Communicating
with Congress
Recommendations for Improving the Democratic Dialogue

CONGRESSIONAL MANAGEMENT FOUNDATION

Communicating
with Congress

Recommendations for Improving the Democratic Dialogue

CONGRESSIONAL MANAGEMENT FOUNDATION

Written by Tim Hysom

The cover image of Emancipation Hall in the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center is courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

About the *Communicating with Congress* Project

For nearly a decade, the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) has been working to improve communications between citizens and Members of Congress. We have found that the Internet has made it easier and cheaper to contact Congress than ever before. However, technological developments have been so rapid that neither citizens and the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns (the senders) nor congressional offices (the receivers) have mastered its use to facilitate truly effective communications between citizens and Members of Congress. As a result, while more messages are being sent to Congress, it seems that less actual communication is occurring.

To help improve the communications, CMF has undertaken a project to: identify the perceptions, expectations, and practices of both sides of congressional communications; provide information to educate and guide congressional offices, citizens, and the grassroots community; promote changes in the attitudes and practices of both sides; and facilitate collaboration and information-sharing that will result in more meaningful and manageable dialogue.

To accomplish these objectives, CMF has conducted extensive research and engaged an ever-widening circle of stakeholders. We began our research with congressional offices, and our outreach resulted in the 2005 report entitled *Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy.* We then engaged small groups of targeted stakeholders in congressional communications, including thought leaders and technologists both on and off Capitol Hill. These meetings led to the *Communicating with Congress* Conference in the fall of 2007, where more than 200 stakeholder participants from both sides engaged in discussions about current processes and problems with communications between citizens and Members of Congress, as well as possible solutions. In June 2008, CMF released a report on our national survey of adult Americans regarding their interactions with Members of Congress. That report, entitled *Communicating with Congress: How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement*, discusses what motivates citizens to communicate, how satisfied they are with their interactions with Members, and the impact that the Internet has had on congressional communications.

Through these steps and the release for public comment of this report in draft form, we expanded our research and outreach to the public even further and invited the public to participate in discussion of our concept of, and recommendations for, improved communications.

We have gained insight through survey research, outreach, and dialogue with as many of the interested parties as possible. This collaborative approach has enabled us to incorporate a broad, inclusive perspective into our work. We hope it will result in a new model for communications between constituents and their elected officials, which will have the support and commitment of as many people as possible. It is our goal that the model we propose and the recommendations we put forward will, if implemented, reduce or remove the current frustrations and barriers, facilitate increased citizen participation in the public policy process, and promote a meaningful democratic dialogue that benefits our country.

Recommendations for Change

Communicating with Congress: Recommendations for Improving the Democratic Dialogue

The culmination of CMF's nine years of research, outreach, and study included a draft of this report open for a period of public comment and this final report with recommendations for all stakeholders and suggested improvements to the structure and processes for managing congressional communications.

Congress

Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy

Focus groups, interviews and surveys of 350 House and Senate staff in 200 offices on their views of constituent communications.

Expanded Stakeholders

Conference on Congressional Communications: Dispelling Myths and Discussing Solutions

A forum in which more than 200 experts and stakeholders from both sides came together to share perspectives and discuss possible solutions.

Key Stakeholders

Meetings with Leaders from Both Sides

Workshops and informal meetings with key stakeholders on and off Capitol Hill.

Citizens

Communicating with Congress: How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement

Nationwide telephone and online surveys of citizens about their views on communicating with Congress.

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

The Internet has forever changed how citizens and Members of Congress interact. Much of the change has been positive: more people than ever before are engaging in the public policy process; citizens are availing themselves of powerful new opportunities to organize around, and advocate for, issues that matter to them; and Members of Congress are informing and interacting with constituents in ways never before possible. However, the unprecedented capabilities of the Internet have also brought unprecedented challenges. Over the past decade, both congressional offices and the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns have employed technology in ways that have unintentionally hindered the democratic dialogue. The result has been misunderstanding, frustration, wasted effort, and even anger on both sides, which must be resolved to truly realize the tremendous opportunities for electronic communications between citizens and their representatives in Congress.

The *Communicating with Congress* project has been a nearly decade-long endeavor by the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) to help improve the democratic dialogue. To identify the critical challenges with, and possible solutions for, communications between citizens and Congress, CMF engaged congressional staff, citizens, public affairs professionals, technologists, and thought leaders through surveys, focus groups, workshops, research, and a public conference. The vast and varied information we collected is the basis for this report, which offers recommendations for ways each stakeholder group can help improve the process and puts forward a concept for a new model for constituent communications.

A prerequisite to understanding the challenges is to understand who the players are, their roles in the communications between Congress and the public, and the processes they use to perform their roles. While it is important to note that these communications are fundamentally personal interactions between one citizen and one Member of Congress, the reality is that other players participate, as well. In addition to citizens and Members of Congress – the primary stakeholders – there are secondary and tertiary stakeholder groups involved. All play vital roles in ensuring that effective communication takes place.

Citizens are the primary stakeholders on the sender side, and their right to petition government for a redress of grievances is enshrined in the Constitution. The primary stakeholders on the receiving end are Members of Congress. Congressional staff members are secondary stakeholders, as they are responsible for helping Senators and Representatives manage their communication to and from their constituents. The many thousands of organizations that facilitate grassroots advocacy campaigns – including interest groups, professional associations, employers, unions, clubs, etc. – are also secondary stakeholders. Citizens look to the organizations they trust to help them monitor what is happening in Washington and to help them understand when and how to become engaged in the political process. Like congressional staff, these organizations play an important role in the communications between citizens and Members of Congress. The tertiary stakeholders are the vendors on both sides that provide technology, tools, and services to help the secondary stakeholders do their jobs more efficiently and effectively.

The processes each stakeholder group uses to perform their roles are complicated by challenges such as security issues, high volumes of communications, a lack of data standards, and stagnant congressional staff

sizes. Unfortunately, rather than collaborating to overcome the challenges and develop a better system of communication, both sides have spent significant time and effort trying to thwart the efforts of the other side to accomplish their own immediate objectives. What has developed is basically an arms race rather than a cooperative effort to accomplish their common overarching goal: effective communication between Members of Congress and their constituents.

Good practices and bad practices are employed by both sides. Some organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns have opted for expediency in sending communications to Congress, rather than employing tactics that are both effective and efficient and show respect for the traditional dialogue between the electorate and the elected. Some congressional offices, on the other hand, have chosen to reject any communication that does not originate through their own Web form, not understanding the role that grassroots organizations play and the faith that their constituents put in the organizations they trust. It is essential to understand, however, that the vast majority of citizens, grassroots organizations, and congressional offices do want effective and efficient communications. Those who engage in bad practices are the minority on both sides.

The purpose of this report is to give best-practice recommendations to every stakeholder group to provide a benchmark for future effectiveness.

Even if all of the players were engaging in best practices, however, the current systems employed by each group have been developed independently of one another, which provides for a great deal of confusion, wasted efforts, and vast inefficiency. What is clear to almost anyone involved in congressional communications is that the current system of communication is inadequate and does not accomplish the goals of either side. The new model for constituent communication that CMF puts forward in this report has at its base a set of beliefs – *all communications to and from congressional offices should be trustworthy, authentic, effective and efficient.* From that starting point we have developed – in collaboration with representatives from all of the various stakeholder groups – a new way of handling communications that will address some of the most complicated issues that keep the process mired in inefficiency. This new model for constituent communications, called the "Aggregated Communications Dashboard," allows for improved communication by:

- **Aggregating grassroots communications.** The primary purpose and power of grassroots communication is to demonstrate strength in the collective voice of engaged and organized citizens. However, if this strength is diluted upon delivery because the messages cannot be viewed together, some of the power is lost. As a result, a new model needs to be able to pull all of the communications about a particular topic or advocacy campaign together. It is in this aggregation that advocacy campaigns can maximize their impact and congressional offices can accurately understand the sentiments of their constituents.

- **Verifying that grassroots communications are sent from real citizens.** Grassroots communications should never be sent to the offices of elected officials without the knowledge, consent, and action of the individual citizen. Any successful model must convey to congressional offices that they can trust the communications are sent through the direct action of a constituent. Though there are few ways to guarantee constituent involvement, there are ways to provide strong evidence that citizens are actively sending messages through the inclusion of personalized comments.

- **Identifying the sponsoring grassroots organization and their vendor.** Congressional staff report that being able to identify – and being able to contact – both the grassroots organization and advocacy vendor it might be using would add weight and credibility to grassroots campaigns. Though it may seem counterintuitive, identifying the organization generating a campaign – which CMF recommends but considers optional – helps improve congressional staff trust, as it demonstrates that the organization stands behind the messages. Staff can also follow up on the campaign or resolve technical problems if contact information for the organization and vendor are included.

- **Identifying the bill, amendment, or topic of the messages.** Early identification of the topic in a constituent's message will allow congressional offices to more quickly process and reply to constituent correspondence. Ideally, the overall subject, bill, or amendment should be clearly identified to immediately allow the receiving office to know the topic and sentiments of the citizen's communication.

- **Developing a set of open source communications standards.** Any new model for constituent communications must be based on open source standards that are published and available for those who wish to communicate with Congress. These standards must be widely available, both to accommodate the largest number of organizations and to allow even small grassroots groups to participate without the assistance of a third-party vendor.

It is not enough to make recommendations and put forward new models for improved communications. Neither will actually affect change unless the stakeholders act on those recommendations and together take steps to collaborate on solutions.

For that reason, CMF believes that great strides could be made by continuing the dialogue and momentum of the *Communicating with Congress* project by convening a task force to help evaluate and implement possible solutions. Of course, any effective task force would need to be comprised of representative decision makers from each of the various stakeholder groups. Through this collaboration, and with this report as a starting point, we believe that the administrative burden of managing communications can be minimized while allowing a more meaningful interaction – an improvement in the democratic dialogue – between Members and their constituents.

Introduction

The state of communications between citizens and Members of Congress is being threatened. At a time when the Internet has made it easier than ever before for Americans to engage in public policy, it is easy to assume that the quality of the interactions between the representative and the represented has improved. In fact, the opposite is true. A series of issues have converged in a perfect storm of increased mail volumes, a proliferation of grassroots advocacy campaigns, an increased U.S. population, static congressional staff resources, and inadequate and under-utilized technology tools. The result has been a deterioration in meaningful communications. If something is not done, citizens may grow more disillusioned with government, elected leaders may become more removed from those they represent, and the ultimate victim could be the open and honest dialogue between citizens and Members of Congress.

As the population of the United States has increased, so have the number of communications sent to Congress each year. In 1911 – the year the number of representatives in the House was set at 435 – congressional districts averaged about 75,000 people. Today the average district has grown to 650,000. In fact, since the 1970's, the last time congressional staff sizes changed appreciably, the population of the United States has grown by more than 100 million people, and congressional districts have grown by an average of 180,000 constituents. That means Senators and Representatives now represent more people than ever before.

During the same timeframe, information and communications technologies have advanced dramatically. In 1911, interactions between Members of Congress and their constituents occurred through in-person meetings, postal mail, and telephone. Information about public policy was slower to trickle to the general public, and, though grassroots lobbying has existed since the dawn of the republic, organizing and communicating with Congress took longer and required greater effort than it presently does. Now, Americans have access to public policy information any time of the day or night, and they can communicate with each other and with Congress instantly. Television, fax machines, computers, mobile devices, e-mail, and the Internet have all had significant impact on how citizens get information about, and interact with, Congress. With the introduction of each, Senators and Representatives became more accessible than they had been before.

While Members of Congress genuinely want to hear from constituents, the rising volume of citizen communication has overwhelmed many of their offices. Because they function basically as independent small businesses, each office has had to decide for itself how to manage its messages. Unfortunately, that means many offices have concluded that advocacy campaigns of identical form messages are not sent with the knowledge and approval of the constituents whose names are on them and, therefore, do not warrant responses.[1] As a result, some employ policies and practices to block, filter out, or ignore certain types of advocacy campaigns rather than capitalizing on the opportunities they present to communicate with constituents who want to hear from them. In so doing, they risk alienating their most engaged constituents. Americans who contact Congress tend to be more politically active in other ways than those who do not, and our research showed almost half of all adult Americans had been in touch with a Member of Congress in the last five years.[2]

---

[1] Brad Fitch and Kathy Goldschmidt, "Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy" (Washington, DC: CMF, 2005), 31. http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF_Pubs/communicatingwithcongress_report1.pdf

[2] Kathy Goldschmidt and Leslie Ochreiter, "Communicating with Congress: How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement" (Washington, DC: CMF, 2008), 10-11. http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF_Pubs/cwc_citizenengagement.pdf

Practices on Capitol Hill are not the only ones that have led to the current problems with communications between citizens and Congress. Many organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns have focused on finding *expedient* rather than *effective* means to use the Internet to communicate with Congress. Some engage in bad practices that make a bad situation worse, and a few seem only to be concerned with whether their messages arrive – rather than if they are facilitating effective communication. This has led to what is essentially an arms race. Some in Congress have been seeking means to keep messages out and citizens and the advocacy community have been seeking means to get them in. Every action results in an escalation. Unfortunately, both sides have expended a great deal of time and resources attempting to thwart the other. What has developed is a complicated system that no longer truly meets the needs of any of the stakeholders.

To help overcome the problems and identify solutions, the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) embarked on the nearly-decade-long *Communicating with Congress* project. This report is the capstone of the project, but it is not the final step in the process. It draws from the vast amount of data CMF has gathered to identify the needs of the stakeholders and define the elements of a new model for communications between citizens and Congress. CMF began with focus group, survey, and interview research with 350 congressional staffers from more than 200 House and Senate offices, gauging their perceptions of citizen communication. That research culminated in the report *Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy*. We then conducted two nationwide surveys with more than 10,000 citizens asking about the perceptions and practices of those who had and had not communicated with Congress. Those findings are detailed in the report *Communicating with Congress: How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement*. CMF has also conducted countless interviews, focus groups, and stakeholder meetings, as well as a 200-person conference with representatives from both sides in an effort to understand the magnitude of the challenges and the perspectives of the affected parties.

Our research enabled us to define the requirements for a new system to improve the democratic dialogue, and to propose a high-level concept, but there is still a great deal of work to be done. This report provides neither technical specifications nor recommendations for the detail work necessary to design and implement a new system. We know that numerous technologies can be used to help streamline and improve communications between citizens and Members of Congress, but our objective was not to identify, review, or create a platform for doing so. Rather, our objective for this report is to discuss in detail the various elements – the high-level principles and considerations – necessary to improve the process.

Public Comment on the Draft Report

Because our recommendations impact the relationship between citizens and their Members of Congress, CMF wanted to ensure that as many of the stakeholders as possible were invited to participate in their development. To this end, on June 16, 2008, we posted a draft version of this report on our Web site to allow interested stakeholders to review our recommendations and our concept for a new model for constituent communications. The draft was available for public comment for 40 days.

The public comment we received was informative and served to remind us of the strong opinions and raw frustrations felt by many of the stakeholders. We heard from citizens who want to ensure their voices are heard on Capitol Hill. We heard from overwhelmed congressional staff trying their best to help their bosses be responsive to their constituents. We also heard from House and Senate committee and leadership staff, academicians, grassroots advocates, technology and communications experts, and even a couple of individuals in the international community who are watching this process from afar.

CMF has never before sought public feedback on our work and were unsure of what to expect. We speculated that perhaps only a handful of diehard observers would read the report and take the time to provide their thoughts. On the other hand, we thought there was a possibility we would be the recipients of an overwhelming amount of feedback along the lines of the advocacy campaigns discussed in this report. In the end, what we received was 115 thorough and thoughtful submissions from various stakeholders and more than a dozen white papers from interested organizations and individuals. The public comment helped refine the content of this report and, for those who viewed the original draft, we believe it is important to highlight themes that emerged in the feedback, as well as resulting changes to our recommendations and concept.

In several areas, the feedback indicated a need for clarification or emphasis to make our concepts less ambiguous, as respondents sometimes took issue with concepts on which there was actual agreement. Other times, the feedback convinced us to change or add content or to remove text that was unnecessary or detracted from the overall message. Finally, we spent the bulk of our time and effort, due to the recurring comments we received, on the following three areas:

1. **Personalized vs. Form.** Several respondents to the draft report took exception with the concept that a small number of personally drafted citizen communications can be more effective than a significantly larger number of form messages with identical text. Some even suggested that the opposite should be true since a higher number of communications logically represents more of a Members district. All communications to Capitol Hill are effective, but many times the key to success is whether or not grassroots organizations utilized the most effective means. Let us be clear; it is not that a large number of communications to Capitol Hill – even a large number of identical form communications – cannot be effective. What is evident from our research with congressional offices, however, is that there is a difference between 100 identically texted constituent messages arriving in a congressional office and six personally drafted letters from citizens that want their Member to know how a bill or issue personally affects their daily lives. High volumes of identical messages are indicative of a potential groundswell of support or opposition to a particular issue

in the Member's district or state. On the other hand, handwritten letters or personally drafted e-mails put a face on an issue and persuade a Member of Congress in different ways. Both can be effective forms of communication. However, the most effective campaigns attempt to do both: produce a large volume of personalized communications.

2. **Organization Identification.** The new model for constituent communications that CMF puts forward in this report contains a recommendation that the sponsoring grassroots advocacy organization identify itself in its campaigns to Capitol Hill. While we stand behind this recommendation because congressional staff consistently reveal that knowing this information lends weight and credibility to the communications they receive, there was some concern that this not be a mandatory field in the new communications model. However, CMF believes that the inclusion of information that identifies the organization should be optional. Organizations wishing to maximize the effectiveness of their campaigns now have an additional tool at their disposal; those organizations that would prefer to remain anonymous can choose to do so.

3. **Aggregated Communications Dashboard.** In the draft of this report released for public comment, the new model for constituent communications that CMF puts forward resulted in a fair amount of misunderstanding. The misunderstanding most likely stemmed from the nomenclature that we used to describe the concept, and we regret that our word choice confused rather than clarified. To simplify the concept of the model, we used the term "dual channel dashboard" to describe the fact that the inclusion of a unique identifier in a grassroots advocacy campaign allowed the campaign's messages to be aggregated together, which conveys to the receiving office the magnitude of interest in a bill or issue. Unfortunately, some took this to mean that if there is a dual channel system, there is a primary and a secondary channel, or even a priority channel and a non-priority channel. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, all messages – regardless of whether they originate from a Member's own Web form or through the efforts of a grassroots advocacy organization – continue to come in as individual messages and congressional offices can and should treat them as such.

