Title: Communications Technology as Symbols of Institutional Legitimacy in the U.S. Congress

Authors:

Samantha McDonald [1] (corresponding author)
smcdona2@uci.edu

Fan Yin[2]
yinf2@uci.edu

Melissa Mazmanian [1]
mmazmani@uci.edu

[1] Department of Informatics. Donald Bren School of Information and Computer Sciences. University of California, Irvine. 5019 Donald Bren Hall. Irvine, CA 92697-3440. USA.

[2] Department of Statistics. Donald Bren School of Information and Computer Sciences. University of California, Irvine. 5019 Donald Bren Hall. Irvine, CA 92697-3440. USA

Abstract

We examine perceptions and adoptions of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for constituent correspondence in the U.S. Congress. ICTs such as e-mail, phones, social media, and constituent databases are thought to improve policymakers' ability to listen to constituents and be responsive to their policy concerns. However, scholarly work finds little evidence congressional offices use ICTs to support such behaviors. To evaluate this disconnect, we surveyed and interviewed congressional staff to capture their perceptions and practices of constituent correspondence. We identified a strong desire by staff to use ICTs to enhance responsiveness to constituent concerns. However, when asked about their actual use, staff describe little value in ICT correspondence to influence policy, offering little evidence that ICTs substantively engage constituents. We argue that a tension between the narratives about ICTs' responsive potential and its actual use demonstrates a ceremonial adoption of technologies. Congress adopts ICTs as a symbol of institutional legitimacy that promotes a face for engagement. Staff use the term "responsiveness" to identify the speed at which they reply to constituents with proforma messages. Thus, the term "responsiveness" allows staff to bridge public narrative and organizational practice by using the same word to promote different values in constituent engagement.

Keywords:

Congress; ICT; Institutional Adoption; Staff, Constituent Communication; Technology

1. Introduction

Normative conceptions of democratic representation require acting in a manner responsive to the represented, requiring some form of communication between the representative and represented (Pitkin, 1967). In the U.S. Congress, communication with constituents offers a Member of Congress (MOC) the ability to obtain, discern, and respond to constituent request and policy opinions, inform constituents of their actions and policy (Lipinski, 2004), obtain and continually reinforce feelings of trust, and establish credibility to the constituency (Fenno, 2003). Thus, open communication channels with their constituencies - in service of both re-elections and policymaking - are defining characteristics of MOCs.

Modern forms of constituent correspondence are multi-faceted and increasingly multi-modal activities (Lassen & Brown, 2011). MOCs use a blend of communication methods such as phone calls, email, faxes, town halls, in-person meetings, and social media. They acquire customer relation management softwares (CRMs), also known as constituent databases, to manage constituent correspondence (Abernathy, 2015). MOCs hire specialized staff for different constituent services such as answering calls and letters, assisting in casework (Open Gov Foundation, 2018), and developing new media production on social media platforms (Fitch and Goldschmidt, 2005). In return, citizens use this ever-growing number of digital and non-digital platforms to communicate with MOCs.

Recent growth in communication has created an unprecedented volume of information flowing between MOCs and constituents. From 1995 to 2004, MOCs experienced a four-fold increase in all contact from citizens (Fitch & Goldschmidt, 2005), and more recent anecdotal evidence from

staffers suggests this has substantially increased. Offices are forced to reallocate staff resources away from other tasks like casework and legislative activities to manage the growing volume of policy communication (Hysom, 2008). In 2005, some offices reported allocating up to 50% of their staff to constituent correspondence (Fitch & Goldschmidt, 2005). The result is an undeniable change to the volume of citizen-policymaker communication.

There is optimism that innovative ICTs will alter the manner in which Congress engages the public. Many assume that by creating unmediated and inexpensive pathways for communication, ICTs will encourage more direct forms of accountability and responsiveness by representatives (Druckman, Kefir, Parkin, 2007)(Shogan, 2010)(Lawless, 2012). Some scholars predict that ICTs will alter forms of representation, arguing that Burke's trustee model of representation (Burke, 1774) is on the decline and larger online constituencies will enable more delegate forms of representation (Shogan, 2010)(Straus, 2013). ICTs will promote a more direct and responsive form of representation.

Without doubt these technical innovations provide more pathways for constituents and MOCs to communicate. But there is very little evidence that MOCs use ICTs to discern and be responsive to constituent opinion. MOCs use websites and social media platforms for self-promotion and policy position-taking (Glassman et al., 2013)(Golbeck et al., 2010)(Owen et al., 1999)(Mergel,2012). They establish very little two-way communication with constituents that could create a dialogue to influence policy (Golbeck et al., 2010) – no less a new form of representation. Recent systemic investigations of the correspondence system in Congress find no clear indication that correspondence with constituents is considered by legislative staffers

working on policy (Open Gov Foundation, 2018). Instead, scholars emphasize that these correspondence procedures fail to utilize correspondence management practices that capture constituent opinion as a meaningful resource to policy decision-making (Abernathy, 2015). Despite this evidence, the promising narrative of ICTs creating direct and responsive communication with policymakers continues to permeate. MOCs, citizens, and advocacy campaigns alike continue to promote ICTs as powerful vehicles for citizen-policymaker engagement, advocating for citizens to call or email their offices to influence the MOC's decisions. For example, advocacy campaigns develop form-emails and automated contact to promote social movement behavior (Karpf, 2010). And MOCs continue to promote these forms of communication by promising to listen to constituents and take their preferences into account. Thus, there is a conflict between the promises, expectations, and realities of adopting these technologies.

