state on their Web sites they do not support. In the eyes of Members and staff, this suggests that the grassroots organization generating the messages have misrepresented the Member’s position to their constituents. This then forces the office to correct the misperception, which is viewed as a waste of everyone’s time and energy – the office’s, the constituent’s, and the grassroots organization’s.
- **Attempting to overwhelm an office.** Some grassroots organizations see it as a challenge or a point of pride to attract a Member’s attention by effectively shutting down his or her office. Usually, this is done by sending such high volumes of e-mail, phone calls, faxes or letters that the entire staff has to be temporarily re-assigned to manage the communications. This rare practice does attract the attention of Members and staff, but it sometimes causes Members and staff to mistrust the organization that generates the campaign. This hinders the organization’s ability to be effective in future efforts to persuade the Member.

Shutting down the systems keeps the messages from getting through. They’re only shooting themselves in the foot.

—Senate Mail Manager

- **Generating multiple identical messages from one constituent.** Congressional offices often receive identical messages from a single constituent. These messages are sometimes generated through multiple actions by the constituent. For example, a constituent who feels particularly passionately about an issue may decide to send the same message a number of times for emphasis. Other times, the multiple messages are generated through a single constituent action, which a grassroots organization takes as “permission” to send messages on the constituent’s behalf. For example, a single click on a Web site might generate an identical e-mail message, fax, and postcard. Similarly, a check box on an organization’s newsletter might generate several identical messages sent over time. In most offices, these messages count as a single communication, but they create extra work for staff, who must sort through the messages and identify messages from the same constituent. One message per constituent per campaign will usually suffice, unless new or substantively different information needs to be conveyed.

One message per constituent per campaign will usually suffice, unless new or substantively different information needs to be conveyed.

Avoid duplications. Grassroots organizations need to filter their communications so we only get it once from the same person. It is very time consuming for staff to filter out duplicates. Some organizations will send us e-mail and faxes from the same person on the same issue. We only need to get it once.

—House Correspondence Staffer

- **Facilitating phone calls without adequately preparing constituents.** Congressional offices are occasionally subject to poor phone campaigns. Generally, grassroots organizations coordinate a phone bank through which telephone operators call potential activists to ask if they would like to express their views to their Member of Congress. When they say yes, they are either transferred to a congressional office or the call is terminated and a second call is initiated, which rings both the constituent’s phone and the Member’s office phone at the same time. Often, however, this results in confused constituents either trying to stammer through a message or wondering why the staffer who answered the phone in the Member’s office called them. In either case, this places congressional staff in a position of counseling constituents while trying to figure out what the campaign is about. When the campaign initiates just a few of these calls,

this practice is simply inconvenient. When the campaign is responsible for many of these calls, it can prevent an entire office from doing anything else until the calls stop.

Phone banks where constituents are simply put through to the Member's office are the most ineffective modes of communication. Most times, they have no idea why they're calling or what the issue is, and all it does is tie up our phone lines.

—House Correspondence Staffer

The worst example of mass generated form communications that I have seen in my two years on Capitol Hill is the tactic of calling constituents at home and convincing them to be immediately connected to their Representative's office by telephone. The intent is that the constituent will reiterate the comments of the operator who prepped them to make the call and connected them with our office. In most cases, however, the constituent was confused and wholly unable to articulate the message.

—House Correspondence Staffer

- **Targeting a specific staffer.** Occasionally, grassroots organizations will direct a mass message campaign to a specific staffer by including the staffer's name, direct dial phone number, and/or e-mail address in their messages to their activists. When the effort results in a few messages from activists with whom the staffer already has a relationship, this is not necessarily a problem. However, when the effort results in a flood of e-mail or phone calls, the staffer is debilitated until the campaign is over and his or her e-mail inbox and voicemail box are cleaned out. Although the offices of only a few of the staff whom we interviewed had been subjected to this practice, they remembered it vividly, and it usually damaged the relationship between the entire office and the organization that generated the campaign.

