

E-mail Contact between Constituents and State Legislators

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THERE HAS BEEN much discussion about how the use of technology has changed the way in which we do business. With the introduction of eBay and other Internet shopping sites and the adoption and prolific use of e-mail by citizens to correspond with family, friends, and government officials, we have entered a new era in interpersonal relations and communication. This phenomenon raises many questions about how public officials will use this technology to serve the people. Do government agencies and legislatures have the ability to stay abreast of these advancements? Will certain segments of the population lose their ability to influence and/or benefit from the political system? Will the utilization of electronic communication result in higher demands on legislators for constituency service?

Dahl (1989) predicted that telecommunications technology would change the democratic process. A more recent study, commissioned by the Twentieth Century Fund, suggested that computer technology will significantly alter the way in which Americans communicate with their elected representatives (Grossman 1995). Anecdotal evidence indicates that constituent-representative relations have been affected by new technology. For example, several states report that

when controversial legislation has been under discussion, legislators have been deluged by e-mail messages (Boulard 1998). However, there has been little systematic analysis of how e-mail is being used in the public arena.

Using a survey and district demographic data, we assess the factors contributing to Tennessee legislators' use of e-mail to communicate with their constituents.¹ The availability of e-mail may increase contact in districts with particular demographic characteristics, thereby affecting constituency service. Given that certain groups are more likely than others to use new technology, advantaged groups may be overrepresented. Legislators with certain attitudes and personal characteristics may be more likely than others to use e-mail, which ultimately influences the legislator-constituent dynamic.

Literature Review

The literature on state legislative representation has described legislators variously as delegates who represent district preferences on policy votes and as trustees (Jewell 1982; Rosenthal 1998). Because policy congruence is difficult to achieve, some contend that legislators are primarily concerned with obtain-

ing pork-barrel projects for their district as a means to resolve citizens' problems (Jewell 1982; Fowler 1994). Communication enables legislators to help constituents by providing services (Jewell and Patterson 1986; Rosenthal 1998). The nature of that communication is the purview of this article.

The advent of technological changes such as e-mail has implications for legislative representation. E-mail increases citizen contact because most people find it easier to send an e-mail message than write a letter or telephone a representative (Clausing and Ranney 1998). The ease of this type of transmission means that lawmakers can be overwhelmed at times. Moreover, the immediacy of e-mail creates unrealistic expectations among citizens regarding legislators' ability to reply to their requests for service; it is not unusual for legislators to receive 100 e-mail messages per day regarding particularly divisive issues (Boulard 1998). For legislators who serve in less professionalized legislatures, who may not have sufficient technology or staff, a timely response is even more problematic.

Not only does the ease of sending e-mail messages increase citizen contact and, presumably, make it easier for legislators to stay in touch, it also likely increases the amount of constituency service requests and appeals for pork-barrel policies. Less clear is whether the technology improves representation. Some observers of the legislative process are concerned about the effect of "electronic democracy" on policy deliberations—

If you are a lawmaker and get 700 messages in one day, you've got to take them seriously, whether [such a campaign] is orchestrated or not. It's not that these kinds of grassroots campaigns could not have taken place before now. It is just that the directness of the vote is today so close. There are [fewer] mediating factors, and that makes it much tougher for lawmakers to ignore a mass e-mail campaign, even if the campaign is wrong-headed. (Rosenthal, quoted in Boulard 1998, 18)

Furthermore, legislators may be more responsive to the policy preferences and requests for government services from citizens who send these messages; that is, those who can afford computers and who are oriented toward electronic technology. A significant bias in the demographics of who uses e-mail at the aggregate level may result in the privileging of these citizen groups—a potential cause for concern. Borrowing a phrase from Schattsneider (1960, 35), does the "heavenly chorus sing with a strong upper-class accent" in terms of the citizens who contact legislators through e-mail?

