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## Speaking Up in the Internet Age: Use and Value of Constituent E-mail and Congressional Web-sites

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### Introduction

It is often claimed that the Internet has the potential to strengthen the democratic principles upon which our nation is based. One test of that claim is the extent to which offices in the US Congress are using the opportunities provided by the Internet to make their policy positions known to the public and to communicate with their constituents.

As part of its Non-profits' Policy and Technology Project, OMB Watch sent surveys to all Congressional offices asking how they respond to e-mail from constituents. The survey sought to determine whether members take e-mail communication as seriously as other forms of communication and how an e-mail correspondent might most effectively communicate with her or his member. In addition, OMB Watch conducted a review of 70 web-sites operated by House and Senate offices (50 House, 20 Senate). At the time of the review, there were 227 Republicans, 207 Democrats and one Independent in the House of Representatives. In the Senate there were 55 Republicans and 45 Democrats. The review of the web-sites sought to determine how consistently the sites are maintained, how often members use the sites to publicise their policy positions, and how accessible their sites are for constituent interaction.

Despite our attempts to increase the survey response rate through follow-up telephone calls to randomly selected offices, only 37 Congressional offices participated in the survey. Sixty-eight offices stated that they do not respond to surveys at all. As a result, all findings from the survey are not necessarily representative of Congress as a whole. One possible reason for the lack of participation by Congressional offices is survey fatigue. Two other surveys on Congress and use of technology were conducted prior to the OMB Watch survey, one from the *New York Times* and one from Bonner & Associates and American University (both discussed below), that reached offices within a few months of the OMB Watch survey.

Overall, the web-site review and the survey found that Congress has a substantial and growing presence on the Internet but that there has been inadequate response to the possibilities the Internet provides for

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members to reach and to be responsive to the needs of their constituents. More specific findings include:

*Nothing is as effective as personal communications with Congressional offices regarding viewpoints on policy matters.* According to the survey, the form of communication that Congressional offices take most seriously when considering a policy position remains the personal letter sent through the mail, followed by personal visits and telephone calls. Communication via fax and e-mail also ranked highly, but considerably below personal visits. This suggests that, as long as fax and e-mail communication have an 'impersonal' feel, they may have difficulty gaining general acceptance from members of Congress.

*For e-mail or any other form of communication to be taken seriously, it should be both personalised (as opposed to a form letter) and from a constituent.* For all forms of communication, the individual letter or call ranked significantly above the form letter or coordinated call. In addition, many Congressional offices, as well as the House Information Resources office, have indicated that they are creating a means to filter out e-mail that is not from constituents. Most of these filters require using e-mail through the world wide web. This may mean changing the e-mail addresses for all House offices, thereby limiting the ability to e-mail those offices to constituents with web access and those to whom the office chooses to give its address. Many offices that currently use filters (whether automated or by hand) stated that they do not respond to e-mails from non-constituents. This limits the accessibility of members, as citizens outside their districts cannot communicate with them via the Internet, even though they may have valid concerns (such as a question or comment about a member's committee work).

*Members are not using e-mail to communicate with their constituents, even when they receive e-mail from constituents.* According to a February 1998 survey by Bonner & Associates and the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies at American University (B&A/AU), most Congressional offices that receive e-mail do not respond to the letter via e-mail, instead responding via postal mail. The OMB Watch survey further found that most offices that did respond via e-mail only stated that they had received the correspondence and would be responding via postal mail if an address were included. The B&A/AU study also found that only 15% of Congressional offices used e-mail to 'keep [constituents] up-to-date on issues that may be important to them' (p. 2).

*Although e-mail on policy matters does not rank high today in terms of how seriously members take it, it is likely to have a powerful role in the near future.* In a 1992 survey by Burson-Marsteller, Congress-

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sional offices ranked communication via facsimile very low, claiming that the fax should only be used in emergencies. Today, faxes are quite common and highly regarded in Congress. Although e-mail is newer than faxes, it already ranks as highly as faxes do as a means of communication. Additionally, the general use of e-mail has grown significantly over the past year. Thus, it is not unlikely that e-mail will become a highly accepted form of communication. This change will require Congressional offices to operate in new ways, such as linking e-mail queries to policy position statements on office web-sites and responding to constituents via e-mail.

*Although almost all members of Congress have web-sites, these sites vary greatly in quality and accessibility of information.* Because there is no standard for what or how information is presented on the web-sites, some members provide detailed, accurate, and timely information, while other sites are outdated, difficult to navigate, and uninformative. This makes it difficult for a citizen to use the web to find information about their members' stances, as the site may not be updated, or may not contain the information that they are looking for. Even if the site is later updated, the user may not return.