We had an unsavory encounter with a group last year that used their database to have their members call a specific [Legislative Assistant]. This turned my boss inside out. The boss called the director of the group and let him have it, and the relationship has been shaky every since.

—House Legislative Director

Although these five worst practices are fairly rare, in the aggregate they consume substantial Member office resources. As such, they are contributing to the view that identical form communications should have little, if any, influence on Members.

CMF intends to learn more about the actual practices of grassroots organizations. At present, however, our one-sided research indicates that, even if these practices are not prevalent, they are common enough in the experience of many congressional staff to cause them to be increasingly skeptical of all grassroots communications. As one House Legislative Director put it, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." The burden is now on the facilitators of grassroots campaigns to avoid these practices and to discourage others from using them, so that a more thoughtful and meaningful dialogue with elected officials can be constructed for the future.

Implications for Congressional Offices

1. There is a new communications environment to which Congress will need to adapt.

Congress is historically slow to change. In fact, the Founding Fathers designed a system of checks and balances within the Congress to ensure deliberative review of any decision, from how to tax citizens to what should be allowed on Members' Web sites. While this process may seem overly burdensome, it is part of the culture of Capitol Hill.

Because the Internet has emerged rapidly, Congress has not had time to adapt to its effects. Many in Congress view technology as merely providing new tools to accomplish the same tasks they have always performed. They view e-mail as postal mail that is sent electronically. They view PDA's as replacements for paper schedules. They view Web sites as direct mail pieces that can be viewed on a computer. This is not unusual. As an institution begins to transition to the information society, it is natural for new capabilities to be viewed through the prism of their Industrial Age counterparts. But this view fails to take account of the very significant ways that the Internet has altered the public's access to information, expanded coalition-building opportunities, and created new communications habits across the entire electorate. The Internet has gone far beyond simply providing new tools to perform old tasks. In order to adapt to the new environment that the Internet has created, Congress must adopt an entirely new communications paradigm.

As illustrated in Figure 22, most congressional offices still think of constituent communications as a one-dimensional process: the constituent sends a letter and the Member's office sends a letter back.

The Internet has gone far beyond simply providing new tools to perform old tasks.