There is considerable debate about whether socioeconomic status is positively related to citizen-initiated contact of elected officials, as has been found with voting behavior (Leighley 1995). Although Jewell (1982) concludes that districts that are below average in socioeconomic status generate the most requests for constituency service from legislators, Squire's research (1993) on public opinion about state legislatures suggests that the likelihood of contacting a state legislator increases with income and education. As electronic communication becomes the favored medium for citizen contact, the fact that some groups have greater computer availability and Internet access than others may significantly affect the types of service requests legislators receive.

Hypotheses

There is scant evidence on the use of e-mail by legislators, and basically there are no studies of factors predicting state legislator use of e-mail to communicate with constituencies. Further, there is little evidence to suggest how the citizenry uses this new technology to initiate contact with their representatives. Moreover, no studies have been conducted to determine whether citizens are using e-mail to contact public officials in lieu of traditional forms of contact such as phone calls and letters. There have been no conclusive studies that determine whether or not certain

segments of society, such as minorities, are being negatively affected by the increased use of e-mail for constituent service requests.

District Characteristics

There is a significant socioeconomic bias in access to computers and in the use of e-mail in the general population. A recent study reported that 46 percent of Americans send or receive e-mail every day (*Newsweek* 1999, 57). Studies of both e-mail and other types of Web usage report significant income, education, age, and racial differences, which have resulted in a digital “divide” or “gap” (Irving 1999). About 6 percent of households with incomes of less than \$5,000 report having access to e-mail at home, whereas 43 percent of households with incomes over \$75,000 do so. Further, this digital gap in income grew from 9 percent in 1994 to 37 percent in 1998. A similar digital gap exists for education level. Individuals with at least a college degree are nearly 16 times as likely to have home Internet access (48.9 percent) as those with only an elementary school education (3.1 percent).

There is also a substantial digital divide between the generations. Twenty-four percent of adults under age 55 years report having e-mail access at home, but less than 10 percent of respondents over the age of 55 have e-mail access (Irving 1999). Studies have found that younger men are more likely to be Internet users, but there has been increased use among women and older citizens. Women still make up less than half of American Internet users (41 percent)—an improvement since 1994, when only 5 percent of respondents to an Internet survey were women (Pitkow 1998). These gender differences are exacerbated by age. Only 29 percent of Web users over age 55 are women.

There are also pronounced racial differences, and they exist even for households with similar levels of income. Only 11.2 percent of black households have Internet access compared with 29.8 percent of white households. Further, a “white, two-parent house-

hold earning less than \$35,000 is nearly *three times* as likely to have Internet access as a comparable black household and nearly *four times* as likely to have Internet access as Hispanic households in the same income category” (Irving 1999). Overall, there are substantial demographic differences in home access to e-mail, but do these differences reveal themselves in legislators’ e-mail boxes?

To examine the relationships among a district’s socioeconomic characteristics and constituent contacts received by e-mail, we consider the following factors: average income, percentage of citizens with incomes over \$50,000, and percentage of citizens in a district who are college educated. We hypothesize that a district’s income and education levels are positively related to the number of e-mail requests for services. We also expect that those over age 55 will be less comfortable using computers and will be less likely to access new technologies to contact legislators. Moreover, because research suggests that use of e-mail among blacks lags behind that among whites, we expect districts with a higher percentage of blacks to generate less constituency contact by e-mail.

Legislator Characteristics

Socioeconomic biases can also affect the propensity of legislators to use e-mail. In particular, we test for gender and race differences among legislators to discover if they are more or less likely to use e-mail. Further, because older legislators may not be as comfortable with the new computer technology (Conte 1999), we predict that tenure in the legislature is negatively associated with e-mail use. It is likely that new legislators are younger, more highly educated, and more likely to have used computer technology in their professions. We would therefore expect greater use of e-mail among these legislators. There is no literature to suggest a connection between political party and the use of e-mail, so we have no clear expectations for party affiliation. Because partisan differences could

have important implications for who gets served, we have included this variable.

Legislator Attitudes

Legislators' attitudes toward constituency service and the general role of government influence their communication strategy with constituents (Jewell and Patterson 1986), and we hypothesize that such attitudes will also affect e-mail communication with constituents. Those legislators most interested in providing services to their constituents will make the greatest use of new technology for citizen contact.

