

Background: Using a collection of survey data, interviews, and observations, I am investigating the current state of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) within the U.S. Congress to understand how technology mediates communication between citizens and policymakers, ultimately affecting their relationships. Relationships between citizens and Congress are influenced by the use of ICT. Although there are numerous studies on the citizen-side of democratic digital communication, there is little investigation into policymaker use of ICT within Congress. A rich investigation into ICT used such as social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), websites, and digital town halls can help scholars understand how policymakers communicate with citizens, and how the digital methods of communication mediate their discourse.

The design and use of ICT can reflect tensions. Email provides a good example. In 1995, the first publicly available email addresses were created for Congress. In 2000, due to the increase of constituent emails as a result of the Clinton impeachment hearings, commercial spam, and non-constituent emails, Congress decided to upgrade their systems to reduce spam and control the type of communication directed into email systems [1]. The result was a more sophisticated zip-code matching system to confirm the constituency of each email received. However, it did not take long for citizens and advocacy groups to learn how to circumvent these new systems to send larger waves of messages to policymakers, even if the citizens and advocacy groups were outside of a constituency. The result is what Hysom calls an ongoing ‘technological arms race’ between citizens, advocacy groups, and policymakers [1]. The arms race has continued to escalate. Citizen contact to congressional offices through email and the Internet rose by 200-1000% over the past decade [2] and anecdotal evidence from congressional offices indicates that those numbers increased two-fold after the most recent presidential election. The majority of emails sent to policymakers are “form-emails”, that is, emails provided by advocacy groups that include carefully crafted automated messages to spur a grassroots email campaign [3]. Form-emails are low-cost because they provide replicable automated content. They require little to no writing effort from participants since the advocacy groups have written the messages.

These automated form-emails are of little value to policymakers. This form of communication does not influence their decisions [4]. However, advocacy groups continue to build technology to increase the number of citizens contacting Congress. These systems burden congressional staff who have limited capacity to handle the influx of communication [5]. Thus, advocacy groups continue to develop digital methods for citizens to communicate with Congress, while Congress continues to develop technology to control the resultant influx.

Email represents one segment of a handful of digital tools in the ICT infrastructure of Congress. A rich investigation into all of the digital tools within policymakers’ offices is critical to understanding how the ICT infrastructure mediates communication, thus influencing relationships between citizens and policymakers.

Research Questions: (1) *What is the current state of citizen-based ICT used by Congress?*

(2) *How is ICT mediating discourse between citizens and policymakers?*

Methods: My research is split into four methods: interviews, observations, a capacity survey, and an inventorial survey.

Interviews and Observations: This summer, I worked for the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF), a non-profit organization in Washington D.C. partnering with Congress to improve citizen-policymaker relationships. I performed data analyses for congressional offices on constituent satisfaction surveys and telephone town halls. This work provided me access to congressional offices to establish rapport and collect preliminary observations on the effects of

ICT within Congress. I conducted six interviews with current and previous congressional staff and interns to gather information on their use of ICT and will continue to interview congressional staff over the next year.

Capacity Survey: CMF recently conducted a survey with 200 senior congressional staff to understand the institutional capacity of Congress to handle their duties in office [5]. This survey included questions about the technological resources available to staffers, and their personal perceptions of ICT use within their offices. CMF has agreed to share this data with me in order to further investigate ICT within Congress. Over the next year, I will be analyzing both quantitative data from survey responses and qualitative data in the survey from open-ended questions about the use of technology for communication within congressional offices.

Inventorial Survey: Each congressional office essentially runs like an independent business [1], and is free to choose how they would like to communicate with their constituency. I will document the trends within this communication to understand variable patterns within the full cycle of information exchange between citizens and policymakers. To do this, I will create an inventory of current ICT used within Congress to communicate with citizens. This includes an inventory of social media platforms, websites, digital town hall platforms, and email software that Congress uses to communicate with citizens. Much of this information is publicly available. Additional software information can be accessed using financial records and technology procurement lists from the Office of the Clerk in the House and the Secretary of the Senate. I will analyze this data to look for patterns and growth of ICT usage within Congress and determine any variance in technology use between offices. The data will be combined with data from the capacity survey to compare perceptions of ICT use to actual ICT use within Congressional offices.

Broader Impacts: Citizens have the constitutional right to express their grievances and preferences to their policymakers. But in order to participate in an effective manner, citizens must be able to comprehend what is happening in government, and respond with their own knowledge and requests. Policymakers must be able to capture that communication and respond in an effective manner. Therefore, the mediation of political information is crucial to the performance of the nation [6]. However, according to CMF, only 6% of senior congressional staff are satisfied with the technological infrastructure in Congress to support their official duties, including citizen-policymaker communication [5]. The technological infrastructure of Congress is not keeping up with the expectations of policymakers and citizens. This study will investigate this dissatisfaction by providing a detailed account of the technological infrastructure in order to provide new knowledge on how technology mediates democratic communication between citizens and policymakers. By working directly with Congress and partnering organizations like CMF, I hope to use this knowledge to improve democratic ICT to provide higher quality relationships between citizens and policymakers, ultimately improving ICTs ability to fulfill the needs of our democracy.

[1] Hysom, Tim. *Communicating with Congress: Recommendations for Improving the Democratic Dialogue*. Congressional Management Foundation, 2008. [2] Fitch, Brad and Kathy Goldschmidt. 2005. "Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill Is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy." Congressional Management Foundation. [3] Rohlinger, Deana A., et al. "Individual claims-making in the Terri Schiavo case." *Social Currents* 2.4 (2015): 361-376. [4] Cluverius, John. "How the Flattened Costs of Grassroots Lobbying Affect Legislator Responsiveness." *Political Research Quarterly* 70.2 (2017): 279-290. [5] Goldschmidt, Kathy. 2017. "State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate." Congressional Management Foundation. [6] Bimber, Bruce. *Information and American democracy: Technology in the evolution of political power*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.