Figure 22. The Old Congressional Communications Paradigm

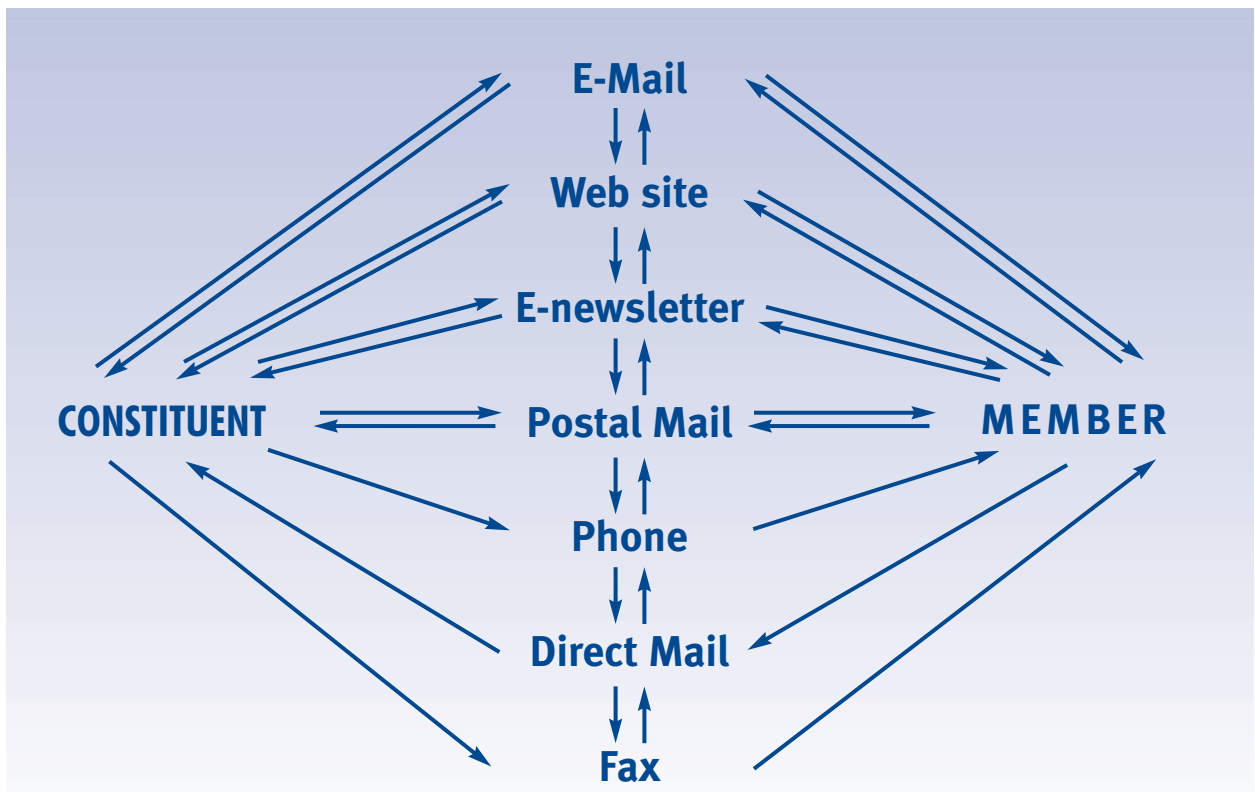


Under the old paradigm, there were some inherent expectations, including that the messages would take several days to travel in each direction. There was no expectation for immediate response or action. There was, however, an expectation that the Member office would take time to thoroughly research a response, since it was reasonable to assume that the constituent would have limited access to timely information on the topic.

The new communications paradigm is multi-dimensional and interactive. As Figure 23 conveys, communications between Members and constituents can occur through many channels at once, each playing off, and building on, the others. Some constituents get their information via e-mail, others via Web sites, others still via a combination of media. The medium and the source of the information can impact a constituent's perspective, and any constituent who wants to learn more has many options for easily doing so. No longer do constituents assume it will take days or weeks to receive a response to a message. Constituents now expect on-demand access to information, services available 24-7, and rapid responses to communications on par with the standards set by other government entities and the private sector. Now, constituents have the capability to be better informed than Members and staff about the minutiae of pending legislation. Now, it is not always the Member informing and updating the constituent, but the constituent informing and updating the Member.

Constituents now expect on-demand access to information, services available 24-7, and rapid responses to communications.

Figure 23. The New Congressional Communications Paradigm



To manage in this new communications paradigm, congressional offices will need to adapt their thinking and practices. This presents a challenge to traditional ways of communicating, but it also offers significant benefits, which will be discussed later in this section.

2. Congress must improve online communications.

Increasing numbers of citizens are becoming involved in politics and government through the Internet. Members of Congress must be able to interact with citizens, *in the form that citizens prefer*. Congressional offices must do all they can to manage the expectations of constituents and grassroots organizations and to promote better communications practices. To begin to do this, Members and staff can:

- **Communicate their response policies.** Some Members of Congress post their response policies on their Web sites or include them in automatically-generated acknowledgements of incoming e-mail messages. By clearly describing the types of communication to which the office does and does not respond, its methods for processing communications it receives, and expected response times, offices can help manage constituents' expectations and promote better practices in the future.

There are conflicts about whether or not to respond. It sometimes seems that organizations are just sending stuff on their members' behalf. When we did some research, we found that people were actually taking action, which made us decide that the form letters were worth answering.