Answers to several questions measure the emphasis a legislator puts on constituency service relative to other duties. First, do legislators who see constituency service as the "most important thing I do" emphasize e-mail use? Second, do legislators who believe that they "do" more constituency service than their colleagues handle more e-mail contacts? Further, do legislators who view constituency service as building citizen trust (Diamond 1977) or providing electoral benefits (Freeman and Richardson 1996) make greater use of e-mail? We hypothesize that legislators who emphasize service, who believe that they "do" more service, who perceive service as a way of building trust, and who identify the electoral benefits of service are more committed to all forms of communication with citizens, including e-mail. Do legislators' beliefs about government spending affect e-mail use? Legislators who believe that the role of government should be limited likely view citizen contact through e-mail less favorably than do their colleagues who do not advocate limited government (Freeman and Richardson 1996).

Methods Used to Solicit Citizen Contact

Legislators vary in the degree to which they are available to constituents and solicit citizen requests for services (Jewell 1982; Richardson and Freeman 1995). The more visible a legislator is, the more likely that legislator is to receive e-mail. We examine the impact

of three variables pertaining to the accessibility of legislators. Having a district office, a district newsletter to enhance constituency relations, and office hours during which the legislator is available would likely make the legislator more visible to constituents in the district and send a signal that the representative is accessible to the citizenry. Visibility and availability should increase the number of requests for services by any method of contact, including e-mail. Legislators who perceive newsletters and office hours as opportunities for citizen contact likely will have e-mail addresses, which may be advertised in newsletters and other printed materials generated by their office.

Data and Methods

To assess the hypotheses, we surveyed the Tennessee legislature. Tennessee's legislature is similar to many state legislatures. The National Conference of State Legislatures describes it as "professional/citizen," a category that includes 26 states and is intermediary between the 9 states that are professional and the 15 that are described as citizen legislatures (Pound 1999). Professional/citizen legislatures offer members moderate levels of pay, staff, turnover, and time in session. Tennessee ranks 26th out of 50 in size of permanent state legislative staff (National Conference of State Legislators 2000).

Tennessee is also representative of the average state in terms of Internet access among both citizens and legislators. Tennessee legislators make little or no use of personal Web sites, which is typical of less professionalized state legislatures. Thirty-one percent of adults in Tennessee have Internet access; this figure is identical to the mean percentage of adults with Internet access across the other 49 states (*State and Local Sourcebook* 2000, 51). Tennessee ranks 26th among the 50 states in percentage of adults with Internet access.

For district information, we consulted the *Almanac of State Legislatures* (Lilley, DeFranco, and Diefenderfer 1994). The vari-

ables for legislator attributes were obtained from the 1997–98 *Tennessee Blue Book* and phone calls to legislative offices. In 1999, we distributed a survey questionnaire to members of the Tennessee State Legislature (99 state House members, 33 senate members). The response rate for state House members (43 percent) was considerably higher than for their senate counterparts (36 percent). We distributed three rounds of the survey to legislators in their capitol offices and provided preaddressed return envelopes.

The dependent variable used for this particular study is reflected in the survey ques-

tion. The legislators were asked to estimate the number of e-mail requests they receive for casework in an average week during the legislative session. There was a range of 0–100 in the number of cases reported by the legislators.

Results

We first conducted both bivariate *t*-tests and graphical analysis of scatterplots of each independent variable against the dependent variable. As seen in Table 1, there were no significant coefficients for the *t*-tests on the

Survey of Legislators' Use of E-mail	
Dependent Variable	
How many requests for casework does your office receive through e-mail in an "average" week during the legislative session? _____	
Independent Variables	
How often do you hold office hours for the public in your district?	
_____ Daily	_____ Weekly
_____ Monthly	_____ Quarterly
_____ Annually	_____ Never
How often do you distribute a newsletter in your district?	
_____ Monthly	_____ Quarterly
_____ Annually	_____ Once every two years
_____ Twice a year	_____ Never
Do you maintain an office in your legislative district? ____ Yes ____ No	
How many years have you served in the state legislature? _____	
For each of the following questions about legislator attitudes, please indicate the number of the response that best reflects your attitudes toward legislative constituency service.	
5 = strongly agree 4 = agree 3 = not sure 2 = disagree 1 = strongly disagree	
_____ a)	Constituency service is the most important thing I do in my position.
_____ b)	Constituency service is an important method of maintaining electoral support.
_____ c)	Effective constituency service allows a legislator to take stands that may alienate some voters.
_____ d)	Constituency service is an important method of building trust with the public.
_____ e)	I put more emphasis on constituency service than [does] the typical legislator in my state.
_____ f)	I would increase constituency service if I had more staff.
_____ g)	The state government should reduce spending on social services.