What the new model and its use of a unique identifier does do, however, is give both congressional offices and the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns additional tools to help them be more effective. For that reason, to eliminate confusion and allay any fear that we are proposing the creation of a "second class communications" method, we have adopted a more appropriate descriptor. In this report we refer to the new model as the "aggregated communications dashboard" to more accurately describe the concept. The aggregated dashboard approach extends an additional benefit to grassroots communications that messages coming through a Member's own Web form have always had: the ability to be aggregated together by the topic of the incoming message. While grassroots communications would continue to come in as individual messages, they now have the added benefit to also be viewed in aggregate, allowing Members to understand the breadth of concern for individual issues. With the implementation of the new model, prior to a vote on the House or Senate floor, a Member can easily be told, "You have X number of constituents that support this bill and X number of organizations that do, too." This is something that is nearly impossible – or at the very least extremely difficult – with current systems.

While this report contains largely the same recommendations and concepts as the draft report that we released for public comment, it is our hope that this final report more clearly explains and articulates our conclusions and intentions. In fact, much of the feedback we received was confined to limited aspects of the larger concepts, rather than objections to core recommendations or the new model put forward in this publication. CMF considers this report to be a collaborative effort. The ideas and suggestions for clarifications offered during the period of public comment helped to ensure that this report represents – as much as possible – the views and thoughts of all invested stakeholders. It is our hope that the process of incorporating the thoughts of such a diverse group of individuals has further enhanced this final report.

Background

When the first e-mails arrived on Capitol Hill around 1995, citizens were using this emerging medium to contact their elected representatives through open, public e-mail addresses. Within a few years, and with the help of a deluge of e-mail messages about the Clinton impeachment hearings, the novelty of this new technology started to wear off. The volume of electronic citizen communication had increased beyond offices' existing capacities to handle it. Citizens were beginning to take advantage of the new medium to organize coordinated electronic advocacy campaigns, which increased the volume. Additionally, offices were receiving rapidly growing volumes of commercial spam and messages from citizens they did not represent, which made e-mail management extremely difficult and time-consuming. So much so, that, for a brief time, some offices opted not to accept e-mail, because it was so difficult to separate the constituent messages from the commercial spam and non-constituent messages.

Realizing that electronic mail was on its way to becoming mainstream, in 2000, Member offices began to develop techniques to reduce the commercial spam and non-constituent messages. They created a more structured electronic communication system using zip code matching to ensure messages were from people living in the Member's state or district. Constituent verification was not very effective using regular e-mail, so congressional offices began to abandon their public e-mail addresses in favor of contact forms on their Web sites which required certain information, including the sender's name, address, and zip code. By requiring electronic contact via the World Wide Web rather than through e-mail applications, these forms made it more difficult for citizens to contact Congress electronically, and they made certain online advocacy techniques impossible. As a result, this act by Congress to impose a more structured electronic communications system was the beginning of a technological "arms race" between congressional offices and the organizers grassroots advocacy campaigns that continues to this day.

To help the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns respond to the Web forms and more easily conduct online advocacy campaigns, a new industry emerged. Technology vendors stepped in and began to provide systems to enable individuals and organizations to coordinate their advocacy campaigns on their Web sites. These tools provided both the organizers of the campaigns and the citizen participants with capabilities never before possible. Using them, organizers could send action alerts, direct people to information on their Web sites, encourage participation in an advocacy campaign, and collect information to automatically populate the forms on Members' Web sites or to send the messages via other communications media. To citizens, the tools provided capabilities to help them feel better informed about why and how to contact Congress and to direct their communications to the appropriate targets, even allowing them to send messages to more than one Member of Congress in a single action. These sophisticated tools escalated the arms race and congressional offices, once again, saw a marked increase in the volume of messages they were receiving. As before, the volumes became unmanageable using the tools and capabilities congressional offices had at the time.

Many congressional offices responded by devising strategies to help them better process the messages. In addition to aggressively employing e-mail filters and rules, they developed increasingly sophisticated Web forms that required correspondents to choose from a list of specific subject areas. Doing so made it easier to

automatically sort and aggregate incoming messages by subject and assign them to the appropriate staffer. However, it created another barrier to organized campaigns, as the technologies at the time were not capable of handling the subject menus. It did not take long, of course, before the vendors upgraded their software so online grassroots advocacy campaigns could proceed as they had been, and the volumes of electronic messages to Congress continued to rise at a rapid clip.

Since then, congressional offices have had to make various management and operational decisions about how to handle their constituent communications. Many have reallocated staff resources away from other tasks like casework and legislative activities to manage the growing volumes of communication. Others have adopted sophisticated technologies to automate data entry and streamline correspondence management. Still others have implemented policies and practices to simplify the processes for researching, writing, and approving responses. A growing number of offices wholeheartedly embrace grassroots advocacy campaigns as an opportunity to identify new constituent contacts and to communicate with more people than ever before. And a very small number have adopted techniques, such as CAPTCHAs and IP blocking, to limit or prevent messages sent via some or all third party Web sites, which is how most electronic advocacy campaigns send their messages.

Congressional offices view their actions, whatever they may be, as ensuring that the electronic environment remains a viable conduit for genuine messages from real constituents. They define what it means to be a genuine message and a real constituent differently – sometimes too restrictively – but they are well intentioned.

The same is true of most of the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns. They want to engage citizens in coordinated efforts to influence public policy about which they care. Their concepts of how best to do this differ, and there are some tactics that are, at best, ineffective and, at worst, counterproductive, but their efforts play an important role in the democratic process.

As the Internet and e-mail have become more integral to the democratic dialogue, however, the tools and tactics used on each side have become more sophisticated, the volumes of messages has grown, and the number of citizens communicating with Congress has increased. As a result, both congressional offices and the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns are investing more time, effort, and resources in the communications. That means the stakes keep getting higher, which has led to very strong feelings – and powerful frustrations – on both sides. Some congressional offices may be too inclined to mistrust organized advocacy campaigns, believing that the bad practices of a few represent the practices of the entire industry. Some organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns may be too inclined to see congressional staff as uninterested in facilitating their constituents' first amendment rights. These views are both far from reality, but tensions are high and the process is rife with misperceptions on both sides.

This continuing arms race is counterproductive because everyone ultimately has the same objective: a real, authentic dialogue between citizens and elected representatives.

This continuing arms race is counterproductive because everyone ultimately has the same objective: a real, authentic dialogue between citizens and elected representatives. Both sides are essentially right, but the problem exists because neither side fully understands the position of the other. Rather than working together to establish a more effective system, both sides have been more intent on using technology to achieve their own short-term objectives without considering the implications of their mutual long-term objective to facilitate and enhance democratic communication.

The Players and Their Processes

AN OVERVIEW OF THE STAKEHOLDERS

To understand the challenges in the communications between citizens and their representatives in Congress it is critical to understand who the various stakeholders are and the roles they play in the process. While these communications are ultimately about the interaction between individual citizens and individual Members of Congress, there are a number of other players, as well. We define the stakeholders as primary, secondary, or tertiary stakeholders. The primary stakeholders are, of course, those that "own" the communication and the relationship. The secondary stakeholders are those that are instrumental in helping facilitate the relationship and the communications between the primary stakeholders. The tertiary stakeholders are those that provide the tools, guidance, and services that help the secondary stakeholders perform their roles more effectively and efficiently. The stakeholders that fall into each of these categories are discussed below, along with their roles in the communications process and their relationships to the other stakeholders.

Primary Stakeholders

- **Citizens.** Citizens are, of course, one of the two direct stakeholders in congressional communications. Citizens are the originators of the interactions on which this report focuses. No matter how they are motivated to communicate – whether through their own initiative or through an advocacy campaign – they are, for the purposes of this report, the initiators of the relationship with their representatives.

- **Members of Congress.** Members of Congress are the other direct stakeholders in these communications. Citizens direct their messages to them, and it is the Members who are ultimately responsible for the interaction and the relationship once the message is received. For practical purposes, however, Members of Congress are heavily reliant on their staffs to help them manage the messages they receive and maintain constituent relationships.

Secondary Stakeholders

- **Organizers of Grassroots Advocacy Campaigns.** For the purposes of this report, this group includes any person or organization – interest groups, professional associations, employers, unions, clubs, etc. – that initiates and facilitates grassroots advocacy communications between citizens and Congress. These stakeholders have a powerful interest in the success of their advocacy campaigns and the outcome of the public policy they are trying to influence, but in the actual communications, their role is secondary. They own neither the communication nor the relationship which is exclusively between the primary stakeholders, but they do have a significant stake in the communications, nonetheless.

- **House and Senate Personal Office Staff.** Senators' and Representatives' personal office staffs are largely responsible for managing and responding to the messages the Members receive from citizens. As with the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns, these stakeholders do not own the relationship, but they are deeply involved, and they hold a vested interest in ensuring the communications are effective.

- **Congressional Committee and Leadership Offices.** The staff in congressional leadership offices assist the Senators and Representatives in leadership positions to provide the direction and agenda for their parties. Staff in committees, where the early consideration of legislation occurs, support Senators and Representatives as they consider the matters under the committee's jurisdiction. These groups are included as secondary stakeholders because our research revealed interest in enabling citizens to be more involved in the early stages of lawmaking. Our research also revealed practices by some organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns to direct citizens to communicate with Members of Congress through their committees. They are secondary stakeholders because they directly support Members of Congress, but they have much less involvement in the communications between Members and citizens than personal office staff do.

Tertiary Stakeholders

- **The Institution of Congress.** At a macro level, this is the entire body of the U.S. Congress, but at a more organizational level, this group is comprised of the offices that provide infrastructure and operational support to the numerous and varied offices of the House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. The role of these organizations is to support Senators and Representatives and their staffs in performing their work, which includes effectively managing citizen communications. They have only an indirect role in the communications between citizens and Members.

- **Vendors that Provide Tools to Facilitate Grassroots Advocacy Campaigns.** These companies provide software tools the organizers of advocacy campaigns use to generate and send messages to Capitol Hill. Their role in the communications is simply to ensure their clients have what they need to conduct their advocacy campaigns. They do not have a direct role in the relationship between Members and citizens, and their primary interest in the communications is to ensure their clients are satisfied with their products and services.

- **Vendors that Provide Tools to Manage Constituent Communications.** These companies provide congressional offices with software tools to help them manage their incoming and outgoing constituent communications. Like the vendors to the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns, their role is to serve their clients. They do not have a direct role in the relationship, and their primary interest is to ensure their clients are satisfied.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between the various stakeholders that are involved in constituent communications. This hierarchy is not intended to mitigate the role or stake each group has in the communications between citizens and Members of Congress, but rather to establish their relationships to one another. Each of these stakeholders has a role to play, whether it is direct, facilitative, strategic, or technical, in the process by which communications are sent by citizens, and received, processed, and responded to by congressional offices. As a result, it is important to consider them all in developing a concept for improving the process. In later chapters we describe these stakeholder groups in greater detail, including their unique challenges, and make best-practice recommendations for each. Before we get into detail about the problems and the solutions, however, it is important to understand the basic ways in which communications processes are managed both on and off Capitol Hill.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

Communications between constituents and Members of Congress have evolved over time as different mechanisms have become available. Before e-mail, most messages to Members of Congress were sent via postal mail or fax. Long distance telephone calls to Washington used to be cost-prohibitive, but are now commonplace, especially when time is of the essence. Few people could have imagined 20 years ago that there would be methods of communication quite like the Internet and e-mail, and because the great majority of the current challenges exist as a result of the Internet and e-mail, our discussion focuses primarily on these media.

Figure 1.   The Stakeholders

Primary

Citizens **Members**

Secondary

Organizers of
Grassroots Advocacy
Campaigns

House
and Senate
Personal
Office Staff

Committee
and
Leadership
Offices

Tertiary

Vendors that Provide Tools to Facilitate
Grassroots Advocacy Campaigns

The Institution
of Congress

Vendors that
Provide Tools to
Manage
Constutuent
Communications

Off the Hill **On the Hill**

Given the significant and relatively recent changes in communication, it is important to understand the processes as they operate today, rather than holding onto an outdated view based on processes that may have been used decades ago. It is no longer the case that every citizen message to Capitol Hill is personally crafted by individuals sitting at their desks or kitchen tables putting pen to paper. Many – if not most – of the citizens who now contact Congress are motivated and assisted in doing so by the organizations they trust, often through organized grassroots advocacy campaigns. These organizations usually provide significant guidance and assistance with the process of transmitting, and often of drafting, the communications. Similarly, a Member of Congress no longer sits in his or her office with a letter opener in hand, or behind a computer waiting to hear the words, "you've got mail." Members receive so much mail that this simply is not practical. Most Senators

and Representatives are involved in the process, but usually their staff does the bulk of the work managing and responding to the communications they receive from citizens. To provide a current view of how messages are managed on both sides, the rest of this chapter describes the process in more detail.

Citizen Action

A citizen currently initiates contact with an elected representative in two primary ways. In the first, a citizen takes his or her own initiative to write a letter, send an e-mail, place a call, or otherwise contact a Senator or Representative on an issue. In most cases, the constituent will either hand-write a letter to send via postal mail, or, more frequently, submit an electronic message through a Web form on the Member's Web site or via the Member's public e-mail address, if he or she maintains one. Many congressional offices consider these messages to be individual communications. They can be anything from short, one-sentence e-mails asking the Member to support a particular bill or amendment to multi-page missives with facts, figures, and voluminous historic information, but they are always self-motivated, composed, and sent directly by the citizen.

Messages sent to congressional offices through coordinated citizen action are often referred to as grassroots advocacy campaigns. The citizen sending the message might be involved in a grassroots advocacy campaign because he or she is interested in, or a member of, an organization with a particular affiliation – such as a corporation, union, or professional association – or an interest group, such as AARP, Sierra Club, or the National Rifle Association. From the citizen's standpoint, the difference between participating in a grassroots advocacy campaign and sending an individual communication is in the source of the motivation to contact Congress, the sense of having strength in numbers, and the fact that the coordinator of a campaign provides guidance, language, and assistance with the communication. Often, the coordinator of a campaign, rather than the citizens participating in them, will be responsible for delivering the messages, as well.

Grassroots Organizer Action

Typically, an organization initiates a grassroots advocacy campaign to Congress by either sending out an "action alert" to its membership or posting information on its Web site about upcoming legislative action. These action alerts attempt to motivate a group of citizens to become engaged in an issue and ultimately to send a message to their elected representatives to influence a legislative outcome. This, of course, is intended to demonstrate to a Member of Congress that a large number of his or her constituents share a similar viewpoint, with the hope that this will have an impact on the Member's position.

Utilizing sophisticated tools to create, manage, and track these communications allows organizations to produce organized and highly-effective grassroots advocacy campaigns that facilitate the interaction between citizens and Members of Congress.

When citizens participate in a grassroots advocacy campaign online – now the most common way campaigns are organized – prepared text is often provided that states the group's position and includes talking points or text to convey to the Member. The resulting messages might be delivered via fax, telephone, postal mail, or other means, but most frequently, they are delivered via e-mail. Citizens usually have the option to edit, replace, or add to the text, but often citizens choose to leave the text as-is. The result is that numerous communications with identical language and formatting are delivered to congressional offices. Given the mistrust many congressional staff feel toward identical form messages,[3] however, many organizations now provide talking points and encourage those participating in their advocacy campaigns to craft their own personal message or customize suggested text with information about the citizen's own perspective and experience.

---

[3] Brad Fitch and Kathy Goldschmidt, "Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy" (Washington, DC: CMF, 2005), 31. http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF_Pubs/communicatingwithcongress_report1.pdf

In addition, the organizers provide their members with the ability to send the same communication to more than one Member of Congress – typically both of the citizen's Senators and his or her Representative. The organizers of the campaigns then perform the legwork to ensure the messages are delivered. This makes it very easy for a citizen to send messages to Congress.

Congressional Office Action

Regardless of whether the missives are sent directly by individual constituents or through a grassroots advocacy campaign, they are all ultimately entered into a congressional office's correspondence management system (CMS – House) or constituent services system (CSS – Senate). These specialized software packages provide House and Senate offices with tools to manage, track, and respond to constituent correspondence. They allow offices to create individual records for each correspondent and to manage every interaction with that correspondent. No matter how the messages are delivered, once they are entered into the CMS/CSS database, they all look the same. The difference is in how each office processes its messages.

While the specific tactics used to manage correspondence are highly individualized by office, each has various processing tools at their disposal. Most begin with batching messages into groups of similar communications, which are then assigned to the appropriate staffers. Batching helps make the processing as efficient as possible, as aggregating similar communications makes it easier for staff to review and respond to the messages, and it provides the office with an idea how many people share similar opinions about a particular topic. Some offices batch using the issue codes from their own Web forms; others rely on system rules or CMS/CSS features that batch messages automatically; a few still batch by hand; and many rely on a combination of these methods. Regardless of the batching method used by the office, however, the process of managing and responding to constituent messages is a time-consuming sorting, reviewing, and logging process that depends significantly on manual labor and human judgment.

In a typical House or Senate office, once the messages have been sorted they are assigned to the appropriate Legislative Correspondent (LC) or Legislative Assistant (LA). That staffer will read the letter and identify an existing text or draft new language to respond to the citizen's communication. The process is nearly identical for e-mail, postal mail, faxes, and telephone calls; each communication is entered into the system and then processed in much the same way. Once a response has been drafted, it begins its path through the approval process. This varies from office to office, but almost always involves a review of the draft by a senior staffer to ensure the response accurately reflects the Member's position, is consistent with his or her legislative record, and is free from typographic and grammatical errors. There can be many people in the review and approval process, including the Legislative Assistant, the Legislative Director, the Chief of Staff, and the Member, or few, depending on the office.