These findings have significant implications for non-profit organisations, which are increasingly working to encourage their members and the public to engage in public policy matters. For example, OMB Watch's web-site contains a service called Activist Central that allows visitors to the site to send e-mail to members of Congress on selected issues. Similar services are offered through the National Education Association, the AFL-CIO, several environmental organisations, such as Defenders of Wildlife, and others.

This research raises many questions about the value of such services in attempting to reach members of Congress other than one's own, or indeed in communicating with one's own members. To the extent that Congressional offices implement filters or keep e-mail addresses private to limit receipt of e-mail to that from constituents, it raises concerns about access in a democratic society. Citizen participation is vital to the health of a democracy, and if a means of participation as direct and accessible as the Internet is not utilised, a great chance for increased participation will be missed.

### Background

In its December 1997 issue, *Wired* Magazine published the results of a survey that indicated that people who are most connected to the Internet are also more civically engaged in general, including commenting on public policy issues and voting ('The Digital Citizen', *Wired*, December 1997). According to this model, if we are able to get more people connected to the Internet, we may also be able to reverse the downward trend in political participation that social critics have been examining

for more than a decade. In addition, the Internet itself may become a tool for increased citizen participation in public policy matters, along the lines of the 'Electronic Town Hall' that Ross Perot mentioned during his 1992 presidential campaign. In fact, Cokie Roberts and Steven Roberts note this possibility with great trepidation in an 5 April 1997 column in the *Salt Lake Tribune*: 'No more pandering to the big contributors, no more deals between members, just the voice of the people will be heard! . . . We hear that and shudder.'<sup>1</sup>

The Internet makes it possible for citizens to become much more directly involved in the public policy process than ever before. At the same time, it runs the risk of overwhelming Congress with the immediate demands and opinions of the citizenry: direct democracy at its worst. No matter what one's opinions are on the merits of direct democracy, however, the Internet is here and will likely significantly change the way Congress does its job. The primary question left unanswered is how members of Congress will prepare for these changes.

Before this year, virtually no research existed on the use of e-mail to communicate with members of Congress. For example, a 1992 Burson-Marsteller survey did not include e-mail as an option for communicating with Congress. In fact, the survey indicated that such (then) new technologies as fax machines were not useful mechanisms for communicating with Congress because they created frustration among Congressional staffers.<sup>2</sup> The report quotes one staffer as saying: 'It [faxed material] does not get our attention. It's rather offensive.' Another staffer added: '[T]he fax was meant for urgent materials. I find myself, unless we've requested [a fax], almost just throwing the stuff away out of spite.' We wanted to test whether the perceived value of faxes has changed and whether e-mail may go through the same cycle.

The only known survey about e-mail was a *New York Times* survey sent via e-mail in October 1997 to all of the Congressional offices with addresses listed on their web-sites (a total of 261 offices), asking the offices to respond. Seventy per cent of offices did not respond.<sup>3</sup> A second survey, conducted by Bonner & Associates and American University's Centre for Congressional and Presidential Studies (B&A/AU), was released after we conducted our survey. The B&A/AU survey was far more detailed than either the OMB Watch survey or the *New York Times* survey, interviewing 270 Congressional offices on a broad range of issues related to Congressional use of the Internet.<sup>4</sup> The OMB Watch survey focused specifically on how members of Congress use the Internet and e-mail to communicate with constituents.

Additionally, we were concerned about the utility of Congressional web-sites in conveying policy positions. Despite the fact that most Congressional offices have web-sites, there has been no research on the quality of these sites. We focused on how effective the sites are in conveying the member's views on policy and legislative matters.

### Web-site review

**SUMMARY:** OMB Watch chose 50 House members and 20 senators at random and reviewed their web-sites, if they had them. At the time of the review (July 1998), all 100 senators had web-sites, as well as almost 400 House members. The focus of the review was how timely the policy content on the sites was, how easily a visitor could contact the member via the web-site, and how easily a visitor to the site could find information on a member's policy positions. Web-sites were graded on these three criteria, and the results are reported in the appendix.

Not surprisingly, the sites varied widely in all three areas of review, owing at least in part to a lack of a coordinated structure for designing and maintaining web-sites in Congress. Although more than a third (2.5) of the web-sites were current to within a month, eight appeared to be at least a year out-of-date, and one, Rep. Norman Dicks (D-WA), did not have a web-site at all.