—House Mail Manager

- **Reach out to grassroots organizations.** Many congressional offices have, at one time or another, informed grassroots organizations about problems they are having with specific campaigns. Few have proactively sought to discuss ways to jointly develop problem solving strategies or to identify opportunities for improving online communications. Adapting to the new environment may require proactive collaboration with the grassroots community to identify better ways for Members of Congress and their constituents to communicate with one another.
- **Respond to e-mail with e-mail.** If a citizen sends an e-mail message requesting information about a Member's position on an issue, the citizen is usually expecting an e-mail reply. Congressional offices have understandable concerns about responding to e-mail with e-mail, most of which can be overcome using simple technological tools or more effective e-mail management procedures. It no longer makes sense to respond to e-mail with postal mail. Responding to e-mail with e-mail can also save money on paper and envelopes and save staff time on folding and stuffing. Responses can be shorter and sent with only a click of a button.

I think people should answer e-mail with e-mail because it saves a lot of money: 37 cents a letter, 200 messages a day, plus envelopes.

—House Legislative Director

3. Managing in the new environment may require new capabilities and new thinking.

Technological and operational efficiencies have been critical to managing constituent communications, but congressional offices are acknowledging that there will soon come a time when no further progress can be made using existing technologies and operational procedures. If nothing changes, either responsiveness will decline or resources will have to be taken from legislative or constituent service work. Neither of these outcomes is especially good for democracy or the public policy process. For this reason, Congress and congressional offices may need to consider some of the following:

- **Provide Members with additional staff and resources.** Congress may need to consider providing Member personal offices with additional resources. Usually, any suggestion of increasing congressional staffs or budgets is met with severe criticism against Congress spending money on itself, especially in an environment of budget deficit and budget cuts. In this case, however, the investment of staff and resources would be directly related to constituent service and the fundamental responsibility Members have of listening to, and representing, their constituents.

We may need more staff or may need to cut what we respond to.

—Senate Mail Manager

- **Expand the use of technology.** Congress may need to identify and adopt additional technologies and communications vehicles to interact with constituents. Perhaps some of the technologies and vehicles already being used by businesses, local and state governments, and public interest groups may be appropriate for congressional use. These tools might include: interactive Web sites with rich content; e-newsletters targeted to the specific interests of segmented audiences; Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds to provide citizens with information on-demand; and other emerging tools such as Web logs and podcasts. Diversifying the communications tools available to the public and Congress could potentially increase both the quality of communications and the number of people who can interact with Members of Congress, while at the same time providing more manageable opportunities for interaction to occur.

I'm frustrated with the limited technology available for processing mail.

—House Chief of Staff

- **Adopt new management policies.** This is an approach that many Member offices are already implementing. For example, some offices have policies to anticipate and manage surges in constituent communications associated with particularly contentious issues. Other offices have developed policies to prioritize responses to grassroots campaigns. Still others have policies to review mail reports at weekly staff meetings to keep staff motivated and informed.

We also apportion resources carefully. When any group begins to take up too much staff time, they are moved from the front burner to the back burner so that we can provide adequate attention to everyone else.

—House Chief of Staff

Already, we have the same number of people doing triple the amount of work. We're getting faster and better.

—Senate Mail Manager

- **Establish a task force to identify solutions.** Identifying solutions for managing in the new environment may require some of the key stakeholders – Member office staff, institutional staff, vendors, representatives from the grassroots industry, and representatives from the public – to come together to brainstorm and agree on new approaches. CMF hopes to facilitate such a forum as part of this *Communicating with Congress* project.

We also need to undertake discussions with grassroots organizations about other ways to channel their desire to DO something.

—House Chief of Staff

4. The new environment provides benefits that Members of Congress and their staffs have not yet fully appreciated.

Members of Congress are politicians. They have limited resources, and to be effective advocates and representatives of their constituents they must carefully choose those issues, projects, and initiatives on which to spend those resources. Each office must weigh the cost of investing time and money in a project against the benefit to constituents and to the Member. While this may sound overly calculating, cost-benefit analysis is a reality for any institution. In Congress, Members who do not make choices on how to focus their resources are less effective. They often divide resources and attention among myriad issues and activities, rather than building knowledge, expertise, and a reputation on a select few.