Once the draft has made its way through the office's review process and any subsequent rewrites, final approval is given. The response is sent to the individual constituent by either postal mail or e-mail, depending on the original sender's communication method and office policy. Some congressional offices have adopted a policy of responding to the communication in the same way in which they received it, meaning an incoming e-mail will get an outgoing e-mail reply. Others will send an e-mail reply to a constituent if they have the citizen's e-mail address on file from previous communications. Regrettably, still others opt to respond to all incoming communications with a postal letter.

It is also commonplace in congressional offices to produce a "mail report" on constituent correspondence. These reports vary from office to office, but typically contain totals by subject matter and position (pro or con) of the number of people that contacted the Member on an issue. Since it is not physically possible for most Members of Congress to read every single message in its entirety, these reports give them a dashboard view of the constituent communications coming in. Members may see reports on a regular basis or view them before important votes. While they know the people who contact them are not necessarily scientifically representative of

their states and districts, most take into account the sentiment of those who felt strongly enough about an issue to contact them.

Figure 2 (following page) displays the flow of individual and grassroots advocacy campaign communications to congressional offices and back again. Though this process appears to be straightforward, there are bumps in the road that create significant obstacles to truly robust democratic dialogue. Many are related to the considerable changes brought about by technology and the Internet; changes to which neither side has yet completely adapted. As a result, frustration is currently high, and the stakeholders on both sides are accusing the other side of being unreasonable, behaving disingenuously, and using practices that are damaging to democracy. To some degree, both sides are right.

In the next three chapters, we examine in greater detail each of the major stakeholder groups: Citizens, Grassroots Organizations, and Congress. We explain any subgroups that exist, describe their roles in the communications process, and discuss the core challenges each faces. More important than focusing on the problems, however, is getting to solutions. We provide recommendations identified through our research for each group in an effort to help foster a more meaningful and productive dialogue between citizens and their elected officials.

Figure 2.   Communications Flow

The Member of Congress signs off, and the response is sent to the constituent

To: Rbarret@e-mail.com From: MikeDelvas@mail.house.gov

Subject: A reply from Congressman Delvas

Dear Mr. Barret,
I appreciate your taking the time to contact me with your views on
H.R. 548. Rest assured that I share your views and I will vote for the
bill when it comes on the House Floor. Thank you.
                          Sincerely,
                          Congressman Mike Delvas

Advocacy organization issues "action alert"

To: Rbarret@e-mail.com From:alerts@nts.org

Subject: National Transportation Society ALERT!

Mr. Barret,
We know transportation issues are important to you. Right now, H.R.
548, the "Transportation Improvement Act of 2008" is being
considered in the House. Go to our Web site to learn more and take
action to help pass this important bill. www.nts.org/hr548

Constituent visits the Advocacy Organization's Web site, where he/she fills out a message form and submits it to be sent to their elected officials

National Transportation Society
Take Action! Fill out your contact information and edit the
message you want to send to Congress.
Name: Rick Barret
Address: 37 Main St, Houston, TX 54321
The message: Dear Congressman, H.R. 548 will
help my community. Potholes destroy
cars and are dangerous.

Send this message!

REVIEW DRAFT

Dear Mr. Barret,
~~Thanks for~~ I appreciate your taking the
time to contact me with your views on
H.R. 548. Rest assured that I share your
views and ~~will be supporting~~ I will vote
for the bill when it comes on the House
Floor. Thank you.
                          Sincerely,
                          Congressman Mike Delvas

The Constituent

The Legislative Assistant, Legislative Director, and/or Chief of Staff review, edit, and approve the draft

The Member of Congress' office receives and compiles all messages in a CMS/CSS

1 Name: Rick Barret   Address: 37 Main St, Houston, TX 54321
Message: Dear Congressman, H.R. 548 will help my community.
Potholes destroy cars and are dangerous.

2 Name: Jack Woolery   Address: 107 Main St. Spring, TX 87654
Message: Vote against H.R 332, it will be very very bad for the state
and we will lose manyt important things.

3 Name: Brook Tomlinson   Address: 7 Oak St. Spring, TX 87654
Message: I saw your appearance on C-SPAN, and I just wanted to let
you know that I agree 100%!! Keep up the good work!

4 Name: Kenny Tennant   Address: 11 Pine Ave. Pasadena, TX 87653
Message: I have a very important business trip in two weeks, and my
passport has expired. I cannot get thru to anyone, please help!

View all 1,054 messages

Constituent visits the Member's Web site and fills out the comment form

Congressman Mike Delvas
I want to hear from you. If you have a question or comment,
please contact me using the form below
Name: Rick Barret
Address: 37 Main St, Houston, TX 54321
Issue: Transportation
Comment: Dear Congressman, H.R.548 bill
will help my community. Potholes
destroy cars and are dangerous.

Send!

The Legislative Correspondent drafts a response

FIRST DRAFT

Dear Mr. Barret,
Thanks for taking to time to contact me
with your views on H.R. 548. Rest
assured that I share your views and will
be supporting the bill when it comes on
the House Floor.
Sincerely,
Congressman Mike Delvas

Citizens

Citizens are, of course, one of the two primary stakeholders in this process. From the very first Congress, individual citizens have petitioned their representatives to influence legislation that would affect their daily lives. In fact, the right to petition government for a redress of grievances is enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution, and this right is at the very core of our democracy. Citizens must be able to communicate with their government and be engaged in public policy to maintain a robust and healthy democracy.

CITIZEN PARTICIPANTS

Citizen "petitions" have evolved a great deal over time and have utilized every form of communication, from in-person meetings with Members to postcards, petitions, handwritten letters, telegrams, telephone calls, faxes, e-mails, and even, more recently, comments on blog posts and text messages. These communications can be heartfelt and awe-inspiring, they can be humble and emotional, or they can be demanding and inauspicious. No matter what form they take, citizens send communications to Capitol Hill because they want to participate in the public policy process and they hope to affect the crafting of laws that will govern their lives. With the advent of e-mail and the Internet, the volume of these communications – and other types of communications to Congress – has increased dramatically.

Some of the senders of these communications expect their elected representatives to reply to their inquiries while others just want to register their views with no expectation of a response. In either case, citizens expect to be heard and to have their representatives consider their viewpoints when it comes time to vote.

The bottom line is that citizens want to participate in the political process, and the issues about which they contact Members of Congress are important to them.

The CMF report, *Communicating with Congress: How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement,* provides interesting information about the individuals who are communicating with Congress. Perhaps one of the most important facts this research revealed was that individuals who contact Members of Congress registered higher rates of participation in political activities across the board than those who did not. They are a highly engaged portion of the population who are also highly influential within their social networks. These "Poli-fluentials" – a term coined by the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet (IPDI) to refer to those who participate in political activities online – are nearly seven times more likely than the general public to be "Influentials." They let others know of their opinions on everything from who to vote for to where to go on vacation, and people listen to them. Poli-fluentials are technologically savvy online consumers of news and political information who serve as opinion leaders in their communities – both on and offline. "When consuming their news online, Poli-fluentials have a propensity to rely on user-generated content, specifically blogs. They're also more likely to take political action online, engaging in activities ranging from signing petitions to making online contributions."[4] (See Figure 3.)

---

[4] Carol Darr and Joseph Graf, eds., "Poli-fluentials: The New Political Kingmakers". (Washington, DC: The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, 2007), 17. http://www.ipdi.org/UploadedFiles/Polifluentials%20Report%20-%20Final.pdf

Figure 3.   Poli-fluentials Are More Likely to Have Participated in the Following Activities within Last Year

Activity	Poli-fluentials	All Respondents
Seen a political video or animation on the Internet.	80%	58%
Used a search engine to find info about issues or candidates.	78%	61%
Added your name to an online petition.	75%	57%
Sent a pre-written email provided by an advocacy group to a public official.	63%	44%
Signed up to get email from a candidate, officeholder or political party.	62%	35%
Completed an online political questionnaire, not including this one.	50%	30%
Printed a list of political facts or talking points to use or give to someone else.	41%	21%
Left a comment on a political blog.	31%	17%
Made an online purchase of campaign paraphernalia.	27%	10%
Blogged about politics.	15%	8%
Visited social networking website to read about or discuss political blog.	14%	10%

■ Poli-fluentials   ■ All Respondents

Reprinted with permission of The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet.

The bottom line is that citizens want to participate in the political process, and the issues about which they contact Members of Congress are important to them. Of the online survey respondents who had contacted one of their Members of Congress, 91% said that what motivated them to make contact was that the issue was something they cared about deeply.[5] (See Figure 4.) The role of these citizen-stakeholders cannot be overlooked; they are the most basic element in our democratic process.

CHALLENGES FOR CITIZENS

Although the Constitution of the United States guarantees citizens a channel of communication to Washington, they do not always find it easy to do so. Furthermore, when citizens do contact Congress, they are not always certain their views are being taken into account. While it is by no means a comprehensive list, below are some of the core challenges citizens face in their attempts to participate in the public policy process:

1. **Citizens want to have their voices heard on Capitol Hill.** CMF's research with citizens reveals that 91% of the individuals who had contacted a Member of Congress in the last five years said that they were motivated to do so because they cared deeply about the issues. [6] That same research shows that regardless of whether a citizen came through the Member's Web site, sat down at their kitchen table to write a postal letter, or utilized the tools of a grassroots advocacy organization that they trust, they all want for their communication to be heard and considered on Capitol Hill. In fact, of those who had not contacted

---

[5] Kathy Goldschmidt and Leslie Ochreiter, *Communicating with Congress: How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement* (Washington, DC: CMF, 2008), 17. http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF_Pubs/cwc_citizenengagement.pdf

[6] Ibid.

Figure 4. By Far the Top Reason Internet Users Contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative Was That They Cared Deeply about the Issue

Reason	Percent
Care deeply about issue	91%
Asked by organization they trust	41%
Saw compelling information on a Web site	31%
Saw compelling news feature	26%
Saw compelling blog post	16%
Responding to message from the Senator or Representative	15%
Saw official on TV	15%
Asked by someone they know	15%
Needed help	9%
Saw compelling ad	6%
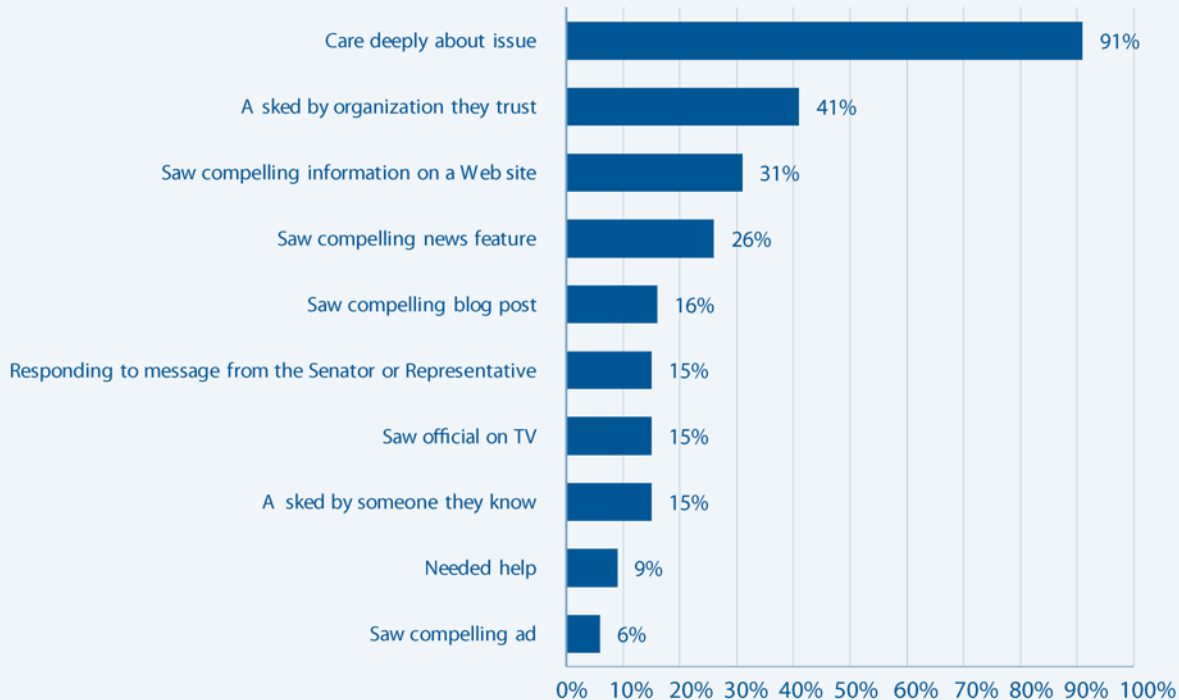
Congress in the last five years, 55% said one reason was that they did not think Members of Congress cared what they have to say.[7] Furthermore, 62% who had contacted Congress felt their Members were not interested in their views and opinions.[8] In spite of those numbers, most Americans we surveyed want their Senators and Representatives to keep them informed of their views and activities and of the policy issues being debated in Washington.

2. Not all citizens desire a response to their communications to Congress.
Congressional offices feel a great deal of pressure to reply to all of their constituents' communications, which is why most prioritize some messages over others. However, not all constituents want an answer from their Members of Congress. Some merely wish to register their opinions. Our survey of citizens found that 91% of Internet users who had contacted Congress, and 82% of those who had not, indicated that they would want to receive a response to any messages they send to Congress.[9] This reveals that, while most citizens want a reply, 9% to 18%, respectively, do not need a postal or e-mail response.[10] Cutting out this small amount of communication would add up. However, few congressional offices use any mechanisms to enable constituents to state their opinions and to opt out of getting a response. As a result, congressional offices are determining for themselves which messages receive responses and which do not, and it is possible that not all of them are making the most effective decisions.

---

[7] Ibid., 29.
[8] Ibid., 30.
[9] Ibid., 26.
[10] Ibid., 14.

3. **Citizens desire to communicate with committees and leadership offices.**
   Although our form of government does not accommodate it, many citizens desire to make their views known to congressional leaders and committee members who do not represent them. The primary reason citizens seek to engage committee and leadership members of the U.S. Congress is that the legislative agendas is set and the early drafting takes place with these offices. When citizens attempt to contact other Members than their own, these messages are usually forwarded to the appropriate Member or are ignored because offices do not have the resources to answer non-constituents. While it is understandable that rank and file Members cannot answer mail from the entire nation – especially when they struggle to keep up with the volume from their own constituents – what citizens are really hoping to do is reach Members that are active on issues that are important to them.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CITIZENS

While there are many challenges to an effective dialogue between citizens and those who represent them in Washington, there are ways that individual citizens can be more effective in their communications to Washington. To be as effective as possible, citizens should incorporate the following recommendations into their practices.

1. **Develop a better understanding of how Congress operates.**
   Through our research, we found that part of the reason citizens are not as effective in their communications as they could be is that many do not clearly understand the legislative process and how Congress functions. It is not necessary to be a congressional scholar, but a basic understanding will not only help you better follow the process, it will also help your messages hit their mark. In addition to the legislative resources list in Figure 5, here are some things you should know before drafting a letter or e-mail to your federally elected representatives:

   - **Who represents you.** American citizens that reside in one of the 50 states have three individuals elected to represent their interests in Congress: one Member of the U.S. House of Representatives and two U.S. Senators. Because of their limited resources, most Members of Congress only accept communications from those they represent.

   - **How Members make decisions.** Members want to hear from constituents, but rarely do they make legislative decisions based solely on the communications they receive from their districts or states. Citizens' messages are one of several things that help them determine how they will cast their votes. Members also weigh the needs of their districts/states with what is good for the country, their knowledge of the subject, party ideology, as well as input they receive from experts on the issues.

   - **The role of Members.** Every Member of Congress has two main roles: as legislators, they draft the laws that govern our nation; and as ombudsmen, they perform various services for their constituents, like helping them resolve issues with federal agencies.

   - **What jurisdiction they have.** Members of the House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate only have jurisdiction over issues of national concern and do not deal with issues of state or local concern like city traffic lights or state park systems. In addition, there are certain issues each chamber has jurisdiction over, such as judicial nominations in the Senate and passing the "articles of impeachment" in the House.

2. **Contact your representatives once per issue – and via one medium – unless you have new information to provide.**
   Although developing a relationship with a Member of Congress or congressional staffer is an excellent way to advocate for an issue, sending numerous identical messages on the same topic does not further your cause.

Legislation does not function like a contest, where the more times you enter, the better your chances to win. Your message will not be more persuasive if you call, write, e-mail, and fax with the same message every day for a week. Congressional offices can identify and merge these messages, and they will only count them as a single communication from one constituent. One message, per issue, per constituent will get your views registered with the congressional office, save everyone time, which will also help to ensure that you receive a response from your Member more quickly. This guidance holds true unless new or substantially different information needs to be conveyed to your representatives or there have been significant developments on the issue. There is also no harm in touching base on the issue periodically, but overwhelming an office with mail is less effective than keeping a dialogue going over time.

3. **Try to limit the number of issues discussed in each message.**
   Congressional offices receive thousands of constituent messages each week. If you are interested in your Representative's or Senator's views on a particular subject and would like to receive a reply, it is far more effective to limit each of your communications to one or two topics. Giving your opinion on numerous issues

---

Figure 5. Public Legislative Resources for Citizens

The Official Site of the U.S. House of Representatives

http://www.house.gov

Information on the House of Representatives including its history, legislative process resources, this week's House calendar, committee schedules, roll call vote records, and links to House committees, leadership offices, and individual Members of Congress.

The Official Site of the U.S. Senate

http://www.senate.gov

Information on the U.S. Senate including its history, legislative process resources, current Senate calendars, committee schedules, roll call vote records, and links to Senate committees, leadership offices, and individual Senators.

Clerk of the House

http://clerk.house.gov/

Obtain official documents, public disclosure forms, historical data, and Member and Committee information for the House of Representatives.

THOMAS

http://thomas.loc.gov/

An online journal of U.S. legislative activity dating back to the 93rd Congress in 1973 maintained by the Library of Congress and named for Thomas Jefferson. Search bills and laws by number or keyword or follow links to legislative calendars, text of historical documents, and the *Congressional Record* with roll call votes and a transcript of everything said on the House and Senate floor.

in a single letter can mean that your response will be delayed because of the time involved in addressing each of your concerns. Additionally, it can be difficult for the office to register accurately all the views included in your letter and aggregate them with the other citizen comments that share your perspective.