As a note of caution regarding the timeliness of the sites: senators in contested elections are restricted from updating their sites near primary and general elections, and are required to post a notice about this on their sites. This rule exists because the official Senate web-sites are financed at taxpayer expense, and the Senate does not want to risk any campaigning on these sites. Senators in contested elections are not allowed to post any new information, to avoid any argument about what is and is not campaign material. Therefore, it is possible that some of these sites would have been more timely if this were not an election year. The House does not have a similar rule. As the 3 November 1998 election drew near, we revisited the Senate sites to see whether they were following the Senate rule. We found that all of the affected senators were in compliance.

Many sites in both the House and Senate made use of the Library of Congress' search engine, THOMAS, to allow visitors to their sites to find bills sponsored by the member. These sites generally provided a link to THOMAS, and often provided the language for a search for bills sponsored by the member. Some sites instead chose to place bills directly on their sites.

In addition, while many sites contained press releases about the member, often including policy positions, only a few sites contained direct links to voting records. In no case did an office identify upcoming votes and specify his or her views on the bills. Nor was there an opportunity for constituents to express their views on the upcoming bills.

On the other hand, many offices provided policy viewpoints on certain specific issues that may or may not have upcoming votes. Some offices have added search engines to make it easier to find things on their site. Others have explored use of audio and video. A few have received certification of compliance with standards for accessibility to those with disabilities. In general, though, without standards and procedures in

place for providing information to visitors to web-sites, it seems unlikely that there will be consistent and comprehensive information available.

Most of the sites offered an opportunity to e-mail the member through the site. Some representatives use a service called Write Your Representative, designed by the House Information Resources office (see below for fuller discussion of this system). The Senate does not have a similar system, although many senators have their own form directly on their site that allows constituents to contact them. Most of these sites either required that the writer input her or his address before sending the e-mail (through Write Your Representative) or requested that the writer include her or his postal address in the e-mail so that the member could respond to the e-mail using postal mail.

Another aspect common to many of the sites was constituent services. Almost all sites included information about the district the member represented and ways for constituents to request services from the member. Two sites, by Rep. Gil Gutknecht (R-MN) and Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV), offered constituents a form on which they could set up meetings with the member. A few sites, such as Sen. Edward Kennedy's (D-MA), also offered such services as an e-mail listserv for constituents.

### RESULTS OF WEB REVIEW

**Timeliness:** Table 1 summarises the timeliness of policy materials that were found on congressional web-sites. In general, the Senate web-sites were much better in being kept up-to-date than the House sites. Ninety per cent of the Senate web-sites had added policy information (e.g. press releases, speeches, position papers) within the last six months B and 45% had added materials that were less than a month old. In comparison, only 69% of the House web-sites had added policy information within the last six months — and only 35% had materials that were less than a month old. Several of the House web-sites had materials on their sites that were not dated, but the content raised questions about how current they were.

There seems to be little difference between the parties with regard to timeliness of materials on the web-site. Thirty-eight per cent of Republican offices and 40% of Democratic offices had the most up-to-date sites B sites where materials have been added within the last month. Roughly one-fifth of Republicans (20.6%) and Democrats (17.1%) do not keep their sites up-to-date, with policy information that is more than six-months-old.

**E-mail and interactivity:** Some offices make a significant effort to interact with constituents. For example, in addition to e-mail communication, Sen. Judd Gregg (R-NH) has an on-line survey to obtain constituent opinions about the tax code and the efficiency of the IRS. Rep. Sander Levin (D-MI) has an even broader survey to solicit viewpoints of constituents on a broad range of issues from campaign finance reform to tax cuts and balancing the budget to drug abuse to trade issues.

1. Timeliness of Material on Congressional Web-sites (%)

	Total	Dem	Rep
<i>Congress</i>			
Under 1 month-old	37.7	40.0	35.2
1-5 months-old	37.7	137.1	38.2
6 months or older	18.8	17.1	20.6
No dated material	5.8	5.7	2.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>House</i>			
Under 1 month-old	34.7	33.3	40.0
1-5 months-old	34.7	33.3	36.0
6 months or older	22.4	25.0	20.0
No dated material	8.2	8.3	4.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Senate</i>			
Under 1 month-old	45.0	54.5	33.3
1-5 months-old	45.0	45.5	44.4
6 months or older	10.0	0.0	22.2
No dated material	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

The Levin survey also asks constituents to identify high priority legislative issues and to comment on them. While these surveys appear to be innovative and not often used, it is unclear from this research whether these surveys get updated with any regularity. The Gregg survey remained on his web-site even after IRS reform legislation was enacted.

Some are attempting to build on their e-mail communication to strengthen interactivity and dialogue with constituents. For example, Rep. Gil Gutknecht (R-MN) gives constituents an opportunity to register to receive e-mails from the Congressman.