To investigate why MOCs continue to promote and use new technologies, we look to the institution of Congress and its practices of using ICTs. Most studies that have explored the congressional adoption of ICTs use external indicators such as tweets, website design, and reporting processes. Esterling et al. notes that very few investigations explore actual communication practices in the offices of MOCs or the norms that influence how MOCs and their staffers make sense of constituent communication (2005). In addition, Abernathy describes how nearly all studies exploring MOC's responsiveness have not explored the actual systems that make policy responsiveness possible (Abernathy, 2015). Further, there is an absence of research on staff perceptions and behaviors around ICTs in relation to responsive policymaking. Staff are the primary users of ICTs within congressional offices (Open Gov Foundation, 2018), and there

is recent evidence that staff practices and preferences can transcend offices (Montgomery & Nyhan, 2017). Focusing on how staff make sense of the role of ICTs in constituent communication enables new insights into the tension between promoted and actual uses of ICTs for constituent correspondence, as well as the symbolic importance of these forms of communication and their relationship to different understandings of responsiveness.

To evaluate how the institution of Congress effects the use of ICTs, we use a survey taken by 200 congressional staff members between August and October of 2016 on their perceptions of constituent correspondence and technology. In this survey, staffers report that one of their top duties for correspondence is to be "responsive" to constituents. When used in its full capacity, staff report that ICTs could support their duties for constituent correspondence. These findings then informed six months of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with 48 staff that explored their understanding of the relationship between ICTs and responsiveness. In these interviews, staff were unable to provide examples of communication being used via ICTs to be "responsive" to constituent opinion in a meaningful way. Staff reported that most constituent sentiment had minimal value and little to no effect on policy. Instead, the primary goal of correspondence is to track constituent sentiment and formulate proforma explanatory letters sent to constituents. It is here that we see a difference between being "responsive" to policy concerns of citizens and "responding" to their incoming correspondence. Although staff claimed in the survey that "responsiveness" is a top priority to their correspondence practices, ICTs are used primarily to "respond" to constituent contact via a stock reply letter. We argue that the difference between perceptions of responsiveness and responding behavior highlights a symbolic adoption of technology. ICTs act as a symbol of institutional legitimacy that provide an image of both

responsive engagement and influence on policy. The explosion in the volume of communication coming into MOC's offices, combined with the perception that this communication is not valuable, serve to undermine the possibility of responsive representation.

2. Institutionalism

This paper draws from theories of institutions and organizations. Government processes and behaviors are inextricably linked to the long-standing and highly political institutions in which they run. Institutional frameworks can help explain those behaviors of bureaucratic organizations (Fountain, 2004). Communication practices are socially constructed within organizations such that technology adoptions are transformed by political and cultural arrangements of the institution (Sparrow, 2006)(Fountain, 2004). Thus, interrogating those arrangements should be a priority in any attempt to understand how and why correspondence processes and technologies are adopted.

By framing Congress as an institution with individual MOCs as organizations – sometimes labeled as the Congressman enterprises (Salisbury & Shepsle, 1981) - we see the effects of the institution on MOC's technology adoption and use. MOCs adopt technology that conforms to the norms of the congressional institution by mimicking incumbents (Esterling et al., 2005)(Chi & Yang, 2010) and following instructions from more powerful actors such as party leaders and chambers (Owen et al., 1996). Available ICTs are contracted and managed by the offices of the congressional chamber that limit their technology choices such as Chief Administrative Office (CAO) of the House (Ward & Graves, 2018). Studies that explore internal processes for Member-constituent communication also find that the methods for managing correspondence technology trend across offices (Open Gov Foundation, 2018). Given that staff turnover is frequent, staffers most likely transfer technologies and practices learned in one office to another, offering spillover

effects on legislative activity and expertise (Montgomery & Nyhan, 2017). The result is a substantial institutional influence over the procurement of ICTs and their use for constituent correspondence.

Within this frame, we pull specifically from neo-institutionalism theories of isomorphism. These theories suggest that, even as organizations attempt to innovate away from each other, they can become homogenous in their goals and practices as a result of persuasive institutional influences (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Meyer and Rowan suggest that there are consequences to this isomorphism. Organizations are driven to incorporate practices that are rationalized independent from the organization. These practices can conflict with actual goals of the organizations because they work towards creating institutional legitimacy more than actual efficiency (Meyer & Rowan, 1991). In other words, organizations will adopt practices and technologies that are taken-for-granted by the institution and external parties. These practices may not improve the outcome of the organization, but they have a ceremonial purpose of proving legitimacy as an organization within the broader institution.

We believe such ceremonial adoption is taking place in Congress. ICTs are externally promoted sources of communication for MOCs that are encouraged by the chambers, party groups, citizens, advocacy campaigns, and other higher congressional powers. By adopting such technologies, MOCs are legitimated by their colleagues and citizens as more open to communication. However, while ICTs are expected to encourage responsive engagement, MOCs may not use these tools to achieve these aims. Yet, MOCs' offices may feel obligated to integrate such systems. The tension

we find between imagined and actual outcomes of ICTs use can be partially explained by these institutionally framed adoptions of ICTs.

3. Methods

In order to explore the complex relationship between institutional influences and actual communication practices in MOC offices, we gather staff perspectives on the value of ICTs for constituent correspondence through both formal and informal modes of data collection. We do this by deploying an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2017) where a quantitative survey of staff is followed and interpreted by ethnographic observations and staff interviews– with the assumption that survey responses reflect the ceremonial messaging around use of ICTs and more informal interviews and observations provide insight into actual opinion and everyday practices. We began with a survey of approximately 200 staff and their perceptions about ICTs. The original purpose of this survey was to measure the institutional capacity and public accessibility of the U.S. Congress. Staff were asked questions related to constituent correspondence processes, attitudes towards technology for correspondence, the capacity of the office to perform their congressional duties, and satisfaction with characteristics of their chamber. Our analysis focuses on two questions within this survey which capture the goals of correspondence and their use of correspondence technology. This survey qualified our assumptions that staff were institutionally engaging ideas of responsiveness and the potential of ICTs to promote responsive behaviors. The survey was then used to formulate staff interviews during ethnographic field work. The lead researcher worked on Capitol Hill for a congressionally focused non-profit for six months during two, three-month intervals in the summers of 2017 and 2018. During that time, the lead researcher conducted and collected data from 48 interviews that

we use to contextualize and interpret the survey results. The results of both the survey and interviews are examined in detail in this section.