The most persuasive communications focus on one or two topics and describe how legislation will impact you as a constituent or their state or district. If you have several subjects to discuss with your elected officials, it is better to send separate messages explaining your position on each individual issue. Always opt for quality (explaining your views on an individual topic) rather than quantity (a list of your support or opposition to many issues all at once). Following this principle, you can be assured that your opinions on each issue can be correctly tallied and taken into consideration.

4. Use consistent contact information.

When a congressional office receives a message, the first thing most look for is whether it comes from a citizen who resides in their congressional district or state. For this reason, it is important to use consistent e-mail and postal addresses. In addition, you should always use your home address, rather than a work address, which might actually prevent your communication from getting through. Most congressional offices have systems to verify that a message is coming from within their state or district. If you use a work address that is outside the district or across state lines, you risk having your message referred to another office without consideration by your actual Member of Congress.

Like postal address information, it is important – to the greatest extent possible – to use a consistent e-mail address. While many people have more than one e-mail address, sticking to just one permits the congressional office to accurately group and track all of your communications in one record. Using multiple addresses may result in your messages showing up in different records in the congressional office database. We advise offices to perform regular database maintenance to merge these records, but using consistent contact information will help to ensure that your Member knows exactly how you feel on all of the issues that are important to you.

5. Be concise, direct and persuasive, and clearly state your position.

Your views will be much easier for a congressional office to process and take into account if your message is short and limited to a specific bill or topic, and briefly states your position, the reason for your interest, or the impact the legislation will have on you. Communications that are concise and targeted will ultimately be more persuasive. Think of your communications with Members of Congress like a television commercial; you have a limited amount of time to make your point. A multi-page letter that does not cite the specific issue that interests you up front, will be less effective than a two to three paragraph message that starts out with the action you would like the Member to take. Members are pragmatic and know they cannot spend an inordinate amount of time on any one particular letter if they are going to be able to reply to all of the mail they receive daily. If you want your communication to have the impact that you desire, it will be most effective if it is short and succinct.

Think of your communications with Members of Congress like a television commercial; you have a limited amount of time to make your point.

6. Include personal stories of how legislation will affect you.

Personalized messages from constituents, whether in letter or e-mail form, are one of the most effective ways to communicate with Members of Congress. In our 2005 survey, congressional staff said that identical form communications have much less impact than

those that are personalized in some way by the sender.[11] These individual messages put a face and a name to an issue and can be extremely influential. If a bill will hurt the industry you work in or dramatically increase the quality of the education that your two small children will receive, say so in your message.

In order for Members to arrive at a position on a policy matter, they seek to study the impact legislation will have on their state or district first, and on the country second. That legislative research is mostly from a theoretical, budgetary, political, or academic perspective, however. One of the best ways for them to get an accurate and complete understanding of how a measure will affect "the man on the street" is to hear from constituents. Representatives or Senators will sometimes retell these personal stories on the House or Senate floor or in town hall meetings – with the person's permission, of course – to help persuade others on the issue.

7. Make a specific request.

Asking your Member to support all environmental legislation or to oppose decreases in fuel efficiency standards are broad requests that are very difficult for Members to quantify given the potential number of bills and amendments that address that issue in some way. On the other hand, a message asking your Member of Congress to support H.R. 6, the Safe Drinking Water Act, or oppose S. 21, the Energy Independence Act, will allow the office to know your exact feelings and to group your views with others who share the same position. That combined tally of letters and e-mails will get the Member's attention. Including the bill number and/or title will ensure that the Congressman or Senator can correctly identify the bill or amendment in question and more easily know how many constituents share your views. When identifying the bill, it is less critical, but still helpful, to include the names of the Members of Congress who introduced the legislation.

8. Be respectful.

You might vehemently disagree with one – or all – of the stated positions of the people who represent you in Congress. Regardless of whether there is any common ground between you and your Member, your representatives should be afforded the same respect you would want in return. Most offices have policies about communications that contain vulgarities, personal insults, or threats. Using any of these tactics is arguably the least effective way to influence your Members of Congress. By all means, respectfully disagree, question their logic or their knowledge of the topic, but stick to the facts and convey your position to the Member.

---

[11] Brad Fitch and Kathy Goldschmidt, "Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy" (Washington, DC: CMF, 2005), 28. http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF_Pubs/communicatingwithcongress_report1.pdf

Grassroots Advocacy Campaigns

The last decade has seen an explosion in the number of grassroots organizations as citizens rely more extensively on groups that they trust to keep them informed of what is happening in Congress and to help them become engaged in public policy. In fact, a significant portion of the messages that are sent to congressional offices every day find their origin in the efforts of grassroots advocacy, and that is why they are considered a major stakeholder in the communications process. In addition, there are vendors that provide tools to grassroots organization in the same way that there are vendors to provide tools to congressional offices. These vendors are also considered stakeholders.

ORGANIZERS OF GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY CAMPAIGNS

The term "grassroots advocacy campaign" is loosely defined as a group of like-minded citizens who coalesce around a particular viewpoint or issue and through their collective power attempt to influence the direction of future public policy. When French political thinker and historian Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of his travels through America in the mid-19th Century, he emphasized the importance of political and civil associations in American democracy. He wrote, "The most natural right of man, after that of acting on his own, is that of combining his efforts with those of his fellows and acting together. Therefore the right of association seems to me by nature almost as inalienable as individual liberty."[12]

Sometimes these "associations" or advocacy campaigns are initiated by individual citizens who are motivated to band together to pool their influence over a particular issue or specific legislation. More often, however, they are the result of the organizing efforts of a corporation, a union, a professional association, an interest group, or some other pre-existing and ongoing affiliation. Both types of groups are stakeholders in this process because they function as mechanisms to educate individual citizens and then channel their collective energy to Capitol Hill.

While grassroots advocacy campaigns have existed for some time, the Internet has created an environment where organizers can easily, quickly, and inexpensively educate others about a particular issue and mobilize them to take action. That action can take a variety of forms, from donating money or volunteering, to protesting or contacting public officials. In some cases, their members may have never been aware of a particular public policy debate if the organization had not brought it to their attention. Citizens look to these groups – which include employers, unions, professional associations, interest groups, and others – to alert them when public policy potentially affects an issue in which they have a particular interest. When an issue arises, members and interested individuals are encouraged to perform some sort of action – often to contact their elected officials – to demonstrate a broad base of political support for a particular viewpoint.

Citizens look to these groups – which include employers, unions, professional associations, interest groups, and others – to alert them when public policy potentially affects an issue in which they have a particular interest.

---

[12] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer. (New York: Perennial Classics, 1969), 193.

The Internet has altered almost every aspect of our daily lives in some way. In the case of grassroots advocacy campaigns, it has created a considerable and ever-growing virtual universe where like-minded individuals can locate one another, share ideas, stay connected, and motivate each other to become politically active in some way. The organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns have embraced the Internet in all of its facets to inform, motivate, and activate citizens. Blogs allow ordinary citizens to be on-the-ground journalists; short video clips posted on YouTube can circle the globe in a matter of minutes; and social networking sites allow countless opportunities for people to meet and interact. No matter how they participate, engagement in the political process is easier than it has ever been.

In 2007, the Public Affairs Council reported that nearly three-quarters of U.S. corporations and all major national associations have grassroots programs in place.[13] With the rise in the activity and sophistication of these advocacy strategies, it is no wonder that Congress has seen a dramatic increase in constituent communications volumes. In CMF's online survey of the citizen-senders of communications to Capitol Hill, fully 82% of those who had contacted congressional offices in the last five years had done so in the last year at the request of a third party interest group.[14] It is interesting to note that in the same survey, 73% of those who had contacted Congress agreed – and 34% strongly agreed – that advocacy campaigns are good for democracy. Even 49% who had not contacted Congress in the last five years agreed with this sentiment.[15]

While their approaches and mechanics are dramatically different, these campaigns have a predictable foundational structure and usually follow a model of alerting the organization's members; educating them on an issue's importance; assisting them in identifying their elected representatives; urging them to perform an action; and giving them a deadline for participation. However, some campaigns are more effective than others. In fact, an entire industry has developed around how to best craft communications for the desired impact when they arrive in a policymaker's office and motivate citizens to act.

VENDORS THAT PROVIDE TOOLS TO FACILITATE ADVOCACY CAMPAIGNS

While the primary stakeholders on this side of the communications equation are citizens, and grassroots organizers are secondary stakeholders, vendors providing the tools to facilitate grassroots advocacy campaigns play a significant role in the process, as well, and should be considered tertiary stakeholders.

These businesses provide organizers with tools to maximize their grassroots advocacy campaigns' impact on public policy at all levels of government. They do not just provide software tools that facilitate the communication itself. Many of them – depending on their size, mission, and market share – also provide tools to assist in the development of comprehensive grassroots campaign strategies, including guidance on effective tactics and mechanisms to ensure delivery of their messages to the targeted public official.

The typical vendor provides the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns with:

- Tools for sending action alerts to membership lists;

- Formats for developing educational material;

- Tools to match a citizen's address with a specific congressional district;

- Customer Relationship Management (CRM) capabilities to track their various lobbying and grassroots contacts with individual offices and membership lists;

---

[13] Foundation for Public Affairs, *State of Corporate Public Affairs* (Washington, DC: Foundation for Public Affairs, 2005), 17-19.
[14] Kathy Goldschmidt and Leslie Ochreiter, "Communicating with Congress: How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement" (Washington, DC: CMF, 2008), 21. http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF_Pubs/cwc_citizenengagement.pdf
[15] Ibid., 32.

- Background information and biographical data about Members of Congress, their voting records, committee assignments, legislative priorities, and staff contacts;

- Legislation tracking;

- Online fundraising management; and

- Grassroots strategy education, training, and consultation.

CHALLENGES FOR GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY CAMPAIGNS

The organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns face significant challenges in their efforts to raise awareness and generate active participation from citizens who share their views on important matters of public policy. While they are not the primary communicators – citizens or Members of Congress – their role is significant and unlikely to disappear. While not a comprehensive list of challenges, grassroots organizations face the following issues in their attempts to facilitate public participation in the policy process:

1. **Barriers to communication impact democracy and free speech.**
   The organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns believe there should not be any barriers to communication between citizens and their elected representatives. They argue that CAPTCHA tools, like the logic puzzles on some Member sites, act as a block to legitimate communications from citizens. In fact, the type of CAPTCHA used can sometimes block certain constituents with disabilities from being able to reach their Representative or Senators.

2. **The lack of Congress-wide electronic data standards for citizen communications creates significant complexity for both sides of the communications.**
   At present, electronic communications to most congressional offices must be sent via the individual forms on the Web sites of each Member. With the exception of House offices that use a generic version of the "Write Your Representative" online contact form, each office creates and maintains its own Web form. And a few Members still have public e-mail addresses. As a result, the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns must be able to format their messages correctly for every office to which they forward communications. They must also be sure to include the information each office seeks. For example, some offices require zip-plus-four; others require prefixes, telephone numbers, or a response to a CAPTCHA logic puzzle. Collecting and formatting information for every office targeted is difficult and time-consuming for the campaign's organizers, and it can often lead to the problems congressional offices face when they receive incorrect or corrupt data. As a result, both sides would save significant resources if there were Congress-wide standards in place.

3. **Congressional offices view personalized messages and identical form messages differently.**
   Identical form messages are largely viewed by the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns as a way to engage their members, generate volume and demonstrate strength in numbers. Grassroots organizations insist that it is an error in judgment for congressional offices to dismiss identical form letters as "spam" or mail that can be ignored or rejected. They argue that just because a citizen does not tailor a message with personalized comments does not mean that the issue is not of equal interest to them as someone that drafts an original letter to their Member. After all, while there have been bad actors in the past, the vast majority of communications generated by grassroots advocacy organizations require the citizen to affirmatively elect to send the communication through their own action.

Grassroots organizations insist that it is an error in judgment for congressional offices to dismiss identical form letters as "spam" or mail that can be ignored or rejected.

4. **Current congressional systems can make it very difficult to deliver a timely grassroots advocacy campaign.**

   To have the greatest impact on a particular vote, the advocacy community often conducts grassroots campaigns in the days and weeks leading up to a particular congressional action. Sometimes, organizations only have a limited time to act because the House or Senate decides on short notice to take up legislation in which the organization and its members have an interest. However, because of the post-anthrax challenges of paper mail and hand-delivery, as well as the many hurdles to e-mail, many advocacy groups have decided that the fax is the best way to deliver messages that must get through under a deadline. Yet, congressional staff rate faxes as their least preferred method of communication (43% said they had no influence at all[16]) because they require labor-intensive data entry and are, therefore, a significant drain on already-strained congressional resources. Additionally, because of the time and effort required to aggregate and digitize the information, faxes rarely achieve the stated goal of timely communication. As a result, organizations have few options for delivering timely and influential messages to Congress.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

There are literally tens-of-thousands of organizations dedicated to initiating grassroots advocacy campaigns. Whether they are corporations, unions, professional or trade associations, or issue advocates, they want to educate and motivate their constituencies to become politically aware and active. Groups organizing grassroots advocacy campaigns should review the recommendations for individual citizens discussed in the previous section, as many apply to organized campaigns, as well. Following, however, are recommendations specific to organizations seeking to have an effect on public policy through grassroots advocacy campaigns.

1. **Send every communication with the knowledge, consent, and action of the citizen.**

   Most grassroots campaigns are sent to Members of Congress because of an "action alert" that asks individual citizens to perform an action – even if that action is simply to hit the 'send' button on a Web form. Any communication sent to a Member should be the result of the constituent affirmatively authorizing a message to be sent to their Representative or Senator. Congressional offices report embarrassing instances of sending responses to constituents who are deceased or were unaware that a communication was sent on their behalf. The fact that a constituent is a member of a particular organization does not necessarily mean that they have given their consent for the organization to create communications of their behalf. The e-mails that arrive in a congressional office will – in most cases – be responded to by the Member. It becomes immediately evident that a campaign was sent without the constituents' knowledge when multiple constituents make confused inquiries with the office. While there is no quantifiable data to indicate how often this happens, and grassroots advocacy groups insist that they do not employ such tactics, it only takes a few bad-practice campaigns to bring the roles of all third parties into question. This practice can severely damage an organization's reputation with congressional offices. There have been a few cases, however, when constituents did in fact send or authorize the original message but either forgot that they had done so, or it was sent by their spouse or other family member on their behalf.

2. **Encourage citizens to personalize their messages in some way.**

   Our research with congressional offices was clear: personalized messages from constituents have more influence than identical form messages. Sending a letter to a Member of Congress is not equivalent to casting a ballot or answering a survey, where the choice with the most responses "wins." Sending a message to a Member of Congress is more akin to speaking up at a town hall meeting or writing a letter to the editor: it is the expression of one person's views. As such, the content matters. Our survey of congressional staff revealed that many operate under the assumption that the more time and effort constituents put into their communication, the more passionately they care about the issue. This does not mean there is no value to grassroots campaigns or that large quantities of identically-texted

---

[16] Ibid., 30.

messages are never persuasive, but simply that personalized messages almost always trump identical form communications on Capitol Hill. It is important to note, however, that those who organize grassroots campaigns argue that just because a citizen opts to send a form letter rather than a hand-written note does not mean that individual is any less informed or passionate about the issue at hand.

So, with these seemingly incompatible views of constituent communication, what is the key to successful communication? First, it is important to know that every congressional office has different preferences for form messages vs. personalized message. Some offices may reveal that they prefer form messages because they are easier to administer, but others assert that their boss is influenced much more by individualized communications. In either case, the presence of personalized comments confirms that there is a "real" person behind the communication, not just a name on a list. In fact, the more personalized the message, the better.

It is important to decide on the ultimate goal of each grassroots advocacy campaign at the onset. If the goal is to show strength in numbers and illustrate to a particular Senator that many residents of their state feel a certain way about a particular piece of legislation, a large number of identically texted letters or e-mails – provided that they are sent with the knowledge, consent, and action of the constituent – can be very effective. Our survey of congressional offices found, however, that if an organization wants to truly influence a Member's thinking, personalized communications are the way to go. The most effective grassroots advocacy campaigns are those that marry the two together.

3. **Communications should only come from constituents.**
Individual citizens and grassroots organizations routinely attempt to send messages to Members who do not represent them. The reasons are sincere. Perhaps the constituents' Representative and Senators do not serve on the appropriate committee; perhaps the message is in reaction to something a Member said on television; or perhaps the issue is so important to the citizen or group that they want to be heard by someone in Congress, no matter whom. However, Congress is a representative body whose Members are beholden to their own constituents. As a courtesy, some Members forward messages to the appropriate Members, but few read or respond to messages not from their own constituents. In fact, in most cases, Senators or Representatives and their staffs never read "out-of-district" or "out-of-state" mail because the systems in their offices usually verify immediately whether a message originated from their district or state.

While most Member offices limit communications to their constituents, it is encouraging to see a few congressional committees and leadership offices solicit communications from citizens on their Web sites. As noted above, one of the top reasons that communicators give for wanting to communicate with a Member other than their own is that a particular Member is in a leadership role or sits on a particular committee. For that reason, our sole recommendation for committee and leadership offices (covered later in the recommendations for Congress) is that they create some mechanism for allowing citizens to participate at the earliest stages of legislative development and interact with those who are shaping congressional direction and priorities. Because of limited resources, it would be nearly impossible for committees and leadership offices to respond to e-mail communications from the entire nation. However, some are soliciting this feedback in manageable ways through online polls, surveys, and one-way comment forms, to help inform their committee members and those in leadership roles about the intersection of their work and public opinion.