Table 1: Factors Affecting Legislators' Use of E-mail for Constituency Service in Tennessee

	Coefficient	t-test	Probability
District Demographics			
Average income	0.00	0.91	0.37
Percent over \$55,000	0.33	1.14	0.26
Percent college educated	0.27	1.20	0.24
Percent over 55 years old	0.03	0.05	0.96
Percent black	-0.09	-0.76	0.45
Legislator Attributes			
Gender	4.30	0.65	0.52
Race	1.40	0.22	0.83
Tenure	0.37	1.13	0.27
Party	-2.32	-0.49	0.63
Education	1.91	0.60	0.55
Legislator Attitudes			
Constituency service is important	2.83	0.97	0.34
Constituency service is emphasized more than by other legislators	5.79	2.14	0.03
Constituency service builds trust	6.96	1.85	0.07
Constituency service maintains electoral support	5.34	1.71	0.09
Social spending should be reduced	-3.55	-1.69	0.09
Methods of Soliciting Citizen Contact			
District office	6.89	4.74	0.15
Frequency of newsletter	3.06	2.99	0.04
Frequency of office hours	2.27	2.23	0.03

N = 55.

district demographic or the legislator attribute variables. On the other hand, variables accounting for legislator attitudes and methods of soliciting citizen contact show significant relationships. Because of the small sample size, a multivariate analysis is not optimal for this set of data and was not conducted. We therefore examined each hypothesis with bivariate *t*-tests.

District Demographic Differences

The demographic characteristics of the legislative district have no statistically significant influence on the number of constituent service requests e-mailed to that district's state legislator. Despite this lack of significance, the direction of the relationship is consistent with the hypotheses for all demo-

graphic characteristics, with the exception of age. It appears that districts with a higher percentage of college-educated individuals and citizens with higher incomes have more contact by e-mail than poorer and less educated districts. Further, as predicted, the racial makeup of the legislative district influences the amount of e-mail contact. As the district becomes increasingly African American, the number of e-mail requests decreases.

Contrary to expectations, the findings of this study suggest that the higher the percentage of the district that is over 55 years old, the more likely citizens are to contact legislators by e-mail. Although the variable is insignificant, it seems that older Americans are quickly closing the digital gap. The contrary findings on age and the absence of any sig-

nificant demographic differences suggest that, at the aggregate level, no major biases exist in electronic access to legislators.

Legislator Attribute Differences

A legislator's personal attributes do not seem to significantly influence the number of service requests e-mailed by constituents. The direction of the relationship is consistent with expectations for two of the legislator attribute variables but not for two others. As expected, legislators who are white and have more education report a higher number of e-mail requests for services. This finding is consistent with the trend in the general population.

Surprisingly, women legislators on average receive more constituent service requests by e-mail than do men. This finding clearly contradicts the trend in the overall population, where men tend to use the Internet more. On the other hand, this finding is consistent with previous studies that suggest that citizens perceive women legislators as more accessible and that they therefore provide more constituency service (Richardson and Freeman 1995).

The number of years that legislators have served is also positively related to the number of requests received during the legislative session. This finding further substantiates our earlier finding that older Americans are not as uncomfortable with the use of electronic communication as has been previously hypothesized. Furthermore, legislators who have a longer tenure may recognize that the appearance of staying current with technology may positively influence their bid for reelection.