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT) has a robust e-mail form for constituents to use. The user can use a pull-down menu to select whether the senator need not respond or whether the response should be by e-mail or postal mail. The e-mail form also allows the user to indicate through another pull-down menu the general topic of the e-mail, thereby making it easier to sort e-mail to the appropriate staff. A few other Senate offices also use the pull-down menu to identify the general topic.

Not everyone is eager to use e-mail as a means for increasing interactivity. Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) does not provide an option to e-mail him through his web-site. Instead he posts the following message: 'I do not maintain an E-mail address. The significant increase in mail volume that would result would place too great a strain on my resources and my staff's ability to keep up with their already heavy work load. However, I will, as always, gladly respond to any question, comment or inquiry received by letter or phone call. Thank you.'

Rep. George Gekas (R-PA) also has no option to send him e-mail through his web-site. He lists the address and phone number for his three district offices and his Washington office. He also has an on-line guest book that allows 'visitors' to sign in. The sign-in also requests the visitor's

e-mail address, although it does not allow for comments to be sent electronically. Eleven other House members—6 Republicans and 5 Democrats—join Frank and Gekas in not offering e-mail interactivity. Only one Senate member, Dan Coats (R-IN), did not have e-mail services.

Table 2 shows that overall, roughly one-fifth of the Congressional sample sites did not have e-mail, a few more Republicans (20.6%) than

2. E-mail Interactivity from Congressional Web-sites (%)

	Total	Dem	Rep
<i>E-Mail</i>			
<i>Congress</i>			
With instructions/easy to find	58.0	64.7	51.4
Without instructions/hard to find	18.8	8.8	28.6
Without any instructions	4.3	5.9	2.9
No e-mail	18.8	20.6	17.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>House</i>			
With instructions/easy to find	59.2	64.0	54.2
Without instructions/hard to find	10.2	4.0	16.7
Without any instructions	4.1	4.0	4.2
No e-mail	26.5	28.0	25.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Senate</i>			
With instructions/easy to find	50.0	55.6	45.5
Without instructions/hard to find	40.0	22.2	54.5
Without any instructions	5.0	11.1	0.0
No e-mail	5.0	11.1	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Democrats (17.1%). Table 2 also provides information about the quality of the e-mail services that are provided. House web-sites had significantly easier to use e-mail services, both in terms of the instructions that were provided and in location on the web-page. Forty per cent of the Senate web-sites had hard-to-find e-mail links; whereas only 10.2% of the House sites were hard to find.

*Type of e-mail:* Within our sample, there are three ways for constituents to send mail to members. The most basic is the 'Mail To' command, which is a piece of HTML code that acts like a link, but sends an e-mail from the user's web-browser. This can be problematic because not all web-browsers support this feature, and there is no filter to check whether the sender lives in the member's district, which could cause some mail to be ignored without the sender's knowledge, as not all sites ask for the sender's address. The 'Mail To' command is the most popular way for members to receive e-mail from their web-sites, used by most of the senators in the sample (68.4%) and more than a third (38.9%) of representatives.

The second most popular way for members to receive e-mail from their web-sites is through the use of an independent service. The two found in our sample are Write Your Representative, which is run by the House and discussed later in this paper, and Citizen Direct, which is run by an independent organisation. Both of these systems serve as

filtering tools, in that a user must enter a postal code within the member's district in order to send mail. Citizen Direct also allows users to set up an electronic 'Communication Center' where they can receive replies from members. This allows those without e-mail accounts to communicate with their member. While no senators in our sample use an independent service, nearly half (47.2%) of the sampled representatives use either Citizen Direct or Write Your Representative.

The third type of device used is a form directly on the member's site. These are similar to those used by Write Your Representative and Citizen Direct in that they generally require the user to enter an address, although the private forms usually do not automatically reject mail from out of the member's district. Some of the forms in the sample also have a feature where the user can select the general issue area they are writing about, possibly speeding up the process of delivery to the correct staff member. Nearly a third (31.6%) of the Senate sites in the sample have their own e-mail form, while few (13.9%) of the sampled House sites use a private form.

*Access to policy materials:* Most policy materials on Congressional web-sites are press releases, although several offices have begun posting position papers and speeches. For example, Sen. Bob Kerrey (D-NE) posted his New Economic Agenda speech from 17 September 1997 in both text and video formats. The user can click on the video format to see the senator speak before the National Press Club. Kerrey's use of video is quite unusual among web-sites reviewed. Only one other site in the sample — that of Rep. Ernest Istook (R-OK) — used video for explaining policy positions. Audio is also used, mostly in the form of homepage greetings, although Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV) does explain several of his policy positions in audio format.