4. **Never transmit incorrect or false data to congressional offices.**
A successful dialogue between citizens and Members of Congress requires accountability and transparency on both sides. At a minimum, citizens must provide basic information, which will also help ensure successful communication. It is unacceptable under any circumstances, for a grassroots organization to transmit data it knows to be incorrect or false. Past examples include telephone numbers transmitted as "(111) 555-1212," zip codes transmitted as the zip code of one of the Member's offices back home, false e-mail addresses

Transmitting incorrect or false data may be the expedient thing to do for that one campaign or that one office, but its impact on your future effectiveness could be far-reaching.

transmitted for citizens that do not have computers or e-mail addresses, and "M." being transmitted as the prefix for all constituents, regardless of their gender. At best, these practices make congressional offices skeptical that the messages are from real constituents and, at worst, they corrupt offices' databases and waste resources. For example, in the past, offices have responded to messages with incorrect zip codes and received hundreds of undeliverable letters back, causing the offices to conclude the campaign was a sham. Organizations employing such tactics run the risk that their future communications could be rejected or blocked because the sender has engaged in deceptive and disruptive bad practices. Perhaps the greater risk, however, is to the reputation or the grassroots advocacy organization on Capitol Hill as well as with individual congressional offices. It may be the expedient thing to do for that one campaign or that one office, but its impact on your future effectiveness could be far-reaching.

5. **Notify citizens to whom their communications are being sent.**
Many congressional offices report receiving communications from constituents who insist they did not send a message to the Member of Congress. One reason may be that not all organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns explicitly notify each of their members to whom their communications are being sent. Most congressional offices will attempt to respond to incoming communications, and when they send a response to a person who was not notified that their message was being sent to Representative X and Senators Y and Z, it naturally creates confusion. All grassroots advocacy campaigns should affirmatively confirm for each participant where their communications are being sent and from whom they might expect a reply message. Notification can be done through a confirmation screen on the Web site after the citizen takes action; however another best practice is to forward a copy of the communication back to the constituent. Access to this communication trail allows the citizen to retain the record of having sent a particular communication to their elected representatives. Then, when one of their elected representatives replies to their inquiry, they are more likely to remember sending the message and welcome the response.

6. **Identify the organization behind a grassroots campaign.**
Many times the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns do their work in the background, preferring that recipients not know that messages were generated through their organizing efforts. However, when numerous messages with nearly identical – or exactly the same text – arrive in a congressional office it is immediately apparent to the congressional office that the messages arrived through an organized effort. Congressional staff are intimately aware of the existence of grassroots organizations that help channel constituent communications to their offices, so if an organization attempts to hide its involvement, the lack of transparency causes the recipients to second-guess the validity of the communications. On the other hand, the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns play the role of trusted educators and facilitators of communications between citizens and Members of Congress, and should feel justified and proud to stand behind the communications that they facilitate.

Congressional staff repeatedly report that if grassroots organizations were to identify themselves in the communications from their members, it would not only save them time, but also add to the credibility and effectiveness of those messages. Even when the organization is not identified, congressional staff can usually research a campaign to determine its origin and many do. Having to do so, however, takes time and can give staff the impression that the grassroots organization is trying to hide their involvement.

It is important to again note that CMF believes that identifying the originating organization in communications should be optional, but those organizations that do so will enjoy increased effectiveness of their campaigns.

7. **Grassroots organizations should develop a better understanding of Congress.**
   As discussed earlier in the "Recommendations for Citizens," another issue that emerged in our research was that sometimes messages sent by individual citizens and by grassroots organizations reveal a lack of understanding about how Congress works. The quality and impact of constituent communications could improve if organizations generating campaigns developed a better understanding of Congress and the legislative process. Grassroots organizations could increase their effectiveness by considering the following factors in their campaigns.

   - **Timing in the legislative cycle.** The actions a Member can take are different at various points in the legislative process, so it is important for a grassroots organization to know the status of a bill, understand the possible actions a Member can take at each stage, coordinate its campaign around an appropriate action, and craft its message accordingly. Is the campaign asking the Member to introduce legislation, cosponsor legislation, support or oppose an amendment or bill, or sign onto a letter to the president? Effective grassroots campaigns ask for some specific outcome and demonstrate that they know how the legislative process works.

   - **The chamber in which a bill was introduced.** House Members cannot vote on judicial nominations or bills appearing only in the Senate, and Senators cannot vote on House bills without a companion in their chamber, so campaigns urging a Member of one chamber to take action on legislation from the other chamber will not yield results. More often than not, companion legislation to a bill is introduced in the other body, but when grassroots campaigns do not correctly identify the companion legislation, effectiveness is diminished and time is wasted.

   - **The Member's position on the legislation.** Congressional offices are often subject to grassroots campaigns requesting – or admonishing – the Member to support legislation he or she already supports. For instance, a grassroots campaign urging a Member to cosponsor legislation that he or she actually introduced will certainly give the office the impression that the writers have not done their homework. It is relatively easy to use the Internet to determine a Member's stance on a bill or issue by simply checking information on his or her Web site or by studying the sponsors and cosponsors of the legislation and the roll call votes of similar legislation introduced in previous Congresses. By identifying the sponsors and cosponsors of a bill, grassroots organizations can save precious resources and target only Members who need persuading.

     This does not mean that the persuaded Members should not receive communications at all. If a Member is the sponsor, a cosponsor, or has said publicly that they intend to support a piece of legislation the grassroots organization backs, messages sent to their offices should acknowledge that fact and could even express a "thank you" for their support. In fact, our research with citizens revealed that only 5% of those who had contacted a Member of Congress in the last five years as the result of a third-party request had done so to thank a Senator or Representative.

8. **The purpose of a campaign should be to influence public policy, not overwhelm an office.**
   While the vast majority of grassroots organizations seek to engage Members of Congress in a genuine dialogue about issues, there is a minority that consider it a point of pride to effectively shut down a Member's office. Usually, this is done by sending such high volumes of e-mail, telephone calls, faxes or letters that a Member's entire staff has to be temporarily re-assigned to manage the communications. This practice does attract the attention of Members and staff, but perhaps not in a constructive way. Tactics to disrupt rather than be effective can also damage the organization's long-term reputation and hinder their ability to be effective in future efforts to persuade the Member.

   Bad practices in grassroots communications may get noticed on Capitol Hill, but that does not mean they are effective in influencing the opinions of Members of Congress. At their worst, they damage the relationship between congressional offices and grassroots organizations.

9. Do not send or create duplicate messages from the same constituent.

Congressional offices often report receiving identical messages from a single constituent, which are sometimes generated through multiple actions by the constituent. For example, a constituent who feels particularly passionate about an issue may decide to send the same message a number of times for emphasis. In some cases, there have been reports that multiple messages are generated through a single constituent action, which a grassroots organization interprets as "permission" to send messages on the constituent's behalf in the future. For example, a single click on a Web site might generate an identical e-mail message, fax, and postcard. Congressional offices have the ability to identify and merge these messages and they will only count them as a single communication from an individual constituent. This practice is a bad use of time for everyone involved in the communications process – and arguably decreases, rather than increases, the effectiveness of a campaign. One message per constituent, per campaign should suffice, unless there has been a change in status or new or substantially different information needs to be conveyed.

Bad practices in grassroots communications may get noticed on Capitol Hill, but that does not mean they are effective in influencing the opinions of Members of Congress. At their worst, they damage the relationship between congressional offices and grassroots organizations.

10. Do not target a specific staffer.

Occasionally, grassroots organizations will direct a grassroots advocacy campaign to a specific staffer like the Member's Chief of Staff or Legislative Director by including the staffer's name, direct dial telephone number, and/or e-mail address in their messages to their organization's members. When this results in a couple of messages from citizens with whom the staffer already has a relationship, it is not necessarily a problem. However, when it results in a flood of e-mail or telephone calls, that staffer is out of commission until the campaign is over and his or her e-mail inbox and voicemail box are cleaned out. Although this is not a widespread practice, we interviewed staff who had been the target of this type of tactic, and they remembered it vividly. In most cases, it damaged the relationship between the entire office and the organization behind the campaign.

11. Form e-mail messages are more effective than form faxes.

In the wake of 9/11 and the anthrax and ricin scares, sending postal mail to Capitol Hill in a timely fashion has become a challenge. Decontaminating and processing postal mail can add up to two weeks – and sometimes more – to the time it takes an office to receive a letter. As a result, postal mail volumes have decreased as grassroots organizations have sought faster alternatives for getting messages to Capitol Hill, particularly fax and e-mail.

For a variety of reasons, some grassroots organizations have opted to send form messages via fax. However, nearly every congressional office reports a preference for form e-mail to form faxes.[17] When formatted correctly, form e-mail is easy for congressional offices to process, count, and respond to, which means that your communications are more effective and more likely to be acknowledged. Form faxes require significant data entry and administrative work, in addition to requiring toner and paper. When a bill is expected on the floor in short order, it can be tempting to send communications via fax, but the tools available to congressional offices actually allow them to more quickly aggregate and report on constituent mail volumes when it is in a digital format. In fact, of all the forms that constituent communications could take, congressional staff reported that identical form faxes were the least likely to have an influence on Member decision-making.[18]

---

[17] Brad Fitch and Kathy Goldschmidt, "Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy" (Washington, DC: CMF, 2005), 30. http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF_Pubs/communicatingwithcongress_report1.pdf
[18] Ibid.

12. Adequately prepare constituents when facilitating telephone calls.

Congressional offices are occasionally subject to telephone campaigns that create confusion for everyone involved. Sometimes, grassroots organizations coordinate a telephone bank through which telephone operators call a grassroots organization's members to ask if they would like to express their views to their Member of Congress. When they say yes, they are either transferred to a congressional office or the call is terminated and a second call is initiated, which rings both the constituent's telephone and the Member's office telephone at the same time. Often, this second practice results in confused constituents either trying to struggle through a message or wondering why the staffer who answered the telephone in the Member's office called them. Other times, citizens are encouraged to call their Members directly without being properly prepared for the interaction. In either case, this creates an awkward exchange that is unlikely to make the organization's case or further its cause. The telephone can be a very effective way for constituents to interact with Member offices, but they are counterproductive unless both the citizen and the grassroots organization have properly prepared for the exchange.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADVOCACY VENDORS

The vendors that provide services to grassroots advocacy organizations are responsible for creating and maintaining the tools those organizations use to channel communications from citizens to Members of Congress. While there are tens-of-thousands of grassroots organizations, there is a relatively small number of vendors that provide the communications tools they use to contact Hill offices, if they use vendors' services at all. Vendors that facilitate grassroots advocacy campaigns should review the recommendations for both individual citizens and grassroots advocacy organizations, as many apply to their work, as well. Below are recommendations specifically for the vendors of grassroots advocacy services and tools. Some are tactical best practices while others recommend new levels of transparency and cooperation.

1. Each vendor should identify itself in the electronic communications it facilitates.

Communications coming through an advocacy vendor's products can experience a variety of technical problems that need to be resolved between the congressional office and the vendor. It is often possible for the congressional recipients to research the origins of the campaign and determine both the grassroots organization and the vendor that are involved, but the quality of communication would be increased dramatically if each vendor identified itself in the metadata of each message and provided contact information through which technical difficulties can be addressed. Providing this information allows these issues to be resolved quickly and keeps the channels of communication between citizens and Members open.

2. Each vendor should have a designated liaison to Capitol Hill.

In addition to providing the identification and contact information described above, we recommend vendors that help deliver citizen messages to Capitol Hill designate a liaison to work with congressional offices. These designated vendor contacts should be viewed as ambassadors that can work with individual offices to answer questions, resolve conflicts, address technical issues, and ensure a cooperative relationship. Congressional offices have reported attempting to resolve technical challenges with a particular campaign, but being unable to determine who to contact and how to resolve the issue. Assigning a liaison to work with offices and building relationships with them will help create a spirit of collaboration that will improve congressional communications.

3. Notify citizens to whom their communications are being sent.

As discussed above, congressional offices report receiving calls from constituents who insist that they never sent a message to the Member of Congress. One of the primary reasons that this happens is that frequently citizens who send their communication through a grassroots organizations are never told where those communications are being sent. They are merely asked for their address information and told that their communication will be sent to their Representative and Senators. Congressional offices who repeatedly receive these kinds of calls can mistakenly – though understandably – determine that a particular

organization or vendor is sending communications without citizens' knowledge and consent. There are numerous ways in which this information can be communicated to the citizen, and it doesn't matter which method is chosen, so long as the entire communication process is transparent to the primary stakeholders: the citizens and the Members of Congress. The important thing to remember is that you want congressional offices to trust that your communications are from real citizens who have performed some action to convey their communication to the office and confused citizens calling a congressional office will seriously undermine your efforts.

4. **Provide best practice guidelines for grassroots advocacy clients.**
    The role of an advocacy vendor is not only to provide tools to their clients to facilitate communication with Members on Capitol Hill, but also to advise them in the proper use of those tools, as well. While advocacy vendors are not responsible for the actions of their clients – and both can engage in good or bad practices – vendors are responsible for providing guidelines for their proper use and not creating tools that actively facilitate disingenuous or unethical interactions. This includes detailing for their clients how to maximize the effective use of the communications tools at their disposal by showing them not just the most efficient ways of communicating but also the most effective methods, as well. Perhaps more important than conveying best practices, is assisting them in ensuring that their communications adhere to best practices, are ethical in their conception and delivery, and will not result in rejected or ineffective messages. What is at stake is the reputation of both the grassroots organization and the vendor and their ability to continue to communicate with congressional offices.

Congress

If citizens are the primary stakeholders on the one side of communications, then Members of Congress are the primary stakeholders on the other side. The staffs that directly assist them in managing constituent communications – in their personal offices as well as in their committees and leadership offices – are secondary stakeholders. However, it is not just these offices that are involved in the dialogue. Institutional offices like the Senate Sergeant at Arms (SAA) and the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of the House must also be considered stakeholders, as well, because they provide infrastructures that support the communications. These offices and the vendors that provide tools to congressional offices are tertiary stakeholders.

MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

The job of a Member of Congress can be distilled down into two primary functions: legislative representation and constituent service. While it is the job of Congress as a whole to create the nation's laws and perform oversight as necessary to ensure their implementation, it is the job of each individual Member of Congress to represent the interests of the district or state they were elected to serve. Members of Congress do this by promoting their own legislative initiatives, cosponsoring bills introduced by other Members, working within the congressional committees, and voting on legislation that makes it to the House or Senate floor.

The second major function of a congressional office is providing constituents with services, such as helping them resolve problems with federal agencies; nominating young people to U.S. Service Academies, coordinating efforts with other local and state government officials; and processing tour, flag, meeting, and presidential greeting requests.

The vast majority of the messages received by congressional offices relate to the Member's legislative function. They come from individuals who wish to communicate their positions on legislation and issues that affect their lives.

Members of Congress, of course, are the individuals whose opinions citizens are trying to sway and to whom all of the messages are addressed. With the population of the U.S. at more than 300 million, the 100 Senators, 435 House Members, 4 Delegates, and 1 Resident Commissioner face a daunting task, especially as the volumes of communications continue to rise and technology continues to increase citizens' expectations for what Congress can and should be providing them. Ultimately, the communications are their responsibility, but for practical purposes Senators and Representatives delegate most of the tasks involved in managing the messages to their staffs. Almost all are involved in some way, but their involvement ranges from receiving high-level overviews of constituent sentiment prior to votes to reading samples of every message and signing all outgoing letters. Most are somewhere in the middle. They keep track of the sentiments of those they represent, and following the incoming messages is one way they do it.

HOUSE AND SENATE MEMBER OFFICES

In the past, House offices had one staff member – a Legislative Correspondent typically located in the Washington, D.C. office – dedicated to organize, and assist the Member in responding to, citizen comments. Today, it is rare that a congressional office relies on the resources of just one staffer. Some congressional offices state that they dedicate up to 50% of their overall staff resources to constituent communications. While Senate offices typically have larger staff sizes and more overall resources dedicated to handling constituent communications than their House counterparts, they usually have much larger constituencies and face the same challenges in keeping pace with the incoming volumes of e-mail and postal mail as their House counterparts.
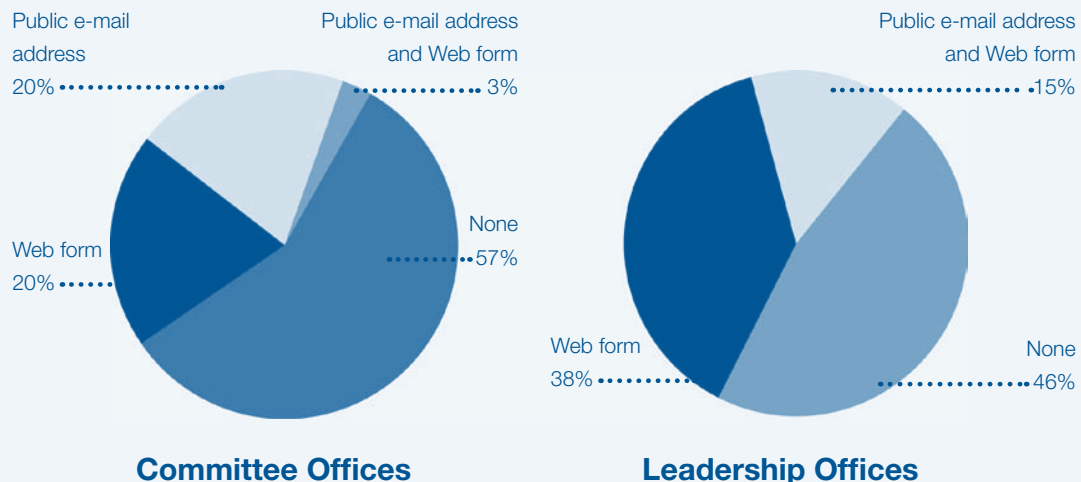
CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEE AND LEADERSHIP OFFICES

While the personal offices of Members of Congress receive the majority of incoming constituent communications, more and more committees and leadership offices find themselves on the receiving end of both individual citizen comments, as well as the target of organized grassroots advocacy campaigns. After all, it is in the leadership offices of the House and Senate where legislative priorities and chamber schedules are developed and committees to which legislation is almost always referred before it is ever voted on in either chamber.

Because most committee and leadership offices do not provide a direct public electronic communication channel, some citizens and grassroots advocacy campaigns attempt to communicate by faxing, writing, or calling committee and leadership offices. Some citizens and grassroots advocacy campaigns attempt to contact individual Members of a committee electronically by going to their personal office Web sites, but are unable to do so because state and district authentication measures ensure that people who are not constituents cannot contact them online. As you can see in Figure 6, a majority of the 69 House and Senate committee Web sites (both majority and minority committee sites) and 13 leadership offices of the House and Senate (both Democrat and Republican sites) do not currently have mechanisms or resources to take in or respond to a large number of citizen questions and comments. While it would be nearly impossible – without a significant increase in their budgets and changes to their procedures – to suggest that all congressional committee and leadership offices of Congress should respond to citizen communications, it is important to note that a growing number of committee and leadership offices do solicit and value public comment in some form.