3.1 Congress Survey

The survey design and the survey collection were performed by the congressional non-profit, a bi-partisan educational resource for MOC and their staff. We gained full access to the resulting data after its collection. The non-profit recruited 1,900 senior congressional staffers. Senior staff describe the Chief of Staff (COS), Legislative Director (LD), Communication Director/Press Secretary (CDs/PDs), and District/State Director (DDs/SDs). Staffers were contacted through a convenience sample of email addresses obtained by a pay-to-use Congressional directory. The 1900 staffers contacted make up approximately 2,164 of the total senior staffers in Congress at that time - assuming there are four in each of the 535 offices - which is approximately 87.8% of the population. We were not provided the original recruitment list for this survey and cannot conclude that self-selection was random, potentially causing self-selection bias.

Each staffer received an email requesting participation. A total of 206 staffers responded. The demographic information for those respondents is presented in Table 1. Some participants were not senior staff. We suspect that the recruited staffer passed on the survey to their co-workers. This has been shown in other studies where higher-level staffers will ask lower-level staffers to take surveys on their behalf (Abernathy, 2015). To control for this, staff members were asked to state their role in the office with an additional open-ended option of 'Other.'

Table 1. Staff Demographics

	Count	Relative Proportion
Years in Congress		
1	8	3.9

1-3	45	21.8
4-10	72	35
> 10	81	39.3
Missing	0	0.0
Role		
Chief	55	26.7
Deputy Chief	11	5.3
Legislative Director	46	22.3
Legislative Assistant	5	2.4
Communications Director	27	13.1
State or District Director	45	21.8
Other	17	8.3
Missing	0	0.0
Location		
DC	193	65.4
District/State	13	30.6
Missing	0	0.0
Party		
Republican	98	47.6
Democrats	106	51.5
Missing	2	1.0
Chamber		
House	167	81.1
Senate	38	18.4
Missing	1	.5
Total	206	100

In the first question we analyze, staff were asked to answer the question "What are your office's top two goals for processing and responding to constituent correspondence?". The survey distributors provided ten options to participants, including an open-ended 'other' response. Staff were expected to choose two. We use this question as an indicator of priority for correspondence. By understanding their top priorities, we could identify whether those priorities are reflected in the use of correspondence technology.

167 staffers answered this question, with 80% of those staffers selecting "To be responsive to constituents" as one of their top two choices. For comparison, the second highest choice was "To reply within a specified timeframe (e.g., two weeks)", with 30% selection. We do not compute a

significance test on this question. We believe the proportion itself is a compelling indicator of responsiveness as a high priority to correspondence across Congress. Given that constituent correspondence is the primary form of communication between citizens and their MOC, it is logical that staff want their correspondence to provide a pathway for responsive behaviors. And from this question, we see that responsiveness is perceived as a high priority for a number of staffers.

Table 2. Staff Response to "What are your office's top two goals for processing and responding to constituent correspondence?"

	Count	Relative Proportion
To build relationships with constituents	29	9%
To be responsive to constituents	133	40%
To reply within a specified timeframe (e.g. two weeks)	49	15%
To build our constituent database and outreach lists	22	7%
To assess and understand the views of groups that organize advocacy	1	0%
To assess and understand our constituents views	34	10%
To inform and guide my boss's priorities	12	4%
To educate constituents on legislation policy issues	13	4%
To explain the Member Senator's position on legislation policy issues	41	12%
Other	2	1%

The second question we use from this survey asked staff to rank the helpfulness of different technology used in the office. "If your office could make better use of the following tools, how helpful do you think each would be to your office's ability to perform its duties?" This paper discusses two of the tools listed; the constituent database and social media. Questions pertaining to social media and constituent databases are appropriate measures because they are exclusively used for constituent correspondence. The constituent database systems are used in MOC's offices to capture, log, store, and analyze contact for constituents. Social media pertains to any internet-

based system which allows offices to communicate publicly with their constituency. In the survey, the participants were given examples of "(Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vine, etc.)" to define social media.

Staff were given a scale of helpfulness ranging from 'Very helpful' to 'Very unhelpful', with an option of 'Don't Know/No Opinion'. Each question produced similar trends of perceived helpfulness. 57% of staffers found social media to be helpful overall, and 70% found the constituent database to be helpful overall to their duties in office. These results are consistent with our understanding of office structure. Social media and constituent databases are crucial to offices because they provide access to constituent comments and manage incoming contact to offices. These findings are also reflected in previous surveys that find overall high satisfaction with ICTs in Congress (Fitch & Goldschmidt, 2015). A distribution of demographic information for these questions is provided in the Appendix.

We use this data to detect institutional trends in response patterns using characteristics of the staffer and their office. This helps us identify if staff perceptions of correspondence technology are salient across the institution of Congress. We perform a regression analysis of these two questions against the demographic variables of Chamber, Party, Staff Role, Office Location, and Years in Office. The covariates were chosen due to their availability and strong indicators of influence that can differentiate staff and offices. Chamber can greatly affect the availability of resource. Senate offices have a higher budget than House offices and often have more staffers, especially interns, to help manage constituent communication. Senate offices may have a greater number of staff using ICTs such as social media in order to reach out to larger populations. Thus,

we may see Senate offices find social media more helpful to their duties than House offices. Previous studies have also shown party, especially in relation to their minority status, can greatly affect adoption rates of social media like Twitter (Laseen & Brown, 2011). Republicans tend to be the earliest adopters of social media as well (Laseen & Brown, 2011), which may affect their attitudes towards ICTs. Staff roles can also have an effect on their attitudes towards these systems. Those that work directly with these systems, may have differing opinions about the technology used to perform their specific duties in office. Communications Director typically control social media and the Legislative Assistant and Correspondents control the constituent database. Thus, their attitudes towards these ICTs may be different than staffers that do not directly use them. Similar to staff roles, the office location may create similar effect outcomes. The roles of staffers in the district or state office are different than those in the D.C. office, and they are physically closer to the constituents. A closer proximity to constituents could alter attitudes towards social media and constituent databases as helpful tools to communicate with constituents. Together, these variables could indicate if there are differences amongst staff or if an institutional salience of perceptions is present.