A few offices, such as Rep. Jim Nussle's (R-IA), provide a link to information about their voting record or statements made in the Congressional Record. However, in virtually every instance the link goes to either the Congressional Quarterly or THOMAS web-site, thereby allowing the user to conduct a search for the voting record. The user must learn the search instructions in order to find the record. Almost all of the sampled sites have a link to bills sponsored and co-sponsored by the member. Most of these are in the form of customised links that query THOMAS and return the bills automatically, however, some sites do not have a customised link, and the user must manually find the bills. Other sites, such as Rep. Terry Everett's (R-AL), list bills that the member sponsored or co-sponsored directly on the site.

In general, it is not easy to find a member's position on a particular policy. Only a few sites, such as Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA), have search engines on their sites. Some members, such as Gil Gutknecht (R-MN), do group their press releases by issue area, although many members organise their releases by date.

Some sites in the sample did contain issue papers, most notably Sen.

Patrick Leahy's (D-VT), which has several statements in over 15 issue areas.

Table 3 provides information about the accessibility of policy materials on Congressional web-sites. Most offices (50.7%) had few or hard

3. Access to Policy Materials through Congressional Web-sites (%)

Access to:	Total	GOP	Dems
<i>Congress</i>			
Many substantial press releases with much legislative info.	11.6	11.8	11.4
Many substantial press releases with some legislative info.	31.9	17.6	45.7
Few of buried press releases of substance	40.6	55.9	25.7
Few of buried press releases of little substance	10.1	8.8	11.4
No policy materials	5.8	5.9	5.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>House</i>			
Many substantial press releases with much legislative info.	12.2	16.0	8.3
Many substantial press releases with some legislative info.	30.6	12.0	50.0
Few of buried press releases of substance	36.7	56.0	16.7
Few of buried press releases of little substance	14.3	12.0	16.7
No policy materials	6.1	4.0	8.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Senate</i>			
Many substantial press releases with much legislative info.	10.0	0.0	18.2
Many substantial press releases with some legislative info.	35.0	33.3	36.4
Few of buried press releases of substance	50.0	55.6	45.5
Few of buried press releases of little substance	0.0	0.0	0.0
No policy materials	5.0	11.1	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

to find policy materials; 5.8% had no policy materials available. There seemed to be little difference between House and Senate offices, but large differences between Republicans and Democrats, particularly in the House, where 68% of Republican sites and 33.4% of Democratic sites had few or hard to find policy materials. Of Congressional offices 43.5% had policy materials that were easy to find, with 11.6% of them having very robust access opportunities.

CASE STUDIES OF GOOD SITES: REP. ERNEST ISTOOK AND SEN. BOB KERREY:

*Rep. Ernest Istook (R-OK):* Rep. Istook's home page is an example of what can be done when a page uses the potential of the web. Visitors are greeted with a short news section containing summaries of new press releases and links to the full story. There is also a weekly column near the top of the page. The rest of the front page is a directory of the remainder of the site, with a short description of each part. This site, unlike most Congressional sites, allows one to go to a specific section in one click, instead of guessing what section information is in.

One particularly interesting section of the page is 'In Congress', which is a central collection of links to the activities of Congress. Real time images from C-SPAN (the cable network that televises congress-

sional proceedings) of both the House and Senate floor are available (although they are only refreshed when the page is reloaded) as well as live streaming audio of both C-SPAN and C-SPAN2. There are links to the day's floor schedule and current proceedings (from the Majority Whip's Office), as well as a link to the day's House Committee meetings (through the Library of Congress). A section labelled 'This Week' contains links to the Majority Whip's weekly notice, a link of all House Chamber action for the past three days, a link to all of the bills up for consideration in both the House and Senate for the week (through the Library of Congress), and a link to House Committee Actions for the past three days. The site also contains a section with links to all bills introduced in the 105th Congress (through the Library of Congress), with the full text of each bill. There is a similar section for the 104th Congress, including all the bills signed into law during the 104th Congress, as well as those vetoed.

Other notable features of the site include a searchable archive of past press releases (which number in the hundreds). There is also a section where one can sign up to receive a periodic e-mail newsletter from Istook. The site also includes a link that searches the Congressional Record for all references to the Congressman.

This site is exemplary not because of any one feature, since many of the components exist on other sites, but because it offers a comprehensive set of services. This site could serve as a model for Congressional offices interested in providing a great amount of information with little staff time being invested. Because the Istook site borrows from a variety of sources, it requires minimal staff time to keep it up-to-date.