Figure 6 shows the number of committee and leadership offices allowing electronic communications with citizens.

Figure 6. Web Site Contact Methods for Committee and Leadership Offices

Public e-mail address 20%
Public e-mail address and Web form 3%
Web form 20%
None 57%

Committee Offices

Public e-mail address and Web form 15%
Web form 38%
None 46%

Leadership Offices

THE INSTITUTION OF CONGRESS

Congress, as an institution, is neither a sender nor a recipient of constituent communications. It is, however, a stakeholder because of the enormous role that the institutional support offices play in assisting individual Member offices and providing them with resources to manage their offices.

Additionally, the institution, through the House and Senate Appropriations Committees, is responsible for funding the entire Legislative Branch each year, and, through the Committee on House Administration and the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, it is responsible for Member office budgets.

The other institutional support offices, primarily embodied in the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of the House of Representatives and the Office of the Senate Sergeant at Arms (SAA), are stakeholders because of the critical role they play in providing technical infrastructure and operational support for congressional offices. As part of their committee jurisdiction, the Committee on House Administration and the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration provide oversight of these support offices and are responsible for the policy framework within which the communications processes must operate.

These organizations serve congressional offices through the structuring and maintenance of the CMS and CSS vendor contracts and relationships, as well as through providing systems support, security, and enterprise services such as e-mail and Internet connectivity to congressional offices. In addition, these organizations provide congressional offices with guidance on the House and Senate rules that govern constituent communications and help to identify developing trends, office needs, and the future technology direction in the House and Senate.

VENDORS THAT PROVIDE TOOLS TO MANAGE CONGRESSIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

Almost every congressional office uses tools and services to help them efficiently and effectively manage the thousands of constituent communications they receive each week. These products are collectively referred to as Correspondence Management Systems (CMS) in the House of Representatives and as Constituent Services Systems (CSS) in the U.S. Senate. In either case, they are database tools that help congressional offices manage and track their interactions with constituents – including constituent services and constituent communications. While some products have modules to organize the Member's schedule, manage interactions with press, and track legislation, the core competencies of these products assist congressional offices in tracking correspondence, authenticating state or district origin, managing a form letter library, producing reports, and responding to constituent queries.

The vendors that provide these tools and services to congressional offices are stakeholders because of the role that they play in facilitating communications to and from the offices they serve. Every congressional office operates independently, so each Member's staff works with their own vendor to customize their database and establish processes to help them maintain these mission-critical utilities. In addition, the vendors conduct the necessary technical integration and configuration to enable the systems to operate effectively within an office's technological infrastructure. In short, these vendors provide the services and support necessary to streamline the process of receiving, managing, and responding to constituent communications and to maximize the benefits of their platform.

As of the writing of this report, there are five approved CMS vendors in the House of Representatives and three approved CSS vendors in the Senate providing the software packages that are the lifeblood of the offices' constituent communications operation. "Approved" means that the House and Senate have tested these products to ensure they comply with the functionality and security requirements of each chamber.

CHALLENGES FOR CONGRESS

There has been a paradigm shift in congressional communications, and offices are struggling to keep up with, and be responsive to, messages from constituents. Every Member of Congress wants to communicate with constituents, but there are numerous barriers to effective communication. More specifically, Congress faces the following issues in its attempts to meet citizen expectations:

1. **The sheer volume of citizen communications has become difficult for congressional offices to manage.**
   With the increased population of the United States, Senators and Representatives now represent more people than ever before and, due to the Internet and advances in technology, it is easier than ever before for people to get in touch with them. As a result, congressional offices are struggling to manage constituent communications effectively. The number of messages to Congress has increased dramatically over the last decade. Most House and Senate offices feel overwhelmed and, in many cases, have decided that the only options are finding means to reduce the volume, prioritizing some communications over others, and/or filtering out or ignoring some messages altogether. While the grassroots community is sympathetic to the situation on Capitol Hill, they insist that the communications are from citizens exercising their rights to free speech and to petition government and, therefore, must not be overlooked or discarded.

2. **House and Senate offices have limited staff, money, and space for adapting to their increased workloads.**
   Congressional staff sizes have been roughly the same since the mid-1970's, long before the Internet and e-mail – and even fax machines – changed the way citizens contacted their elected representatives. Though offices' workloads have increased significantly, they must make do with about the same number of employees, which requires them to be very efficient and somewhat creative in their approach to their work. Offices' budgets have not kept pace with the demands either, and increasing congressional budgets is a political challenge that few are willing to take on, especially given the current state of the economy. Finally, space in congressional offices is at a premium, at least in Washington, D.C. In fact, the Architect of the Capitol found that the population density in House offices is five times that of the typical office building.[19] Even if offices had the money to hire more staff to manage the work, it would be difficult to find space to accommodate them without exploring alternatives such as telecommuting or remote work sites.

3. **Congressional staff mistrust identical form communications.**
   Many congressional offices are suspicious of advocacy campaigns consisting of identical form messages because of concerns that the messages are not "real." They believe these campaigns are sent without constituents' knowledge or approval – that they are being generated by organizations using their membership lists without any direct action by the constituents whose names are on them.[20] This mistrust leads many offices to assign some or all advocacy campaigns a lower priority than personalized messages or to filter out or ignore these communications. The grassroots community acknowledges there is a very small minority of groups that might engage in deceptive practices, but they argue that the vast majority of the communications are from constituents who performed a direct action to transmit their views, even if all the person did was forward a suggested text to the office. They worry that congressional offices will summarily reject or ignore all communications that originate from a third party because of the actions of a few bad players. In addition, if it is true that a majority of form communications come through the action of the constituent – and there is compelling reason to think they are – congressional offices risk alienating constituents as well as miss the opportunity to engage a large number of their constituents.

Congressional staff sizes have been roughly the same since the mid-1970's, long before the Internet and e-mail – and even fax machines – changed the way citizens contacted their elected representatives.

---

[19] Elizabeth Brotherton, "Visualizing A Happier Workplace," *Roll Call* April 21, 2008, 3.

[20] Brad Fitch and Kathy Goldschmidt, "Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy" (Washington, DC: CMF, 2005), 31. http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF_Pubs/communicatingwithcongress_report1.pdf

4. **Incorrect, generic, and corrupt electronic data create unnecessary work for congressional offices.**

   Congressional offices report that they sometimes receive electronic communications via advocacy campaigns with data that consume significant resources for them to fix and process. Sometimes the mistakes are the result of a technical glitch, such as when an office changes a field on its online contact form and it takes a few days for the vendors to adjust their systems accordingly. Other times, the mistakes are typos, incorrect addresses, and zip codes that do not correspond to addresses. Occasionally, generic data is included in every message (e.g. the same zip code or salutation on every message) because the organizer of the campaign cannot or will not customize it or ask their membership to do so. In any case, congressional staff must spend a great deal of time identifying, troubleshooting, and fixing the problems before they can even begin to process and respond to the messages. With the volume of communications offices receive, they must weigh the benefits of devoting the time to correct the data or designate such communications to a lower processing priority than those that were formatted correctly.

5. **Some congressional offices do not respond to e-mail via e-mail.**

   Although responding to e-mail with e-mail would save congressional offices time and money and enable them to answer constituents more quickly, many refuse to do so. The most frequently-cited reason is that Members and/or senior managers fear their communications will be altered and forwarded to constituents or the press, resulting in political problems. In addition, many congressional offices cling to the perception that a response on letterhead with a Member's signature has more impact on a constituent, while ignoring the implicit communication preference of the individual contacting them.

A RECOMMENDATION TO THE INSTITUTION OF CONGRESS

There is only one recommendation for the institution itself, but it is a significant and politically charged one. If individual congressional offices ever hope to manage the volume of constituent communications and perform the rest of their duties successfully, we believe Congress must provide them with more resources. This could mean additional budget, additional staff, new enterprise services or technologies, or any number of solutions to help them work more effectively and efficiently.

As CMF previously reported, e-mail messages account for the lion's share of the increase in communications to Congress; there have also been increases in faxes, postcards, and petitions due to grassroots advocacy campaigns. However, the total number of staff employed in Members' personal offices has not changed appreciably in almost 30 years.

Of the average House office staff in the Representative's Washington, D.C. office, approximately three-quarters are involved in managing constituent communications on a part-time or full-time basis. Senate staff sizes are dependent on budgets that are calculated, in part, according to the populations of their states and the distances between their home states and Washington, D.C. Consequently, Senate office budgets and staff sizes vary widely.

In addition to the increase in constituent communications, a variety of other factors has contributed to expanding congressional workloads. As discussed earlier, the population of the United States has grown significantly, which means that Senators and Representatives are representing more constituents than ever before.

Increased legislative and lobbying activities on the Hill and the advent of the 24-hour news cycle have also significantly increased congressional workloads. The state and district offices, considered the "frontlines" for Members of Congress, are also under more pressure as they act on more complicated and time-intensive constituent casework requests. These offices are also responsible for planning and conducting increasing numbers of outreach events and meetings with community and business leaders.

In other industries, increases in workloads of these magnitudes would warrant commensurate increases in staff and resources. In Congress, however, this has not been the case. Congressional office buildings are already filled to capacity. Significant increases in staff would not only require higher payrolls, but sharp increases in resources, as well as in office space. However, the reason for this issue not being resolved is that these are not just business decisions.

Even in a less contentious political atmosphere than we have experienced in recent Congresses, these changes would be difficult to fund and oversee. Usually, any suggestion of increasing congressional staff sizes or budgets is met with severe criticism of Congress for spending money on itself, especially in an environment of federal deficits and budget cuts. The result has been that congressional offices have had to identify other means for coping with the ballooning workloads with the staff and resources they currently have. In light of the current communications crisis, however, investment in both staff and financial resources would be directly related to bolstering constituent service and the fundamental responsibility Members have of listening to, and representing, the views of their constituents.

In the short term, CMF recommends that both the House and Senate explore ways in which alternative office configurations, enterprise services and applications, and other institutional support services could ameliorate the current burdens on congressional offices. Both the House and Senate are testing services for digitizing postal communications, as well as providing more robust telephone and fax capabilities to ease the burdens on staff. It is important to note that while these are significant developments in the short-term, they are temporary, incomplete solutions. It is important for the institution as a whole to plan for the future financial, space allocation, human resource and technological needs of congressional offices.

A great deal of work has already begun in the House of Representatives with two studies commissioned by the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO). The first, which took place between 2004 and 2006, was to develop a ten-year strategic vision for the use of information technology in the House. That report, conducted by the Gartner Consulting Group and CMF, was based on a number of roundtable discussions with House stakeholders from all levels. The roundtables involved Members of committees responsible for management and oversight of the House, committee and leadership Staff Directors, House officers and legislative branch officials, Member office Chiefs of Staff, and high-level House and legislative branch technology administrators. The second report, commissioned by the CAO and completed during the spring of 2008, was conducted by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and focused on possible improvements within the existing structure of House office buildings to better utilize office space and help offices operate more efficiently.

Both of these studies underscored a need for some improvements to the existing House complex to ensure sustainable operations in the future.

Without a doubt, there will be some objections to Congress allocating more finances to alleviate the budgetary limitations of individual Member offices. However, through this project – and our interactions with a large number of advocacy organizations – we have found a general acknowledgement that an increase in congressional resources, if dedicated to augmenting office constituent services, is what offices need to effectively manage the increased volume of citizen communications.

While Congress has shown admirable fiscal restraint in limiting their staff resources for so long, CMF believes strongly that the time has come for a critical look at the needs of Member offices. Should Congress find a politically and fiscally acceptable way to boost their budget, benefits would be quickly realized by not only the congressional offices themselves, but more importantly by the constituents, they serve. After all, our democracy will suffer if Members and staff cannot engage with their constituents.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO MEMBER OFFICES

The House and Senate Member offices of Congress are the primary recipients of constituent communications. Below are a number of recommendations that should be evaluated by each office. Some are tactical, and some suggest new ways of thinking about or addressing constituent communications.

1. Adapt to the new communications environment.

Many in Congress still view technology as merely providing tools to accomplish the same tasks they have always performed. They view e-mail as postal mail that is sent electronically. They think of PDAs as replacements for paper schedules. They view Web sites as direct mail pieces that can be seen on a computer. But this mindset fails to take into account the very significant ways that the Internet has altered the public's access to information, expanded coalition-building opportunities, and created fresh communications habits across the entire electorate. The Internet has gone far beyond simply providing new tools to perform old tasks. To adapt to this environment created by the Internet, Congress must adapt to the entirely new communications paradigm.

The public has the capability to be almost as informed as Members and staff about the minutiae of pending legislation. Now, it is not only the Member educating and updating the constituent, but the constituent is bringing new information to the Member as well.

The emerging communications paradigm is multi-dimensional and interactive. Communications between Members and constituents can occur through several methods simultaneously, each playing off and building on the others. Constituents get their information from a variety of sources, such as e-mail, Web sites, blogs, podcasts, and even YouTube. No longer do constituents assume it will take days or weeks to receive a response to a message. They expect on-demand access to information, services available 24-7, and rapid responses to communications on par with the standards set by the private sector and other government entities. The public has the capability to be almost as informed as Members and staff about the minutiae of pending legislation. Now, it is not only the Member educating and updating the constituent, but the constituent is bringing new information to the Member as well.

To manage communications in this new paradigm, congressional offices will need to adopt alternative practices and ways of thinking about these issues. This presents many obstacles to their traditional ways of communicating with constituents, but it also offers tremendous opportunities to forge relationships with constituents, as well as build communities online.

2. Collaborate with advocacy/interest groups to identify solutions and solve problems.

Increasing numbers of citizens and advocacy/interest groups are using the Internet to become involved in politics and government. Congressional offices should do all they can to manage the expectations of constituents and grassroots organizations and to utilize communication practices that foster an open dialogue between Members of Congress and those they represent. Prior to widespread use of the Internet, it was difficult for congressional offices to easily contact the grassroots organizations behind advocacy campaigns. Many congressional offices have, at one time or another, informed grassroots organizations about problems they were having with specific campaigns. Few, however, have proactively sought to discuss ways to conduct joint problem-solving or to identify opportunities for improving online communications. Adapting to this new environment will require active collaboration with the advocacy community to identify better ways for Members of Congress and their constituents to interact.

In the "Recommendations to Grassroots Organizations" section of this report, CMF counsels organizations behind grassroots advocacy campaigns to identify themselves in the communications they generate to congressional offices. Congressional staff, on the other hand, should reach out to the organizers of advocacy campaigns to resolve technical challenges with individual campaigns and to find ways to engage these organizations. Many congressional offices report that knowing the identity of the organization behind the campaign adds weight and credibility to the constituent communications. It also provides legislative staff

in congressional offices information about the originating organization if they have questions prior to a vote or if their bosses simply want to know which groups support or oppose a particular piece of legislation.

3. **Fully utilize e-mail for responding to constituents.**
    A surprising number of congressional offices continue to respond to all incoming queries with a postal letter – regardless of how they arrived in the office. If a citizen sends an e-mail message requesting information about a Member's position on an issue, the citizen usually anticipates an e-mail reply. Congressional offices have understandable concerns about responding to e-mail with e-mail, but simple and affordable technological tools and more effective e-mail management procedures can overcome almost all of them. It no longer makes sense from a technological, budgetary, political, or customer service standpoint to respond to e-mail with postal mail. For instance, answering e-mail with e-mail can save a considerable amount of money in the Member's budgetary allotment – money on letterhead, envelopes, toner, and maintenance costs – not to mention staff time on folding and stuffing, and the impact on the environment. In addition, e-mail responses can be shorter, include links to further information on the Member's Web site, and sent with only a click of a button, which allows a much faster turnaround time. For more information on common objections to the use of e-mail by congressional offices, and the arguments against them, see Figure 7.

4. **Provide separate online Web forms for constituent service requests.**
    Congressional offices repeatedly report their frustration that time-sensitive requests for flags, tours, and, most importantly, federal assistance requests, get lost among the high volumes of issue-related constituent communications. This is often due to the fact that congressional Web sites are not explicit about how to place such requests. Consequently, messages are submitted through only one "contact" form, rather than through a tier-structured Web form that differentiates between the different reasons for contacting the office and guides constituents to the correct contact channel.

    There are ways in which these important requests for assistance can be funneled into separate queues that quickly direct the messages to the appropriate staffer, such as a caseworker or a staff assistant handling flags and tours. On page 42 is a screen capture from the Web site of Senator Carl Levin (Figure 8). The Senator's Web form takes a multi-step approach to ensure that constituent service requests are not lost. After constituents select the purpose of their inquiry, they are directed to customized forms specific to their request: an order form for constituents wishing to have a flag flown over the U.S. Capitol, an issue-related Web form for citizens wishing to register their views, and a casework form for individuals who need assistance with a federal agency.

    CMF recommends that congressional offices explore ways to be more deliberate in their use of Web forms. A great deal of staff time could be saved and constituents better served by fully utilizing this technology on their Web sites.

5. **Develop and post your correspondence policies online.**
    While the volume of communications to congressional offices is at an all time high, few offices actually post substantive information on their Web sites about their correspondence policies. Because each office has different procedures, constituents would be well served if they could easily access specific Members' policies on their Web sites. Specific information would vary from office to office, of course, but a thorough communications policy would include: guidance on the most effective ways to communicate, an estimate of how long a response can be expected to take, an overview of what information the office needs to properly process the message and respond, information about delays in postal mail delivery, and any other requirements or restraints the office may place on e-mail communications.