We use cumulative link models for statistical analysis to examine the ordinal data. Cumulative link models (CLM) (Argesti, 2002), also known as ordinal regression models, allows the ordered nature of the data to be treated rightfully as opposed to a Pearson Chi-squared test based on contingency table. The regression framework enables in-depth analysis of the association between response and covariates. In this paper, all statistical analysis based on CLM. It is performed using package ordinal in R (R Core Team, 2018).

About 24% and 22% of the responses are missing in the questions of helpfulness of social media and constituent database respectively. We hypothesize a missing at random (MAR) mechanism for the missing data that can be explained by observed covariates (i.e. the demographics) (Rubin, 1976). In practice, the MAR mechanism for missing data is almost impossible to verify statistically and requires substantive reasonableness (Little & Rubin, 2002). For example, more senior staff may be too busy to answer every question. By including staff role in our regression model, we are guaranteed to obtain valid statistical inference. Thus, we regress the response variable on all demographic variables together to study their effects and to account for missingness.

The demographic information of staff was collected as categorical variables but are converted to dummy variables in the regression analysis. This is by far the most prevalent way to incorporate categorical variables into regression framework. Note that a categorical variable with J-levels can be represented by a group of (J-1) indicator variables (i.e. dummy variables), with exactly one level being the baseline, and the other dummy variables corresponding to levels other than the baseline. The inclusion leads to a dramatic increase on the number of coefficients to be estimated and reduces the degree of freedom of the model. This is often not an issue when the sample size is large, but this is obviously not the case for this particular survey with 2016 participants.

Staff younger than 25 and 25-30 were divided into two distinct levels. We combine them as one single level in the analysis under the assumption that these two levels arguably represent staff of similar ideologies. The actual response variable is also a slight variation of the original survey

scale. "Somewhat Unhelpful" and "Very Unhelpful" were combined to a single level "Not Helpful" to make the response variable less imbalanced and avoid potential numerical instability. The "Don't know / No Opinion" options (four cases in helpfulness of social media, one case in helpfulness of the constituent database) is treated as missing. Overall, the response variable in the analysis is an ordinal variable with four ordered levels, "Very Helpful", "Somewhat Helpful", "Neutral" and "Not Helpful" (coded as 4, 3, 2, 1 respectively).

We hypothesize that the attitudes towards constituent databases and social media are not influenced by any of these demographic covariates, indicating a possible institutional salience over the helpfulness of correspondence technology. Those hypotheses are evaluated based on the significance tests of the regression coefficients in ordinal regression. We estimate separate ordinal regression models for helpfulness of social media and helpfulness of the constituent database against demographic variables[1].

Table 3. Staff Demographics Compared to Response of Technology Helpfulness

	Model 1: Helpfulness of Social Media	Model 2: Helpfulness of Database
Years in Congress		
1		
1-3	1.700(1.055)	0.425(1.343)
4-10	2.017(1.052)	1.032(1.357)
10	2.041(1.074)	1.285(1.393)
Role		
Chief		
Deputy Chief	-0.906(0.684)	0.170(0.740)
Legislative Director	-0.169(0.471)	0.101(0.503)
Legislative Assistant	-2.145(1.577)	-0.480(1.030)
Communications Director	0.448(0.557)	1.504*(0.716)

[1] The condition number of the Hessian (cond.H), a measure of empirical identifiability of the ordinal regression model, equals to 500 and 760 for these two models respectively, which are well below 10^4, indicating that these models are fairly well-defined [Christensen, 2015].

State or District Director	0.306(0.632)	1.827*(0.765)
Other	0.459(0.717)	2.307*(0.970)
Location		
DC		
District/State	0.285(0.557)	-0.342(0.627)
Party		
Republican		
Democrats	-0.302(0.313)	0.385(0.366)
Chamber		
House		
Senate	-0.550(0.412)	-0.428(0.485)
Number of Complete Observations	153	157
Log-Likelihood	-178.054	-128.019
Note:		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

As seen in Table 3, we found insignificant effects for most of the covariates on the odds of predicting responses to each of the two questions. We did not see any statistical significant covariates in the model for helpfulness of social media (Model 1). For some roles in Congress, there appears to be a statistically significant covariate for helpfulness of the constituent database for the communication director, district directors, and those labeled as other (Model 2). The effects of Location, Party, and Chamber are not statistically significant for either Helpfulness of Social Media or Helpfulness of Database. Thus, we do not reject the null hypothesis for most of the covariates and do not assume these particular covariates affect staffers attitudes towards social media and constituent database.

We also ran an OLS regression on the same dataset where we treat the ordinal response as continuous variable. The statistical significance and direction of effects are very similar to that of our CLM, though we prefer robust properties of the CLM given its ability to retain the ordinal nature of the original dataset.

From this survey, we identified two primary pieces of information. First, the majority of

participating staff perceive responsiveness as a high priority to their correspondence process. Second, staff across the institution generally find social media and constituent databases as helpful ICTs for their correspondence process. There is some institutional variance in the perceptions of helpfulness of ICTs across roles in Congress, but most do not indicate a strong difference, following an institutional trend. These results offer promising evidence of an institution-wide desire by staff to use ICTs for correspondence to enhance responsiveness to constituents. We use the results of this survey as a general indicator to guide our interviews with staff. Those interviews will provide detailed information on the actions and perceptions of individual staffers.