Although the relationship is not statistically significant, Democrats are less likely than Republicans to receive e-mail requests for services. There may be distinct advantages in claiming the mantle of technological sophistication, but the nonpartisan aspect of legislative responsiveness to e-mail contact by citizens can be viewed as a positive result for the future of electronic democracy.

Legislator Attitudinal Differences

Legislators differ in their attitudes about the importance of constituency service. The more a legislator views the role of constituency service as important, the more likely he or she is to be contacted by citizens (Freeman and Richardson 1996). Legislators were asked to rate their opinions about constituency service on a 1–5 scale, with 1 indicating that they strongly disagreed with a statement and 5 indicating that they strongly agreed with the statement. Legislators who more strongly agreed with the statement “I put more emphasis on constituency service than the typical legislator in my state” also received more constituent service requests by e-mail. This relationship is statistically significant and consistent with earlier studies of more conventional methods of such requests (Freeman and Richardson 1996). Thus, the more provision of service is emphasized, the more avenues will be explored and utilized to increase the ease of receiving such requests.

A positive attitude toward service, as reflected in three other statements regarding the overall importance of service and its implications for building trust and maintaining electoral support, is also positively related to e-mail contact. Even though these relationships are statistically significant only at the .10 probability level, they suggest that legislators view e-mail as an additional means of staying in touch with citizens. Furthermore, the more positively legislators regard constituency service, the more comfortable citizens are with contacting them by new and alternative modes of communication.

Attitudes regarding the proper role of government seem to influence attitudes about the proper role of legislators. Legislators who feel that government should be more involved by providing government services also feel that they should be involved with the citizenry. Legislators who favor reduced government spending on social programs receive fewer e-mails from constituents. This finding suggests that constituents are less likely to feel comfortable requesting the services of

these legislators by e-mail. Overall, it appears that legislators' attitudes are one of the most important factors affecting the number of e-mail requests they receive.

Methods of Soliciting Citizen Contact

Legislators who feel it is important to communicate regularly and frequently with their constituents are more likely to be contacted by e-mail. This result suggests that the number of e-mail constituent service requests increases as accessibility to legislators through newsletters and district office hours increases. Both of these relationships are statistically significant. Although not statistically significant, the presence of a district office is also positively related to the number of e-mails from citizens. Overall, the increased availability of a legislator results in increased demands by citizens. Again, these findings are consistent with previous studies regarding legislator solicitation of casework and the number of constituent requests for legislative services (Richardson and Freeman 1995).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the advancement of technology affects the ways in which state legislators perform their jobs. There are concerns that these technological advancements will give some citizen groups an advantage in influencing policy and/or in receiving government benefits. However, based on the findings of this study, there is little systematic evidence that any one group is using and therefore unduly benefiting from e-mail access.

To test whether legislators who responded to the survey differ from those who did not respond, we compared the survey respondents to the non-respondents, based on demographic attributes of both individual legislators and their respective legislative district. There was no significant difference between these two groups. Therefore, it can be concluded that the lack of findings is not based on non-response bias.

These results may be encouraging for those who advocate electronic democracy. At the aggregate level, there appears to be no significant sociodemographic bias among citizens who e-mail requests for services. The results suggest a weak bias against the disadvantaged, but it is not a strong effect. Furthermore, legislator attributes do not appear to impede electronic communication between constituents and their representatives. The only clearly significant factors affecting electronic communication between the governed and the governing are legislators' attitudes toward constituency service and their interest in soliciting citizen contact. Although these attitudes could lead to differential access for citizens, they are clearly identifiable features of a legislator that could be influential during an election. It has long been argued that "home style" is a crucial component of a legislator's reelection efforts (Fenno 1978). As citizens come to rely on electronic communication, legislators who do not incorporate this medium into their home style will likely suffer at the polls.

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Note

1. We treat the terms “casework” and “constituency service” synonymously in the text but generally rely on the broader notion of constituency service. The survey question used in the analysis employs the term casework, but open-ended statements and answers to other unreported questions suggest that the respondents used the terms interchangeably. The respondents referred to several kinds of constituent services, such as assistance in dealing with state agencies to obtain benefits or cut through red tape, help in obtaining jobs or funding for projects, and requests for information generally.

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