    One good example of this type of guidance can be found on the Web site of Congressman Earl Blumenauer. As part of the "Contact Earl" section, a page on "Effective Advocacy" gives visitors directions on how they

Figure 7. Responding to E-mail With E-mail	
Myth	**Reality**
"The text of our response will be altered if we respond with e-mail."	• Offices that respond to e-mail with e-mail have never reported that happening. • Your CMS/CSS system stores copies of all e-mail, providing a record of what your office has sent. • The constituent may forward the e-mail on to friends and family in a positive way, allowing you to reach more constituents. • If there are still concerns, there are affordable technologies to help track and "guarantee" that your e-mail is secure.
"E-mail will increase our workload."	• E-mail is actually more efficient. You can automate certain parts of the data entry, which will save time. You'll also save time folding letters and stuffing them into envelopes; not using paper and envelopes will also save money. E-mail responses are not expected to be as long as postal letters, so the review process could be easier.
"People like letters—they're more impressive."	• People who send e-mail are expressing their preference for an online reply. • Responding to e-mailers with a postal letter may make the Member appear out-of-touch.
"Constituents who write via e-mail are not as important as those who write via postal mail."	• E-mailers are some of your most important constituents. Research shows that people who are politically active online and those who have contacted their elected officials are far more influential in their communities than the general public. They're also far more likely to vote and participate in political campaigns.[21]
"We don't want to write shorter responses— constituents appreciate a good, quality response."	• A quality e-mail is not the same thing as a quality letter – it is a different medium with different expectations. E-mailers will generally place greater importance on the speed of the response than on its length and will view a long response as an unnecessary and difficult read.
"Answering e-mail with e-mail will encourage pen pals."	• E-mail does make it easier for pen pals to prolong the debate, but there are some easy techniques for managing their expectations. For example, making response policies clear on your Web site and in a "re-direct message" pointing back to the Web site if they would like to send in an additional message can reduce pen pals. • When sending an e-mail response you can link to your Web site, providing the constituent with access to much more information than can be included in a letter.

[21] Source: Carol Darr et al., "Poli-fluentials: The New Political Kingmakers" (Washington, DC: The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet, 2007), 17. http://www.ipdi.org/UploadedFiles/Polifluentials%20Report%20-%20Final.pdf

M I C H I G A N

Carl Levin

UNITED STATES SENATOR

About | In the Senate | On the Issues | Newsroom | Constituent Services | In Michigan

Search Site | Contact Center

Adjust type size: M L XL

Home > Email & Contact Center

Email & Contact Center

Please note that due to security screening procedures, postal mail may take over two weeks to reach my Washington D.C. office. Please feel free to fax your letter to 202-224-1388 or use the webform below for the fastest response.

Here you can email me to let me know your position on an issue, or to get help with the many services my office can provide. By filling out this web form below, it makes it possible to sort and prioritize the email I receive each day so that I can identify those that come from Michigan residents and respond to them promptly. Thank you for taking the time to contact my office.

Please note that (*) denotes a required field.

STEP 1. SELECT THE PURPOSE OF YOUR INQUIRY

What would you like to contact me about?

○ Position on an issue   ○ Help with a govt agency

○ Order a flag   ○ Request a tour

○ Apply for internship   ○ Apply to be Senate page

○ Academy nomination   ○ Request Letter of Recognition

○ Comment About Website

Go to Step 2 -->

WASHINGTON
269 Russell Office Building
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC
20510-2202

Phone (202) 224-6221
Fax (202) 224-1388
TTY (202) 224-2816
8:30 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.

MICHIGAN
Senator Levin has seven offices in Michigan that help constituents with federal agencies.
office locations >

can be the most effective in their communications by knowing how to make requests of the office. The Web site says, "The communications that receive the most attention in our office often ask for something specific, such as signing on to a specific piece of legislation, or voting in a particular way on a bill. Of course, we always appreciate updates and general information on issues you care about. However, you should think about whether there is something specific you would like Congressman Blumenauer to do."

On Senator Kent Conrad's "Email Policy" page, he answers the relevant questions about why he only responds to North Dakotans, why constituents are required to give their postal address, and how long they can expect to wait before receiving a response.

Stating the office's policies upfront can set expectations and smooth interactions between Member offices and their constituents.

6. **Provide constituents answers to their legislative inquiries online.**
One way to reduce the number of communications from constituents – while still meeting their expectations and providing good constituent service – is to post robust legislative issue information on the Member's Web site. Well-conceived legislative content can accomplish many important goals at once. It can: support the goals and legislative priorities of the office; strengthen public understanding of Congress and the Member; foster public trust in the democratic process; attract and retain visitors to the site; and answer constituents' questions before they even have the chance to ask. The benefits of making as much of this content as possible available on the Web site outweigh the costs in terms of time and effort to produce it. A comprehensive, up-to-date legislative issues section posted to the Member's Web site allows the Senator or Representative to highlight their legislative priorities, describe their most recent actions, and spell out their overall positions on "hot topic" issues.[22] Many constituents come to the Web site looking for information about the Member's position on issues that matter to them. If they find it they will be less likely to feel the need to contact the office because their questions have been answered.

7. **Diligently maintain the health of your constituent database.**
It can be such a chore to keep pace with incoming e-mails, telephone calls, postal letters, and faxes that congressional offices often overlook routine maintenance on their database of constituent records. Here are three tasks that every office should undertake on a regular basis:

- **Address standardization.** All CMS and CSS vendors can run utilities on a constituent database to make sure that all records conform to a standardized addressing format. Whether the office prefers to truncate address information to two-letter state abbreviations or to spell out "street," "boulevard," and "avenue," it is helpful to go through the database regularly and standardize each record to the office's preferred format. This saves significant staff time and frustration when the office is trying to get out a large and time-sensitive batch of letters.

- **Merge duplicate records.** To maximize the capabilities of your system, it is important to run duplicate-checking utilities on your database. Again, most CMS/CSS vendor products contain tools that can help you successfully identify and merge duplicate records, but they only work if you actually use them. Eliminating duplicate records will help offices keep all information about the views of each constituent in one place, and lessens the possibility of errors or duplicate letters being sent to the same constituent.

- **Obtain voter registration lists.** One strategy for decreasing the amount of necessary data entry when postal communications arrive in a congressional office is to regularly purchase publicly available voter registration lists. If the constituent

Not being adequately trained in the use of your CMS/CSS software can be like having a high performance car but never taking it out of first gear.

---

22 Collin Burden, "2007 Gold Mouse Report: Lessons from the Best Web Sites on Capitol Hill" (Washington, DC: CMF, 2008), 41. http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF_Pubs/2007_goldmousereport.pdf

already exists in the database as a result of the voter list, then there is much less data entry required when their next communication arrives in the office.

- **Get Adequate CMS/CSS Training.** Perhaps one of the best ways to maintain a healthy mail system is for anyone involved in processing constituent communications to be fully trained on the CMS/CSS tools at their disposal. Not being adequately trained can be like having a high performance car but never taking it out of first gear. Regardless of the CMS/CSS package that your office employs, having everyone up to speed on the latest features and shortcuts will not only ensure that you maintain the health of your database, but also that your office can operate more effectively and more efficiently.

8. **Maximize the use of your Web form.**

- **Offer your constituents an opportunity to subscribe to your e-newsletter.** Your constituents are sending you messages every day. Offices should look for every opportunity to invite citizens to subscribe to their e-mail newsletters. This can keep Members in touch with constituents interested in what is happening in Washington, as well as in the Member's state or district. One of the easiest ways to build that list is to include an option on your Web form for constituents to subscribe to regular e-mail updates. In fact, our research shows that a majority of citizens, regardless of whether or not they have communicated with their Members, want their representatives to keep them informed about what is happening at the federal level.[23]

  A note of caution: both the House and Senate have rules governing the ways in which offices can and cannot elicit subscriptions to their online communications, so check with the Committee on House Administration or Senate Committee on Rules and Administration to be sure that you are operating within the appropriate boundaries. One such restriction is that an office may not pre-check a box if the Web site offers a "please subscribe me to the Congressman's e-mail newsletter" checkbox. Instead, it must require the constituent to take direct action to choose affirmatively to become a subscriber.

- **Consider utilizing a "no response necessary" checkbox or a "register my views" Web form.** Sometimes constituents do not expect – or want – a response to their message. Instead they merely wish to register their views. One way to ease the burden on congressional staff and meet constituent expectations is to add a "no response necessary" checkbox on the Member's Web form or create a separate mechanism such as an online poll or survey where citizens can simply state an opinion. When such messages arrive in the congressional office, they can still be aggregated and shared with the Member, but the office need not respond to the constituent in writing. While some offices will want to respond to everyone, for those offices that are dealing with a particularly high mail volume, this is a helpful tactic that both reduces mail volumes while also meeting constituent expectations.

- **Limit the number of prefixes offered on the Member's Web site.** As part of our review of House and Senate Web sites for CMF's Gold, Silver, and Bronze Mouse Awards, we regularly visit congressional Web forms to observe best practices. Since we first started researching Congress' use of the Internet in 1998, we have noticed that congressional offices utilize many different sets of prefixes that are often required fields on their Web forms. In an effort to be inclusive, one congressional office lists 125 possible prefixes – from the usual suspects like "Mr.," "Mrs.," "Dr.," and "Ms.," to numerous prefixes for those serving in each branch of the U.S. Military. Other offices provide prefixes for select members of the clergy, like "Pastor" and "Sister" but exclude their equivalents in other religions. CMF recommends that offices utilize a simple list of the most frequent iterations, or opt for a blank fill-in field rather than an exhaustive pull-down list that could – and probably will – exclude someone. A lengthy drop-down list also increases the likelihood of user error, and could result in more time-consuming data entry fixes later.

---

23 Kathy Goldschmidt and Leslie Ochreiter, "Communicating with Congress: How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement" (Washington, DC: CMF, 2008), 31. http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF_Pubs/cwc_citizenengagement.pdf

- **Make telephone numbers optional.** Many congressional offices prefer to call constituents if their issue is particularly complex or urgent. As a result, some make the telephone number field on their Web forms mandatory. However, because it is not essential in replying to the constituent, and because many Americans prefer not to give out their telephone numbers, CMF recommends making this field optional. Many citizens will still fill in the field, but it will not alienate constituents who simply prefer to hear back from the office with a written response.

9. **Take advantage of enterprise fax services.**
   Both the House Chief Administrative Officer and the Senate Sergeant at Arms offer enterprise fax services that transmit digital images of the original fax that can be imported into the office's CMS/CSS database and attached to the constituent's communication history. Most offices prefer digital communications to fax, and even postal mail, because they do not require data entry and can be processed electronically. Digital communications help ensure that communications are received and counted, rather than lost in the stacks of paper that pile up under the fax machine. Both the House and Senate's enterprise fax services also allow offices to save each fax in a searchable format that requires less data input by staff.

   For more information about these services, Senate offices should contact their Customer Support Analyst (CSA) in the Sergeant at Arms Office (SAA) and House offices should contact their Technical Support Representative (TSR) in House Information Resources (HIR).

A RECOMMENDATION TO COMMITTEE AND LEADERSHIP OFFICES

The committees of the U.S. Congress are where much of the substantive work of the legislative process takes place. Some House and Senate committees deal with highly technical information and interact with a professional audience, like the House Science and Technology Committee or the Joint Committee on Taxation. Other panels' jurisdictions impact a sizeable percentage of the population on a personal, rather than an academic or professional, level.

The leadership offices in the Congress range from the Speaker of the House and the Senate Republican Leader to the House Democratic Caucus and the Senate Republican Policy Committee. Though each has a specific function, they all provide institutional and party leadership both on and off the Hill. Some have primarily Hill audiences, and some operate for, and provide information to, both congressional and public audiences.

Citizen communication with the various committee and leadership offices of Congress, while not a new phenomenon, is increasing. All committee and leadership offices have physical mailing addresses, telephone numbers, and fax numbers. Some allow citizens to communicate with the office directly through Web forms on the office's Web site or through public e-mail addresses. Allowing the public to transmit communications online, however, has not yet become widespread among these Capitol Hill offices. While every one of the 540 Member offices provides some electronic method of communication for constituents, several committee and leadership offices do not. In fact, of the 13 House and Senate leadership offices, six do not offer any way for the public to send e-mail, either through a Web form or public e-mail address. In addition, there are 39 congressional committees that do not provide members of the public with the means of electronic communications (see Figure 6 on page 30).

It is easy to understand why committee and leadership offices might be reticent to open themselves up to contact from individual citizens. Because their actions have national impact, the challenge of answering mail from every state and congressional district would be daunting for them. While committee and leadership offices typically have significantly more resources than the rank and file Member offices, they still are not in a position to respond to communications from across the United States.

On the other hand, our research shows that the primary reason citizens contact their elected representatives is that they care deeply about an issue. In fact, one of the most likely reasons citizens attempt to contact Members

other than their own Senators and Representative is because those Members sit on committees with jurisdiction over a piece of legislation that is of particular interest to them. Fully 61% of the Internet users who responded to our 2007 citizen survey reported that they had contacted a Member other than their own.[24]

Again, it is important to recognize that given their limited resources, committees and leadership offices will not have the wherewithal to respond to the potential avalanche of communications they could receive if they opened the floodgates. However, allowing the public to weigh in on the work of a committee or the legislative priorities of a leadership office will not only let citizens feel they have a place at the table, but in its aggregated form, it could also help leaders understand the impact of policy changes on the general public.

Even if committee and leadership offices do not have the ability to reply, they could still benefit from the feedback that they receive. It could even help to shape the congressional agenda and provide a critical perspective on the direction of public policy long before legislation is brought to a vote on the House or Senate floor.

In the past, committees have solicited feedback in two basic ways: through general Web comment forms or through more targeted means like an electronic survey. Both are discussed in detail below.

Web Forms

Some of the committee and leadership offices do solicit public feedback provide forms similar to those found on Members' personal Web sites.

The House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is one example of a panel that accepts public comment (Figure 9). The committee is careful, however, to set expectations, saying, "While it is not possible for Chairman Waxman or the committee's staff to respond to every message, please be assured that your comments will be carefully considered." In addition to their general comment form, they also maintain a "Waste, Fraud, and Abuse of Taxpayer Dollars" tip page, and they report receiving between 100 and 200 citizen messages during the course of an average week.

Polls, Surveys, and Targeted Feedback

Committee and leadership Web sites also occasionally solicit citizen feedback on specific issues through a targeted feedback mechanism, like an online poll or survey. One example of this practice was when the House Committee on Agriculture solicited public comment on the most recent Farm Bill. In addition to conducting field hearings around the country, the committee sought public opinion as it prepared to reauthorize the legislation. Though this type of interaction is not a two-way dialogue, it does enable citizens to participate directly in the legislative process in a way that is both meaningful and convenient for them and which could make a difference in shaping important legislation.

Regardless of whether it is through a Web form or a targeted application like an interactive poll, allowing citizens to engage more fully in the drafting of legislation – at every stage in the process – is good for democratic dialogue. In the past, committee and leadership offices relied primarily on input from Members and a select group of witnesses called to testify during hearings. CMF is encouraged to see more committees opening up their deliberations with innovative Web sites, Web casts of hearings and committee votes, and the acceptance of citizen comments via e-mail. More and more, the information that was once easily accessible only to a handful of congressional staffers, lobbyists, political reporters and subject matter experts intimately involved in the issue under consideration, is becoming more accessible to the public.

---

[24] Ibid., 10.

A New Model for Constituent Communications

With a firm foundation laid of who the players are, how they operate, their challenges, and best practice recommendations, we will move on to discuss improvements to allow for a more free-flowing dialogue between citizens and Congress. This chapter describes a new model – or new structure for transmitting and receiving communications to and from congressional offices. We describe the origins and key principles of this next-generation method of communication before giving detailed information, including screenshots, on how it would work and how it would be implemented.

ORIGINS OF THE NEW MODEL

The new model for constituent communications was a collaborative effort between CMF and representative experts from each stakeholder group that evolved over the course of this project. For instance, the concept of the aggregated communications dashboard is predicated on a presentation by Daniel Bennett at the *Communicating with Congress* Conference. As coauthor of *The Net Effect: How Cyberadvocacy is Changing the Political Landscape*, a former congressional staffer, and former president of the House Systems Administrators Association, he discussed the inclusion of a unique identifier – he referred to it as a "Topic Code" – in grassroots advocacy communications as a method for aggregating similar communications together.

As we discussed this concept and other possibilities with key stakeholders, a consensus developed that the inclusion of the unique identifier would be extremely useful and should be the core of any new model for citizen communications. We discovered, however, that other elements could be included in a new system that would provide even more value to both sides beyond just the aggregation of similar communications. To address all of the identified challenges and provide additional value, Rob Pierson, a congressional staffer and co-president of the House Systems Administrators Association, assisted CMF with the identification of a number of other key elements that would help address some of the core communications challenges discussed earlier.

The model that emerged was discussed with many key parties from the various stakeholder groups prior to the publishing of this report. We included in these discussions representatives from House and Senate leadership, institutional, and Member offices; all of the approved House and Senate CMS/CSS vendors; the *Communicating with Congress* Working Group, a coalition of grassroots advocacy vendors; advocacy groups representing a broad spectrum interests, and many thought leaders on this topic. Each added their insights, and in some cases, their criticisms and concerns. With each of these discussions, CMF sought to clarify the concept, identify its shortcomings, and strengthen the structure and efficacy of this new approach to citizen communications.

The concept evolved even more as CMF opened a draft version of this report for a period of public comment. That process allowed an even broader group of stakeholders to provide their feedback, and we believe this final version of the report is better for their input.

THE KEY PRINCIPLES

Putting forward a new concept that changes the current citizen communications model is both ambitious and complicated. CMF wanted very much to identify a new process that would ease the current burden on everyone involved in the process: citizens, congressional staff, as well as grassroots advocacy organizations. We soon realized, however, that while there were quick and easy fixes to existing problems and challenges, not all of them were palatable because of their detrimental impact on the dialogue on which our democracy is based. We could not, for instance, recommend that Congress ignore or block all electronic messages that do not originate from their own Web forms because our research revealed the intricate and irreversible role of third party grassroots organizations.

On the other hand, we certainly could not recommend that all congressional offices revert to public e-mail addresses and accept communications from not only their own states and districts, but also from the rest of the nation. Congressional offices that can barely manage the volumes they are getting from their own constituents are hardly in a position to tackle messages from all 50 states.