3.2. Limitations

Caution should be taken when interpreting the survey coefficients. The most common parameterization of CLM models is the cumulative logit as the intercept minus the linear combination of covariate effects. Hence, the larger the value of the linear combination of covariate effects, the higher the probability of the response falling in a category at the upper end of the response scale. Second, the coefficients associated with the dummy variables represent the relative difference from the baseline, and need to be interpreted with a comparative argument. Lastly, there are multiple covariates in the model. When interpreting the marginal effect of any specific covariate, we are controlling all other covariates constants. For example, the statistically significant positive coefficients for Communications Director and State of District Director in Model 2 implies that these types of staffers tend to think the database is more helpful compared to the Chief of Staffs who are similar with respect to other demographic variables.

4. Interviews

If staff believe technology could help promote "responsive" behaviors, do they implement those beliefs into their correspondence practice? And if so, does that implementation embody normative conceptions of responsive behavior? We turned to staff interviews to explore these questions. We used 48 semi-structured interviews with staff and interns. The goal of these interviews was to obtain two types of information: details about the exact process for managing constituent communication and their perception of the value of the correspondence process, especially the constituent database and social media. We include interns because they are at the front lines of constituent correspondence. Interns are the first and sometimes only people to listen, read, and record constituent contact, thus providing quality insight into day-to-day interactions with constituents.

Our interview data is split into three forms of collection. The first form is 40 semi-structured interviews conducted by the lead researcher. The second form is seven close-ended interviews performed by the same non-profit that conducted the survey. The lead researcher sat in the room when those interviews were held, and later they transcribed all the recordings. The last interview is a public recording given by three current and previous staffers at an interactive media festival. This interview focused on constituent communication and the best methods for constituents to communicate with their MOC. In total, the data set includes nine interns, twenty-seven legislative correspondents/staff aides (LCs/SAs), four Legislative Assistants (LAs), five Chiefs of Staff and Deputy Chiefs of Staff, and two Communications Directors (CDs). The data set provides an emphasize on correspondence staff while accounting for other staff perspectives within MOC offices.

We performed data analysis using qualitative coding (Saldaña, 2015). This coding was conducted iteratively between interviewing windows. After all the survey responses were collected, we went back and re-evaluated the initial code schema to disentangle the various discussions that evolved over the course of all the interviews. In the first full round of data analysis, we openly coded salient discussions about staffs opinions about technology and correspondence practices to link their actions back to the results of the survey. In the second round of data analysis, we began to draw out themes related to the connections between the constituent database technology and described correspondence practices. Subsequent rounds of analysis help frame these connections into the theme of ceremonial adoption, where we identified the tension between how correspondence is discussed by staff and how correspondence plays out in practice.

During the interviews, staff provided descriptions of how constituent comments sent via digital channels is used within MOCs' office. We use these descriptions to identity whether constituent opinion is a factor in policy creation – in other words, if policy is responsive to constituent opinion. Throughout interviews, it became clear that constituent opinion is used for goals unrelated to policy behaviors. Instead, correspondence is used primarily for two purposes: to track constituent sentiment and to respond to constituent contact. This work is performed within the constituent databases and rarely crosses the attention of MOCs.

4.1 Tracking Constituent Opinion

Staff use constituent databases to capture and record incoming constituent contact with the office. This includes contact through both digital and non-digital communication such as email, fax,

phone, and postal letters. The database is a central repository of all constituent information including their name, address, dates of contact, and topics addressed. Unless constituent contact is logged into this database, it is minimally addressed by the staff. Once entered into the database, staff describe a process known as batching where each contact is tagged by general themes or topics. Batching tags vary across offices. Some offices tag constituent contact by bill number or by overall topic such as ‘gun control’ or ‘healthcare.’ Staffers also describe extraneous batches for contact such as ‘rants’ or ‘complaints about the president.’ This batching process is used to quantify constituent contact to track the overall salience of topics. By using the word *track*, we emphasize staff’s desire to passively collect general indicators of sentiment. For example, staff frequently described constituent sentiment in health-related phrases such as ‘temperature’ or ‘pulse,’ indicating that correspondence reflects a metabolic process to track.

“Every now and again we overlook a bill that a constituent points out but generally it’s for taking temperature." - P43

“[We] Use it just to get feedback…It's not necessarily used to make a policy decision, just to check the pulse of the constituency...You can answer a phone for a day and pretty much know what constituents think." - P38

“…seeing what's on people's mind is more valuable than the content (of correspondence)." - P26

In this case, constituent opinion is tracked using brief descriptors of contact, signaling apathy towards the reasons and claims of constituents. Another example of this happens during heavy periods of constituent contact where simple reporting terms such as 'Pro/Con Bill X' are acceptable documentations of contact.

"...anytime you got a call, one of the interns was the first one to answer it. You'd just pick up and say 'Thank you for calling the Representative's office, how can I help you?'. Most of the time, it was just constituents calling and you would listen to their concern, you would take notes so that you could do the summary just take a couple notes….Just be like ok, here's that they are all basically saying the same thing. They are all pro this. And then sometimes we would get one that wasn't about anything that we had heard before. Like I would get one and read it and be like, I don't know what this is about. I have to actually look it up at the time. And then I'd have to put a more detailed description into it. Ok pro this thing, relating to whatever it is." - P10

The practice of tracking through summarized information is not new. Staffers have historically documented summaries of volume, position, and tone of contact for particular issues (Owen et al., 1999). The tracking alone does not indicate a lack of responsive behavior. MOCs could still use general sentiment knowledge to develop their policy agendas. However, the systematic details of the correspondence process do not provide such evidence. Once contact information is logged into the system, staff describe the process of developing mail reports, also known as executive summaries, to summarize the types of constituent opinions coming in. These mail reports are internal reporting mechanisms used to inform other staffers in the office about the incoming contact. Previous research by Abernathy offers substantial empirical descriptions of these mail

reports, which show that they include primarily instructive metrics to manage correspondence and not information about constituents' opinions (2015).