In making their calculations regarding constituent communications, most offices have determined that there are benefits to responding to the communications they receive, but few have recognized that, in the new communications environment, there are also benefits to *expanding* and *encouraging* constituent communications. Currently, most staff view constituent communications primarily as a necessary administrative burden that pulls their time and attention away from their legislative work. Senior managers usually recognize the importance of being responsive, but few have embraced the inherent opportunities associated with communicating with more constituents more often through new communications tools.

Under the old communications paradigm, this analysis was appropriate. Paper newsletters and outreach mailings were expensive, so there were limits on how often they could be sent. The back and forth exchange between a Member and a constituent took days or weeks, so there was limited opportunity to develop relationships or motivate action. Under the old communications paradigm, there were plenty of opportunities for information exchange, but limited opportunities for dialogue.

Under the new paradigm, communications are faster, less expensive, and can reach more people. Members of Congress could realize significant benefits by utilizing new tools and devoting more resources to interacting with constituents. These benefits include:

- **Connecting to thousands of constituents.** In the past, a Member of the House of Representatives might have responded to between 10,000 and 20,000 constituents each year. Today's Members of Congress have an opportunity to more easily and affordably interact with, not just respond to, even more people who are interested in participating in the public policy process. E-mail, the Internet, databases, and other technologies make it faster, easier, and less expensive to develop interactive, but manageable, relationships with constituents who have expressed interest in communicating with the Member. Interacting with these constituents could help improve constituents' understanding of the Member's views and activities, as well as generate broader support for the Member.
- **Connecting to Influentials in the district or state.** As previously discussed, people who send political e-mails or who write or call a public official are significantly more likely than the general public to be involved in political and community activities. By increasing interactions with this group, Members of Congress could strengthen their relationship with people who are more likely than the average citizen to belong to a political party, write a letter to the editor, participate in a public interest organization, discuss politics with people in their communities, and vote.
- **Realizing cost savings.** Congress, as a whole, will likely need to invest more resources in constituent communications in order to respond to constituent demand. However, individual offices can realize costs savings by using online communications tools instead of off-line tools. For example, sending an e-mail message costs less than sending a letter. Not only are material costs lower, but an office also saves money in labor costs through processing communications electronically instead of manually.
- **Improving the Member's image in the district or state.** By communicating with constituents using faster and more accommodating methods, Members can enhance their images among their constituents. For example, using e-mail to respond to constituent e-mail allows Members to incorporate hyperlinks to connect constituents to additional information on the Members' Web sites, build up e-newsletter lists, and provide rapid responses to constituents' communications. Additionally, offices that answer e-mail with e-mail report that their e-mail responses and e-newsletters are often forwarded to recipients' friends and families with nice notes attached, which is another way to enhance the Member's image.
- **Learning to operate in the Information Age.** The Internet is not simply a new delivery vehicle for recycling the same messages that are delivered through other media, such as broadcasting. There are new rules, standards, and customs that accompany this new technology. For example, slogans, graphics, and political rhetoric were once the most effective means to deliver a message. This is no longer the case. Now substance, cross-channel communications, information on-demand, and viral campaigns are the ways to get messages delivered. The implication for congressional offices is that they must learn to operate in the Information Age. They must also recognize that the means of doing so are not necessarily means to which broadcast-savvy Members and their press secretaries are accustomed.

E-mail, the Internet, databases, and other technologies make it faster, easier, and less expensive to develop interactive, but manageable, relationships with constituents.

The Internet is not simply a new delivery vehicle for recycling the same messages that are delivered through other media.