*Sen. Bob Kerrey (D-NE):* Sen. Kerrey's is another example of a good site. It has much information without being cluttered, and is easy to navigate. The most impressive thing about Sen. Kerrey's site is the wealth of information. The press release section has more than a hundred press releases. There is also a section that contains Kerrey's floor statements, dating back to 1989. There are several hundred statements in all. One problem with all this information is the lack of any index. Only one section, 'Kerrey Initiatives' sorts information by subject. The press releases and floor statements are arranged by date, which makes it difficult to find releases on a specific issue, although the site does have a search engine on the front page. There are also several speeches in audio format on the site.

The site contains its own e-mail form, which requires the user's address and asks for an e-mail address, if the user would like an e-mail reply. The innovative feature on this form is a pull-down menu that allows the user to choose from almost 30 general issue areas as the topic for the message. This feature presumably streamlines the communication process by allowing delivery to the proper staff member without reading the message. Another innovation is the 'Ask Bob'

column. Constituents can write or e-mail a question and specify that they want it to be part of the 'Ask Bob' column. Kerrey then posts the question and his answer for all to see. As the web-site indicates, the column 'provide[s] Senator Kerrey with yet another opportunity to open a dialogue with Nebraskans and answer questions in a public forum on concerns or questions that other Nebraskans may share'.

One area where the site is lacking is in access to legislative information. There is a link to THOMAS, although it is not customised, and the user must know how to search the system. The link for the senator's voting record takes the user to the Congressional Quarterly VoteWatch site, where the votes must be found manually. This site also contains many Nebraska links, which are not uncommon. Almost every member has a set of links for things such as universities, cities, and sports teams within their district or state. Kerrey also has a 'constituent services' section which details how Nebraskans can order a flag, how to contact his office for internship opportunities, and how to handle problems with the federal government through his office.

#### *Survey on constituent e-mail*

OMB Watch sent the survey to each office in the House and Senate and then made follow-up calls to randomly selected offices. The final number of respondents to the survey was 37. The 37 responses to this survey offer an insight into the role of e-mail in legislative offices of Congress today. Thirty-two of the offices reported the ability to receive e-mail, and twenty reported that the volume of e-mail has increased significantly since last year, with most of that increase due to the growing popularity of e-mail around the country.

**VALUE OF E-MAIL:** Respondents were asked to rank the importance of various forms of communication from constituents when considering a policy position. Letters ranked highest, with personal visits and telephone calls following. Faxes and e-mails ranked highly, but below these more traditional forms of communication. Scoring poorly in the survey were petitions, sign-on letters, and post card campaigns, with form letters via e-mail receiving the lowest marks of all.

In addition, the survey compared the amount of attention that members give to various forms of communication in considering a policy position. The results were quite similar to the questions on importance of the forms, with letters receiving a great deal of attention from almost two-thirds of respondents. The only form of communication which any respondent reported giving no attention to is e-mail, with one respondent reporting this.

**RESPONDING TO CONSTITUENT E-MAIL:** The majority of offices that receive e-mail reported that they send an automated reply via e-mail promising a fuller reply via postal mail. Almost all offices print their e-

mail before responding, reflecting a lack of an efficient means of identifying constituent e-mail and responding to it. The B&A/AU survey found that about a quarter of offices respond to e-mail by both e-mail and postal mail, while more than 70% respond by postal mail only.

**DESIRABILITY OF E-MAIL:** Respondents noted that e-mail is both easier and more timely than other modes of communication with members, allowing constituents to share their views directly with their members. Others noted that e-mail is also very inexpensive and provides greater access to the member.

**PROBLEMS WITH E-MAIL:** The OMB Watch survey and the B&A/AU survey clearly indicate that members of Congress are very concerned about being overwhelmed by e-mail. Precisely because it is so easy and quick to use, it is far more likely that someone will e-mail her or his member rather than taking the time to write a letter, put it into an envelope, put a stamp on it, and mail it. Many respondents indicated that this is why they rank e-mail lower than other forms of communication.

Another significant problem respondents identified is the possibility of spamming, or writing to every member at the same time with little or no effort. Because it is often less easy to tell who is sending an e-mail than who is sending a letter, respondents expressed concern about being overwhelmed by coordinated efforts by interest groups to reach them, at the expense of constituents.

A final major concern about e-mail raised in the OMB Watch survey relates to its immediacy. Because constituents can send e-mail so quickly, they often expect to get a response just as quickly. In addition, e-mail encourages what one respondent called 'chatters', or constituents who e-mail whenever some idea hits them, sometimes as often as several times a day. Some of these 'chatters' also make requests that are very time consuming, such as asking for detailed policy positions from the member on a different issue each day, making it much more difficult for staff to respond to all of the letters they receive.