Sometimes more detailed information is captured if the constituent offers a good story. But staffers will only capture the narrative that a constituent offers when they deem such stories relevant to their pre-existing agendas and media campaigns. Constituent contact can strengthen pre-existing stances of MOC, but there is little evidence it will persuade their judgements.

"The LA wants narratives. They like to sit down and hear from people who have stories so the congresswoman can tweet about it." - P2

"I mentioned for the ACA, we were looking for very, very compelling stories for that. People would call, I think [The Member] tweeted something out. Like we had our communications director tweet something out saying like "call our office with something compelling to say", and it's didn't change her policy stance or anything in the ACA. But it helped strengthen it." - P8

As seen in other research, we find little evidence that constituent databases enable responsive behaviors to constituent contact. The same is true for social media where contact from constituents through these platforms are rarely documented in the database. Staffers say they cannot integrate social media comments into their database, unless they did so by hand. In addition, staff see social media users in very different lights. Different platforms promote different levels of engagement,

and it is very difficult for staff to differentiate constituents from non-constituents. Although staff promote social media as a way to communicate with their district,

the actual process for managing correspondence does not include social media.

"To be very clear Facebook is seen as our constituents. And that is where we are messaging thanks to our constituents. Twitter is seen as activists and press and DC. But Facebook is where we are really putting our best face forward with really thoughtfully crafted messages because we see that as our constituents...[Social Media] could be more effective if you have a well-crafted message. I guess the reason I'm so negative right now is if you look at our Twitter feed it is full of bots. And I can identify them all. They have 37,000 tweets, they started in June of 2016 and 2017. They're not hard to identify. [Twitter] is where a lot of engagement is coming from and it's really too bad and so we ended up zoning some of it else out." - P21

Staff were further probed to explain why constituent communication does not influence policy decision-making. Staff defend their behavior, arguing that most contact isn't valuable. Staff report that incoming contact via digital channels primarily comprises: redundant messages sent by advocacy campaigns; angry constituents calling to express their emotions rather than their policy concerns; and messages sent hours or days past the time of a vote.

"It's not a bad thing when you get [uninformed] calls like that. Most people just call because they just don't know or understand...They call to express their opinion about a bill, but also request more information as well." - P2

“[there’s] not many sophisticated letters that are coming from constituents. They aren’t influential." - P4

"And this is another thing, a lot of the callers are not well informed. And who knows that their source of information is and weather its a valid point that they are making....a decent portion of the constituents calling are a[illegible]ell informed but ...they are a small sample and their voice may not have an impact there. But when it comes voting time, the misinformed constituents have equal voting power. So the Congressmen has to take that into account because at the end of the day, that is what matters. Not that there was a small sample of well informed individuals that had valid opinions on issues. What good is that if the bulk of the population is misinformed ... [And] the campaigns. It was cruel because sometimes they would wage them like a day late. Or they voted at 10am and they were still calling in the evening.” -P9

Redundancy in both the content and the contactors is brought up frequently by staff. Staff repeatedly hear from only a handful of citizens, and MOCs won’t change their opinion for only a small number of constituents. The content within advocacy campaigns is also redundant, using the same messages over and over as part of a large campaign of messages.

“So we would get like 30 emails from the same organization with the same message, just with this person that's sending it. But we would get mail from the constituents too, pretty frequently from the same people...I remember one [citizen] in particular, I forgot her name but she was pretty

much either writing or we would get like a letter or a small postcard or something from her probably every other day. And a phone call every other day." - P7

Media events also trigger an increase in contact from constituents, but this contact is claimed to be a quick emotional response, rather than what is perceived as a thorough and thoughtful insight into the event's discussion.

"...they saw him on TV and he said something they didn't like and now they are calling to shout at me. And that was a thing also, my Congressmen was on TV a lot. He did a lot of interviews on a lot of different channels. He's a democrat but he'd go on Fox news relatively often." - P10

"if [Trump] would say something that was not exactly policy but a policy type of opinion, like they would call it in and say 'you need to oppose him doing this' and you know he even really wasn't doing anything, just talking." - P9

Despite an increasing volume of contact, staff offer little optimism that information collected from constituents through these channels has enough value to affect policy decisions. Although new ICTs such as constituent databases provide the ability for staff to efficiently record and process more information, the overload is not seen as reflecting the opinion of more citizens – and thus broadening the citizen base. Rather, redundancy within the volume is experienced as an information fatigue (Bimber, 2003). That fatigue exhausts staffers' time and resources, flooding staff with undervalued contact that dilutes any information that could be of value.

Again, this perceived lack of value in constituent contact is not new. An overwhelming volume of inconsequential information was also highlighted in staff interviews by Owen et al. in 1999. However, the scholars of that piece had optimism that this would change with an increased understanding of technological systems and the development of new correspondence management systems like constituent databases (Owen et al., 1999). Despite large improvements to ICTs and increased use of digital correspondence, the concerns are clearly the same.

These ICTs are rationalized institutional elements in MOCs' responsive strategies. They are adopted and used by nearly all MOCs, and publicly emphasized as systems for policy responsiveness. However, in reality they are barely considered sources of policy information. Yet, MOCs still feel the need to emphasize this claim. As a result, the institutional myth (Meyer & Rowan, 1991) of these technologies promoting responsiveness becomes a rationalized necessity for all MOCs to use as part of their office structures. Of course, MOCs use both constituent databases and social media for more than listening to constituents. They also use these technologies to develop outgoing communication and media. Nonetheless, they continue to publicly encourage citizens to contact the office through digital channels as a means of persuading their policy-decision making. When it comes to the promotional value of these ICTs as platforms to encourage responsive communication, the promises embedded within their public narratives do not match reality.