Conclusion

The conclusions that can be drawn from our research may seem disheartening at first. Congressional staff are frustrated by the increasing quantity and decreasing quality of constituent communications, and they are inclined to mistrust grassroots communications and the organizations that generate them. They feel they are doing more work to respond to less substantive messages, which is giving them less time to work on the legislative work that brought most of them to Capitol Hill in the first place.

However, despite these frustrations, congressional staff believe that the Internet and e-mail have provided some clear public benefits that are encouraging for our democracy. They view constituents as more informed, Members as more responsive, and citizens as more engaged in the public policy process as a result of Internet and e-mail. The Internet and e-mail have also provided grassroots organizations and citizens with new and exciting opportunities to organize around issues, access and share information, and communicate with their elected officials. Clearly, they are taking advantage of these tools.

It is encouraging for the future of democracy that citizens find it easier to become informed of and engaged in public policy and to communicate with Congress. It is also encouraging that Members of Congress and their staff want to hear from their constituents and are trying to be responsive to them. However, both sides need to figure out how to facilitate this dialogue in more productive and meaningful ways.

Citizens and Congress have a shared interest in improving communications between them.

Citizens and Congress have a shared interest in improving communications between them. Both sides want and benefit from a robust and meaningful discourse. Members and their staff would like to see communications occur in ways that are both valuable and manageable to their offices. Citizens and the grassroots community want to know that they are succeeding in making their voices heard and influencing the legislative process. Consequently, it is in the interest of both parties to consider making changes that better serve these shared interests.

Through this *Communicating with Congress* project, CMF intends to help facilitate these changes. This report represents the first step in that effort. To help the Congress better understand the other side of the communications equation, CMF's next report will turn to research that will identify the perceptions that citizens and the grassroots community have regarding their communications to Congress. We then hope to use the data from this report and our next report to identify best practices for constituent communications on Capitol Hill. Finally, we hope to facilitate discussion and problem-solving among congressional staff, citizens, and the grassroots community by convening a task force with representatives from both sides of congressional communications. It is our hope that, at the conclusion of CMF's *Communicating with Congress* project, there will be a new model for communications between constituents and their elected officials. A model that reduces or removes the current frustrations and barriers, facilitates increased citizen participation in the public policy process, and increases a meaningful democratic dialogue that benefits our country.

About the Congressional Management Foundation

The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF), founded in 1977, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) educational organization devoted to promoting a more effective Congress. CMF pursues this mission by providing targeted management services that help Members and their staff perform their jobs more effectively. These services come in the form of training programs, books and reports, customized management services, and technology outreach. CMF is an independent organization that works with both Democratic and Republican offices and takes no position on policy matters.

Management Training

CMF provides free training workshops to top level congressional staff on topics including: strategic planning; motivating staff and reducing turnover; assessing management skills; measuring office performance; supervising staff; and internal office communications.

Guidebooks and Reports

CMF regularly produces such publications as the House and Senate Staff Employment Studies (which provide congressional staff salary, tenure, and demographic information); *Setting Course: A Congressional Management Guide*; *Frontline Management: A Guide for Congressional District/State Offices*; *The Insider's Guide to Capitol Hill Research*; and the *Congressional Intern Handbook*.

Technology Guidance

Our technology research focuses on enhancing the effective use of leading information technology in congressional offices. In 2001, CMF partnered with George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management to create the Congress Online Project through a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. The project provided congressional offices with guidance on how to improve e-mail communications, enhance Web sites, and increase office productivity through better use of technology. CMF currently is continuing this research with The Harvard Kennedy School of Government through a grant from the National Science Foundation.

Customized Management Services

CMF provides a range of confidential management services to personal offices and committees including: detailed office assessments which provide Members and staff with comprehensive analyses to identify weaknesses and develop strategies for improving performance; facilitation of office retreats that usually focus on strategic planning and problem-solving office issues; and analyses and recommendations for improving constituent correspondence systems.

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