**WRITE YOUR REPRESENTATIVE:** In response to these concerns, the House Information Resources office has created a web-based e-mail system that all House offices can use, called Write Your Representative. Through the member's web-site, or through the Write Your Representative site itself, a visitor can type in her or his postal code and then send an e-mail to the member who represents that area. In this way, a person can send an e-mail without even knowing the name of her or his representative.

According to Reynold Schweickhardt, a former staffer in the House Information Resources office and one of the founders of Write Your Representative, the House will soon be replacing its current e-mail

addresses <name@mail.house.gov> with new addresses that will not be made publicly available unless the individual offices choose to publicise them. This will likely significantly reduce the amount of spam and also make it far easier to reduce out-of-district e-mails.

The Senate does not currently have a system similar to Write Your Representative, but many Senate offices, as well as some House offices, use a similar private system called Citizen Direct. At this point, there does not seem to be a plan to coordinate efforts across the chambers.

### *Unanswered questions and areas for further research*

This study has raised several questions that require further investigation. First, the web review indicated substantial unevenness in both quantity and quality of Congressional web-sites. Should Congress set standards for the type of information, layout of sites, and accessibility of the member via the site, and if so, how should this be done? What would the implications of such standards be?

Second, since members reported in the survey that they often do not respond to e-mail from non-constituents, how can a citizen or non-profit public interest group contact a member of a congressional committee if they are not a constituent of that member? Particularly if Congressional offices move toward limiting electronic access to their offices, will committee staff be more available?

Third, it may be useful to test Congressional responses to e-mail sent from a variety of sources. This study included sending e-mail to several Congressional offices as sample tests, but virtually no response was received. A more comprehensive test would be quite revealing in terms of actual versus reported interest by Congressional offices in receiving e-mail comments from constituents.

Also, several recent legislative battles have included an e-mail component. Examining the effect of e-mail on these campaigns B both in terms of whether it increased citizen participation in the efforts and in terms of how members responded would be instructive to groups considering making e-mail part of their campaign repertoire.

Finally, to what extent do the results of this research extend to state legislatures? Anecdotal evidence indicates that faxes are unpopular in some state legislatures because offices often share a fax machine. Therefore, e-mail may be preferable to faxes in reaching a state legislator.

Technological advances such as the Internet and e-mail present members of Congress with great opportunities to increase their ability to communicate with and to effectively represent their constituents, but members of Congress are very nervous about how to take advantage of these tools without being overwhelmed by them. Congress must begin thinking about how to deal with advances in communications technology in ways that promote effective democracy.

One possible way to address some of the overload would be for

Congress to recommend policies and procedures for web-sites and to offer training on web design as part of training for new members. Recommendations might include maintaining a broad range of policy statements and voting records on members' web-sites, along with a search engine that would allow visitors to find information. In addition, e-mail responding to constituent questions could then point the constituent to the site. It might even be possible to create an auto-responder for this process, although that would require significant development.

The message for non-profit organisations and for citizens is that, although e-mail is not now as well regarded as personal letters, its popularity and regard are likely to increase significantly. At the same time, the advent of e-mail requires even greater attention to traditional advice about communicating with a member of Congress: be clear, be brief, and be a constituent.

### Appendix: Web-site Review Scorecard

Member name	How timely*	Ease/quality of information**	Ease of contacting†	Type of e-mail‡
Thomas Barrett (D-WI)	4	3	2	A
Roscoe Bartlett (R-MD)	3	2	0	n/a
Howard Berman (D-CA)	3	4	4	B
Kevin Brady (R-TX)	4	3	2	O (own form)
Donna Christian-Green (D-VI)	0	1	2	A, B
Bob Clement (D-TN)	4	3	3	A
Diana DeGette (D-CO)	3	2	4	C
Norman Dicks (D-WA)	3	2	3	A
Terry Everett (R-AL)	no site	no site	no site	no site
Thomas Ewing (R-IL)	4	2	3	A
Jon Fox (R-PA)	4	2	1	A
Barney Frank (D-MA)	2	3	0	n/a
George Gekas (R-PA)	1	2	0	n/a
Paul Gillmor (R-OH)	1	1	0	n/a
Ben Gilman (R-NY)	4	2	4	C
Bart Gordon (D-TN)	0	0	3	A
Gil Gulknecht (R-MN)	4	4	3	B
Darlene Hooley (D-OR)	4	2	2	A
Henry Hyde (R-IL)	n/a	0	0	n/a
Ernest Istook (R-OK)	3	3	4	O (own form)
Barbara Kennelly (D-CT)	4	3	3	A
Ron Klink (D-PA)	3	2	0	n/a
John LaFalce (D-NY)	4	3	4	B
Steven LaTourette (R-OH)	4	3	4	B
Jim Leach (R-IA)	4	2	3	A, B
Sander Levin (D-MI)	1	4	4	B
Jerry Lewis (R-CA)	3	2	4	n/a
Thomas Manton (D-NY)	n/a	1	3	A
Ed Markey (D-MA)	3	3	4	B
Matthew Martinez (D-CA)	2	3	4	B
Robert Menendez (D-NJ)	0	0	0	n/a
Jim Nussle (R-IA)	4	4	4	B
Solomon Ortiz (D-TX)	0	1	0	n/a
Richard Pombo (R-CA)	0	2	3	A
Deborah Pryce (R-OH)	3	2	3	A