4.2 Responsive vs. Responding

Returning to our survey, staff say one of their top goals is to be "responsive" to constituent opinion and that ICTs for correspondence can promote responsive behaviors. If our interviews provide

little evidence for responsive behaviors in the use of constituent databases and social media, where do these opinions come from and where might they play out in practice? We identify where these opinions come from by explaining the role of outgoing correspondence, where staff find tremendous value in the action of responding to constituent contact. Here we emphasize the difference between being "responsive" and "responding" to constituents, while explaining how staff use these terms respectively to describe their behaviors.

Staff describe outgoing correspondence when providing examples of how the correspondence process promotes responsiveness to constituents. This correspondence is primarily proforma emails and postal letters thanking constituents for their input. Often these letters and the language used within them transfer across offices of the same party, with correspondence staff sharing copies of previous and current letters through a repository of historical letters. One staffer said they tried to remain neutral on all letters to ensure they wouldn't anger constituents. This supports research of the U.S. Senate that finds that explanations in the letters are tailored to their audience (Grose et al., 2014), furthering their ability constructively respond to citizens attitudes in order to gain their support.

Staff believed responding to constituents through these letters signified a form of responsive behavior. These responses are taken seriously by many offices who emphasize their importance by prioritizing an efficient turnaround time to reply to constituents. This is seen both in the survey and interviews. In the survey, 30% of staff, said one of their top two goals for is to reply within a specified timeframe (See Table 2). Although the number is small, it was the second highest option chosen in the question and was later emphasized during staff interviews.

"We're a two-week turnover. We take it very seriously. At the end of every month we do what's called zero mail day where no mail is allowed to still be in the system. That is rare but we take it very seriously...Our two-week turnaround time, does require us to write shorter letters right but I have that we do this balancing act of like we want to get back to you in a timely way and we want to be substantive and they just constantly kind of even out right." - P21

"...you want [responses] at a consistent pace. You do not want to keep (the constituents) hanging." - P1

These responses to citizens are often stock 'thank you' notes that indicate to citizens that their MOC received their input and appreciate their contact. Although staff see these response letters as a requirement, some recognize them as promoting lesser forms engagement.

"So it's more like just data collection. And it's not really personalized, like our responses. They're like automatic responses." - P9

"We respond to mail but we don't communicate with constituents." - P38

"[I] want more a mixture of townhall meetings, town councils, celebrations, and our side should be building a stronger social media response team to respond to it. There is no clear answers or solution. Sometimes you reach out to them and they don't feel it's the right response." - P33

"I like the idea of [campaign mail]. It lowers the barrier to political participation in anyway is good. [But] there's a difference in getting voices heard and knowing they are responded to. I wish there was a better way to communicate how that works." - P43

"Well we still had to pretend that we cared. As terrible as that sounds, you can't just hang up or say sorry. But you still listen and then you ask them at the end usually ok, can I get your address so we can send some response. Because we always sent, when people called in or mailed in or sent an email or fax, we always responded. You know a thank you letter addressing their concerns, usually an email. That's how they preferred to do it."- P10

Staffer 33 was particularly interested in making sure that their office provides the 'right response', indicating that the communication to constituents is focused on responding to constituents in a way that satisfies them. Staffer 43 wished there was more explanation of the difference between being heard and being responded to or what they said was "actually being heard". The staffer believed that citizens have a high expectation of a response, but didn't fully understand that such responding is not the same as "being heard" in terms of being responsive to constituents.

The perception that constituents desire a formal written response was echoed by other staff who felt there was an obligation to respond to keep the constituents satisfied. Whether or not a formal written response is actually desired or expected by constituents is neither questioned nor confirmed by staffers. This assumption functions as a highly rationalized myth that binds the office to the process of responding. This view is common across offices, which use these proforma responses as insurance against claims of responsive negligence to their constituency. By

answering phone calls and sending reply letters, the MOC can assert that they are taking constituent voices into account – whether or not these voices are heard in any substantive manner. This fits Fenno's account of trust and voting leeway (2003), in which Member's may believe these letters provide a form of trust and explanation (Grose et al., 2014) to the constituency that increases their ability to make policy decisions how they choose.

Responding to constituents also came up during conversations about the responsibilities of correspondence staff vs. policy staff within MOCs' offices. When describing the communications process, correspondence staff initially say policy staff partake in the correspondence process and listen to constituents. However, when probed to describe further, correspondence staff say policy staff are used to help develop their outgoing correspondence, especially when the correspondence staffer is unsure about the policy stance of their MOC. Policy staff are not always shown correspondence by citizens and often not made directly aware of the constituents' opinions.

By prioritizing outgoing correspondence as a method of responding to constituents, the offices use proforma responses as the primary method for demonstrating "responsive" practices – and describe their actions through a language of responsiveness. This fits normative conceptions of symbolic adoption, where the evolution of the organization's language morphs to the institutional goals. The vocabulary used by staff frames how task will be carried out. In this case, the word responsiveness is tied to the word respond. The language becomes flexible and allows staff to bridge the public narrative around the potential of ICTs to enable responsive representation and the reality of the process. The same words are used to promote different values in constituent engagement.

5. Conclusion

We find that the adoption of ICTs in Congress follows institutional practices of symbolic adoption. Despite clear evidence from scholars that ICT enabled communication has not lead to responsive policymaking, these systems are regularly used in a normative manner that is recognized by the institution as expected and legitimate. Congress adopts new communications technology to promote the appearance of responsive engagement with their constituents. The technologies enable MOCs' offices to display responsive-looking practices without becoming more responsive to constituent opinion and sentiment. By using the term "responsive", staff are able to create a narrative that appears to align with public sentiment about the role of ICTs in promoting more responsive representation while eliding that possibility.

These symbolic adoptions occur within a variety of organizations but become particularly troubling in the face of democracy. The symbolic adoption becomes a problem when the expectations of citizens do not match the realities of their government. Put succinctly by Coleman, "A political system that encourages public input into the policymaking process but ignores such input when it comes to producing outputs lacks democratic legitimacy" (2017). Indeed, such adoptions must be cautiously evaluated. If Congress continues to adopt technologies that portray responsive behavior, but in reality, do not promote meaningful engagement with constituents, then citizens will be pushed further away from the policy-making process. It is perhaps the most important finding that current uses of ICTs make this gap worse by promising new channels for engagement, without creating meaningful opportunities for constituent opinion to be considered in the policy decision-making process.

6. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Bonnie Nardi, Stephen Goggin, Craig Anderson, and Hillary Abraham for their invaluable feedback on the production of this work.

7. Funding Sources:

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship under Grant No. (#DGE-1839285); UCI Center for Organizational Research; and the Democracy Fund.

8. References

Abernathy, C. E. (2015). Legislative Correspondence Management Practices: Congressional Offices and the Treatment of Constituent Opinion (Doctoral dissertation, Vanderbilt University). https://www.vanderbilt.edu/csdi/AbernathyDissertation_Formatted.pdf. Accessed 12 July 2018.

Agresti, A. (2002). Categorical data analysis. 2002. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 267-313.

Bimber, B. (2003). Information and American democracy: Technology in the evolution of political power. Cambridge University Press.

Burke, E. (1774). Speech to the Electors of Bristol. In Works, New York: Harpers. 446–8.

Coleman, S. (2017). Can the Internet Strengthen Democracy? John Wiley & Sons.

Chi, F., & Yang, N. (2010). Twitter in congress: Outreach vs transparency. MPRA Paper # 23597, Munich.

Christensen, R.H.B. (2015). A Tutorial on fitting Cumulative Link Models with the ordinal Package. Retrieved from: http://www.et.bs.ehu.es/cran/web/packages/ordinal/vignettes/clm_tutorial.pdf

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. Sage publications.

Druckman, J. N., Kifer, M. J., & Parkin, M. (2010). Timeless strategy meets new medium: Going negative on congressional campaign websites, 2002–2006. Political Communication, 27(1), 88-103.

DiMaggio, P., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Collective rationality and institutional isomorphism in organizational fields. American sociological review, 48(2), 147-160.

Esterling, K., Lazer, D. M., & Neblo, M. A. (2005). Home (page) style: Determinants of the quality of the House members' web sites. International Journal of Electronic Government Research (IJEGR), 1(2), 50-63.

Fenno, R. F. (2003). Home Style: House Members in Their Districts (Longman Classics Series). London, England: Longman Publishing Group.

Fitch, B., Goldschmidt, K., Fulton, E., & Griffin, N. (2005). Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is coping with the surge in citizen advocacy. Congressional Management Foundation.

Fountain, J. E. (2004). Building the virtual state: Information technology and institutional change. Brookings Institution Press.

Glassman, M. E., Straus, J. R., & Shogan, C. J. (2013, March). Social networking and constituent communications: members' use of Twitter and Facebook during a two-month period in the 112th Congress. In Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress.

Golbeck, J., Grimes, J. M., & Rogers, A. (2010). Twitter use by the US Congress. Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 61(8), 1612-1621.

Grose, C. R., Malhotra, N., & Parks Van Houweling, R. (2015). Explaining explanations: How legislators explain their policy positions and how citizens react. American Journal of Political Science, 59(3), 724-743.

Hysom, T. (2008). Communicating with Congress: recommendations for improving the democratic dialogue. Congressional Management Foundation.

Karpf, D. (2010). Online political mobilization from the advocacy group's perspective: Looking beyond clicktivism. Policy & Internet, 2(4), 7-41.

Lassen, D. S., & Brown, A. R. (2011). Twitter: The electoral connection? Social science computer review, 29(4), 419-436.

Lawless, J. L. (2012). Becoming a candidate: Political ambition and the decision to run for office. Cambridge University Press.

Lipinski, D., & Neddenriep, G. (2004). Using "new" media to get "old" media coverage: How members of Congress utilize their web sites to court journalists. Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 9(1), 7-21.

Little, R. J., & Rubin, D. B. (2002). Missing data in experiments. Statistical analysis with missing data, 24-40.

Mergel, I. (2012). The social media innovation challenge in the public sector. Information Polity, 17(3, 4), 281-292.

Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. 1991. Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. In W. W. Powell & P. J. DiMaggio (Eds.), The new institutionalism in organizational analysis: 41-62. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Montgomery, J. M., & Nyhan, B. (2017). The Effects of Congressional Staff Networks in the US House of Representatives. The Journal of Politics, 79(3), 745-761.

The Open Gov Foundation. From Voicemail to Votes: human-centered investigation by The OpenGov Foundation into the systems, tools, constraints, and people who drive constituent engagement in Congress. (2018). Retrieved from: https://v2v.opengovfoundation.org/

Owen, D., Davis, R., & Strickler, V. J. (1999). Congress and the Internet. Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 4(2), 10-29.

Pitkin, H. F. (1967). The Concept of Representation. Univ of California Press.

Rubin, D. B. (1976). Inference and Missing Data. Biometrika, 63(3), 581-592.

R Core Team. (2018). R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing. R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria. https://www.R-project.org/.

Saldaña, J. (2015). The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers. Sage.

Salisbury, R. H., & Shepsle, K. A. (1981). US Congressman as Enterprise. Legislative Studies Quarterly, 559-576.

Shogan, C. J. (2010). Blackberries, tweets, and YouTube: Technology and the future of communicating with Congress. PS: Political Science & Politics, 43(2), 231-233.

Straus, J. R., Glassman, M. E., Shogan, C. J., & Smelcer, S. N. (2013). Communicating in 140 characters or less: Congressional adoption of Twitter in the 111th Congress. PS: Political Science & Politics, 46(1), 60-66.

Ward, K., Graves, Z. (2018). Doing Business With Congress: A Primer on Information Technology Acquisitions in the Legislative Branch. Lincoln Network.