### House

Jack Quinn (R-NY)	4	2	0	n/a
Frank Riggs (R-CA)	1	1	3	A, B
Bob Riley (R-AL)	2	4	3	A, C
Tim Roemer (D-IN)	4	3	1	A
Edward Royce (R-CA)	2	2	4	B
Charles Schumer (D-NY)	3	4	0	O (own form)
Pat Sessions (R-TX)	4	4	4	A
David Skaggs (D-CO)	4	3	3	O (own form)
Louise Slaughter (D-NY)	3	1	4	n/a
Gerald Solomon (R-NY)	0	3	0	O (own form)
John Tanner (D-TN)	0	3	2	O (own form)
Gene Taylor (D-MS)	n/a	1	0	n/a
John Tierney (D-MA)	4	3	4	B
Fred Upton (R-MI)	3	2	3	A

### Senate

Joseph Biden (D-DE)	4	2	2	A
Richard Bryan (D-NV)	3	2	2	A
Robert Byrd (D-WV)	4	3	2	A
John Chafee (R-RI)	4	3	3	A
Dan Coats (R-IN)	1	2	0	n/a
Dan Coats (R-IN)	4	2	2	A
Susan Collins (R-ME)	4	2	2	A
Pete Domenici (R-NM)	0	0	2	A
Wendell Ford (D-KY)	3	2	2	A
Robert Graham (D-FL)	4	2	3	A
Judd Gregg (R-NH)	3	3	3	A, O (own form)
Edward Kennedy (D-MA)	4	2	2	A
Robert Kerrey (D-NE)	4	3	4	O (own form)
Patrick Leahy (D-VT)	3	4	4	A, O (own form)
Mitch McConnell (R-KY)	3	2	1	A
Carol Mosley-Braun (D-IL)	4	4	4	O (own form)
Jack Reed (D-RI)	3	3	4	A, O (own form)
Harry Reid (D-NV)	3	3	2	A
Jeff Sessions (R-AL)	4	3	3	A
Robert Smith (R-NH)	3	2	4	O (own form)
Ted Stevens (R-AK)	3	2	3	A

\* 0, more than 1 year-old; 1, 6-12 months-old; 2, 3-5 months-old; 3, 1-2 months-old; 4, under 1 month-old; n/a, could not find any dated information.

\*\* 0, no press releases/issue statements; 1, few/buried press releases of little substance; 2, few/buried press releases of substance; 3, many substantial press releases with some information on sponsored bills; 4, many substantial press releases with interface to sponsored bills/voting record. (note: this is a subjective ranking, and situations not covered, such as a site with few Press Releases or Issue Statements but with links to Voting Records and Floor Statements would be given a higher rank).

† 0, no e-mail; 1, e-mail in 'mailto' format without any instructions (i.e. 'please include address'); 2, e-mail in 'mailto' format with instructions/form interface but hard to find; 3, e-mail in 'mailto' format with instructions and easy to find; 4, form interface that is easy to find. (note: form interface includes 'Write Your Representative', 'Citizen Direct or the office's own form').

‡ A, 'mailto' format (HTML code that sends simple e-mail through the user's browser); B, 'Write Your Representative'; C, 'Citizen Direct'; O, other.

- 1 'Internet Could Become a Threat to Representative Government', *Salt Lake Tribune*, 5.4.97, p. A-11.
- 2 'Communicating with Congress 1992: A Survey of Congressional Offices', Barson-Marsteller, *Worldwide*, June 1992.
- 3 'More Members Are Plugged In, But Few Are Making Connections', *New York Times*, 5.1.98.
- 4 For more information, visit American University's Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies web-site: <http://www.american.edu/academic/depts/capts/Research.htm>