CMF believes that it is important that any new model take into account the realities and deep complexities of the current challenges. Given the great number of stakeholders and hurdles, it is clear that any new system needs to address as many of the issues previously discussed in this report as possible, all while navigating around "deal breakers" from each side's perspective. We set forward the following key principles to guide the development of any potential solutions. The new model had to be:

1. **Trustworthy.** To develop and implement a truly effective new model, both sides of the communications process must understand that they share the same overarching objective: meaningful dialogue between the representatives and the represented. Members of Congress want to hear from their constituents and to use their opinions to help guide their activities in Congress. Citizens and grassroots organizations want to engage their members and help shape public policy. Our concept acknowledges this symbiotic relationship that requires both sides to place significant trust in the other to engage in actions that further, not undermine, their shared objective. While there always have been and always will be actors on both sides that, in fact, do violate this trust, a shared goal of quality communication should allow both sides to have a modicum of faith that the other is acting in the interest of democracy. Unless both sides actually commit to extending the benefit of the doubt, however, and adapt their practices accordingly, the right to petition government threatens to become nothing more than an empty pretense on both sides.

2. **Authentic.** For meaningful dialogue to take place between citizens and their elected officials, the communications must be genuine messages from real people. Every grassroots advocacy organizer should reject false methods of generating communications and give assurance that every message is sent with the knowledge, consent, and action of individual citizens and that all information transmitted to offices is accurate and legitimate.

3. **Effective.** If citizens' concerns never truly reach the attention of their elected representatives because congressional offices are buried under the sheer weight of messages, then no sharing of ideas has occurred. Our concept envisions a new model for constituent interaction that maximizes the benefits to both sides and results in truly effective communications. Members should be able to determine clearly the views of their constituents, and citizens and advocacy groups should be able to have their voices heard and counted.

4. **Efficient.** While citizens have used many means to transmit their views on legislation before Congress, not all have been efficient. Sending messages to Congress just to say they were delivered, regardless of whether they arrive in a format that was usable and actually had their intended impact, does not further true democratic dialogue. Likewise, blocking any communication that does not originate from the Member's own Web site is certainly an expedient solution for growing mail volumes, but it is certainly not good for democracy. This concept strives to help both the senders and the receivers of congressional

communications gain from a system that is as efficient as possible. In order for our democracy to maximize the benefit of increased civic engagement, both sides must reject outmoded methods of communication and seek the best and most efficient ways of engaging in robust, meaningful exchanges. Expedience is not the same as efficiency, and both sides should look for ways to make communication more meaningful and effectual, not just easier.

With these four key principles in mind, we – with ideas and generous assistance from many stakeholder representatives on both sides of the process – have developed a proposal for a new model of constituent communications. This concept does not discard past practice or fundamentally alter the way communication takes place. Instead, it uses available technology to present information in a new way that, if implemented, would ultimately result in a lighter administrative burden on most stakeholders and would create a new system to more easily aggregate communications so they are more valuable to everyone.

THE CONCEPT: AN AGGREGATED COMMUNICATIONS DASHBOARD

Our concept for a new model of constituent communications relies on the development and implementation of a new aggregated communications "dashboard" view of electronic messages. Regardless of whether a message comes in through the Member's own Web form or as part of a grassroots advocacy campaign, this new model would treat all communications as individual messages from individual constituents.

The Web form communications (those sent by constituents who personally enter comments directly into the contact forms on Senators' and Representatives' Web sites) would be single contacts aggregated into their respective issue areas using issue codes chosen by constituents. Similarly, grassroots advocacy campaigns (messages sent through the coordinated action of organized citizens) would be transmitted as single contacts but also be aggregated and viewed as part of a larger advocacy campaign. (See Figure 10.) No matter which way the messages came in, the aggregated communications dashboard model would enable the communications to be handled as effectively and efficiently as possible for both the senders and receivers.

Regardless of whether a message comes in through the Member's own Web form or as part of a grassroots advocacy campaign, this new model would treat all communications as individual messages from individual constituents.

The new model would allow offices to manage the volume without losing the meaning of the campaign or the sense of the involvement of the individual constituent behind each message. More concretely, this concept would provide opportunities to:

- **Easily aggregate grassroots communications.** The purpose and power of grassroots communication is to demonstrate strength in the collective voice of engaged and organized citizens. However, if this strength is diluted upon delivery because the messages cannot be viewed together, some of the power is lost. As a result, a new model needs to be able to pull all of the communications about a particular topic or advocacy campaign together. It is in this aggregation that advocacy campaigns can maximize their impact and congressional offices can accurately understand the sentiments of their constituents.

- **Help verify that grassroots communications are sent from real citizens.** Grassroots communications should never be sent to the offices of elected officials without the knowledge, consent, and action of the individual citizen. Any successful model must convey to congressional offices that they can trust the communications are sent through the direct action of a constituent.

- **Identify the sponsoring grassroots organization and their vendor.** Congressional staff report that being able to identify – and being able to contact – both the grassroots organization and advocacy vendor it might be using would add weight and credibility to grassroots campaigns. Though it may seem counterintuitive, identifying the organization generating a campaign – which CMF recommends but considers optional – helps improve congressional staff trust, as it demonstrates that the organization stands behind the messages. Staff can also follow up on the campaign or resolve technical problems if contact information for the organization and vendor are included.

Figure 10. Sample Dashboard View of Aggregated Constituent Communications

All communications coming through Member Web forms would continue to enter the CMS/CSS the way they always have, as single contacts that can be batched by issue code.

Regardless of whether they arrive through the Member's Web form or through the efforts of a grassroots advocacy organization, the messages are maintained as individual messages from a Member's constituents.

Constituent Records		Correspondence	Casework	Letter Library	Mail Reports	Settings

Communications Batched by Issue and Advocacy Campaign

Aggregated By Issue

Subject	Pending
− Defense	446

	Name	Address	Received	Text
☑	Rick Barret	37 Main St. Houston, TX 54321	5/26/2008	Dear Congresswoman, I have been stationed on an ... More
☑	Brook Tomlinson	7 Oak St. Spring, TX 87654	5/26/2008	Dear Congresswoman, in these extraordinary and... More
	View all 446 messages			

+ Energy	826
+ Transportation	115

View All 16 Active Issues

Aggregated By Advocacy Campaign

Bill/Issue Name	Pro/Con/Other	Response Summary	First Message	Most Recent	Organization
− H.R. 233 Education for All Americans Act of 2008	Pro	1258 incoming / 237 with comments	5/18/2008	5/26/2008	American Education Coalition (AEC)

	Name	Address	Received	Text
☑	Helena Tova	11 Pine Ave. Pasadena, TX 87653	5/26/2008	Dear Congresswoman, as a mother of two college... More
☑	Gary Durden	542 Paper St. Houston, TX 54321	5/26/2008	Dear Congresswoman, I am an admissions assistant...More
	View issue position or View all 237 comments			

Bill/Issue Name	Pro/Con/Other	Response Summary	First Message	Most Recent	Organization
+ H.R. 98 Industrial Standardization Act	Con	154 incoming / 8 with comments	5/25/2008	5/26/2008	
+ H.R. 548 Transportation Improvement Act of 2008	Pro	1033 incoming / 143 with comments	4/1/2008	5/26/2008	National Transportation Society (NTS)

View all 8 active campaigns and 3 unanswered campaigns

Grassroots advocacy campaigns would arrive and be managed as individual messages, but with the added ability for them to be viewed in an aggregated format, allowing them to have the organization's desired impact in the Member's office while also making it easier for congressional staff to manage them and respond.

Individual comments, aggregated totals, and the organizations supporting or opposing legislation makes it easier for staff to communicate information to Members prior to congressional action.

Figure 10 is a mock-up of what the aggregated communications dashboard might look like within a non-product-specific CMS/CSS interface in a congressional office. It illustrates the concept of the dashboard view where communications grouped together by interest area and advocacy campaign are aggregated and summarized. (Note: All the information in this figure, including names, addresses, and the CMS/CSS interface and nomenclature, are fictitious and only used to illustrate the concept.)

- **Identify the bill, amendment, or topic of the messages.** Early identification of the topic in a constituent's message will allow congressional offices to more quickly process and reply to constituent correspondence. Ideally, the overall subject, bill, or amendment is clearly identified to immediately allow the receiving office to know the topic and sentiments of the citizen's communication.

- **Develop a set of open source communications standards.** Any new model for constituent communications must be based on open source standards that are published and available for those who wish to communicate with Congress. These standards must be widely available, both to accommodate the largest number of organizations and to allow even small grassroots groups to participate without the assistance of a third-party vendor.

Member Web Form Communications

In our concept, individual constituent communications generated through the Member's own Web form would continue to be delivered in the same way they are currently. Constituents can continue to visit their Members' Web sites, read about their views, and contact them through a form on the Member's Web site. In the same way they currently do, congressional Web forms would contain the necessary fields – which would be included at the discretion of each congressional office – to ensure that communications harvested through their Web forms will be accurately pulled into offices' CMS/CSS products.

The following list illustrates the typical fields that will probably be necessary to verify senders as constituents of the Member:

- Prefix

- First name

- Last name

- Address 1

- Address 2

- City

- State

- Zip + 4

- Telephone number (optional)

- Issue Code (chosen by each office)

- Comment or message field

Once these individual communications arrive in the Member's CMS/CSS product, the office retains all of the options that they currently have to assign e-mails to certain staffers, attach and send response letters, group them by broad issue topics such as Energy or Environment, and choose an affiliation/personal code for the constituent's record. (See Figure 11.)

Figure 11 . Member Web Form Communications Aggregated by Issue - Defense

Issues that are sent through a Member's own Web form are aggregated by asking individual constituents to choose the issue that most closely associates with the issue that interests them.

Issue: Defense   **Actions** Attach Letter   Reassign   Assign Issue Code   Other

Select All
    Name: Rick Barret   **E-mail:** rick.barret@e-mail.com   **Address:** 37 Main St. Houston, TX 54321
☑ **Comment:** Dear Congresswoman, I have been stationed on an army base in your district for many years now. If it is shut down, it will have a terrible effect... More

    Name: Brook Tomlinson   **E-mail:** tomlinson2006@e-mail.com   **Address:** 7 Oak St. Spring, TX 87654
☑ **Comment:** Dear Congresswoman, in these extraordinary and important times, we need to strengthen our borders and really focus on homeland security. Please support the bill now on the House floor and show your... More

    Name: Jack Wilson   **E-mail:** jwilson@e-mail.com   **Address:** 56 Pine Ave. Pasadena, TX 87653
☑ **Comment:** Dear Congresswoman, what is the US Congress doing about the threats all over the world? In the Middle East and elsewhere, there is a lot going on. We need more resources for defense than ever before... More
    View all 688 pending messages

Offices can open individual records or view every active letter that came in with a particular issue code selected and choose which should be batched together due to similar content.

Options to attach prepared responses, issue codes, and assign communications to a certain staffer allow offices to track, manage, and respond to constituent messages.

Figure 11 is a mock-up of what the mail dashboard might look like within a non-product-specific CMS/CSS interface in a congressional office. It illustrates the concept of the dashboard view for messages that originate from the Member's own Web form, where communications are grouped together by broad interest areas chosen by the constituent. (Note: All the information in this figure, including names, addresses, and the CMS/CSS interface and nomenclature, are fictitious and only used to illustrate the concept.)

Grassroots Advocacy Campaigns

In this model, congressional offices would be able to view and manage grassroots advocacy campaigns in an easier and more effective way, thereby allowing constituent's voices to be heard more clearly. Though these messages would enter the CMS/CSS systems of the congressional office as individual messages, the added functionality and user interface would allow these communications to be more easily aggregated, tallied, understood, and acted upon than is possible with current systems. All parties have a vested interest in fostering a meaningful exchange of views, and this proposed model would provide innovative new benefits to congressional offices, the citizens who participate in advocacy campaigns, and the organizations that generate them. Unfortunately, under the current configuration, the task of collecting and tallying the messages delivered through an advocacy campaign is extremely difficult and time-consuming for congressional offices to perform accurately. The result is that it is difficult for congressional staff to convey to a Member how many people support or oppose a particular piece of legislation. Some of the CMS/CSS packages provide tools for identifying and batching similar communications, but, by and

large, congressional offices rely on internal policies they establish for themselves, including manual sorting which is labor-intensive, inconsistent, and ineffective for both sides.

In this concept, while all messages would continue to arrive as individual messages, new features would increase the effectiveness of advocacy campaign communications by differentiating them from the thousands of other messages that come directly through a Member Web form. (See Figures 12 and 13.)

The following list illustrates the proposed information fields for creating electronic grassroots advocacy campaign communications as our aggregated communications dashboard concept envisions. On page 58, the major components of the new model and their benefits are explained in greater detail.

1. A unique identifying "advocacy campaign code"

2. Constituent Identification Information

   - Prefix
   - First name
   - Last name
   - Address 1
   - Address 2
   - City
   - State
   - Zip + 4

3. Issue Information

   - Bill name (preferred when communicating about specific legislation)
   - Bill number (or Legislation ID)
   - Stance (Pro/Con/Other)
   - Issue position (summary of organization's views)
   - Individualized citizen comment field

4. Advocacy Organization and Vendor Information

   - Name of originating organization
   - Organization contact information (lobbyist and/or grassroots contacts)
     - Contact name
     - Telephone number
     - E-mail address
   - Name of the vendor used by the advocacy organization to deliver the communications
   - Vendor contact information
     - Contact name
     - Telephone number
     - E-mail address

In this model, congressional offices would be able to view and manage grassroots advocacy campaigns in an easier and more effective way, thereby allowing constituent's voices to be heard more clearly.

Figure 12.   Member CMS/CSS Campaign View

Inclusion of a unique identifier like this "Advocacy Campaign Code" allows all related communications to be aggregated regardless of whether or not they are customized in some way by the citizen.

Congressional staff access a dashboard view that shows how many constituents share this opinion and how many have customized their responses to show the impact the legislation will have on their lives.

The bill or issue is easily identified, while also giving the group's detailed issue position information.

Active Advocacy Campaign - Education for All Americans Act of 2008 - Pro

Advocacy Campaign Code: http://educateamericans.org/aec.1536

Issue Summary

1258 individuals sent this message and 237 added additional comments

Bill/Issue: Education for All Americans Act of 2008

Pro/Con/Other*: Pro   Bill ID #*: HR 233

Issue Position: I urge you to support the Education for All Americans Act of 2008. It would set important universal education standards. This bill will raise the bar for achievement in schools across the nation by increasing funding for new textbooks and extra curricular activities. Education drives the economy, improves social bonds, and enriches lives. Investment in education is essential for all Americans. HR 233 / S 193 would set the country on the right course, by giving every citizen the opportunity to better their lives, their communities, and themselves.

Constituent Comments   **Actions** Attach Letter   Reassign   Assign Issue Code   Other

Select All

☐   **Name:** Helena Tova   **E-mail:** helenatova@e-mail.com   **Address:** 11 Pine Ave. Pasadena, TX 87653
☑   **Comment:** Dear Congresswoman, as a mother of two college-age children, I believe that nothing is more important than access to education. More

☐   **Name:** Gary Durden   **E-mail:** tdurden122@e-mail.com   **Address:** 542 Paper St. Houston, TX 54321
☑   **Comment:** Dear Congresswoman, I am an admissions assistant at Houston College. Every day I meet with students eager to continue their education. More

☐   **Name:** Sherrie Bynum   **E-mail:** sherrie2007@e-mail.com   **Address:** 107 Main St. Spring, TX 87654
☑   **Comment:** Dear Congresswoman, this bill is essential for America to stay at the forefront of innovation and growth in the economy. More
     View all comments

Organization*   ## Vendor

Name: American Education Coalition (AEC)   Name: Hill Data Group (HDG)

Contact: Jane Doe - (202)555-1234 - jane.doe@aec.org   Contact: John Smith - (202)555-5678 - john.smith@hdg.com

About: The AEC is a grassroots association of students, parents, educators, and professionals dedicated to advancement of education in America. More

Constituent messages can still be personalized and managed as individual communications.

OPTIONAL: Organizations generating campaigns have the choice to increase the effectiveness of their campaigns by identifying their organizations and providing contact information for offices to ask questions and resolve technical issues.

Providing congressional staff with the name and contact nformation for the advocacy vendor, if there is one, allows them to contact the vendor to resolve technical problems with a particular campaign.

Options to attach prepared responses, issue codes, and assign an advocacy campaign to a certain staffer allow offices to track, manage, and respond from the advocacy campaign view.

Inclusion of this information can increase the effectiveness of a campaign but should be considered optional.

Figure 12 is a mock-up of what the aggregated communications dashboard for an individual advocacy campaign might look like within a non-product-specific CMS/CSS interface within in a congressional office. (Note: All the information in this figure, including names, addresses, and the CMS/CSS interface and nomenclature, are fictitious and only used to illustrate the concept.)

Figure 13. Citizen Action Form on Advocacy Web Site

A descriptive subject and detailed issue position statement ensures that the congressional offices are aware of the overall view of the organization and its members who are interested in this particular issue.

Constituents should be encouraged to include individualized information about their views on the legislation and how it will impact them. This reassures congressional staff that messages are sent by real people and provides insight into the constituent's rationale.

A merican **E** ducation Coalition

| TAKE ACTION | LEARN MORE | DONATE | GET INVOLVED | ABOUT US | JOIN US |

Please take a few minutes to show your support for the Education for All Americans Act of 2008 by filling out this form.

COMPOSE MESSAGE

Subject: Support the Education for All Americans Act of 2008.

Issue Position: I urge you to support the Education for All Americans Act of 2008. It would set important universal education standards. This bill will raise the bar for achievement in schools across the nation by increasing funding for new textbooks and extra curricular activities. Education drives the economy, improves social bonds, and enriches lives. Investment in education is essential for all Americans. H.R. 233 / S. 193 would set the country on the right course, by giving every citizen the opportunity to better their lives, their communities, and themselves.

YOUR COMMENTS

Please tell your representatives how this legislation will affect you.

Comment: As a mother of two college-age children, I believe that nothing is more important than access to education. Millions of Americans do not have access to a quality education. Please support this bill to ensure everyone receives a quality education.

SENDER CONTACT INFORMATION

This system requires that you provide your name and contact information. This information will not be used for any purpose other than to match you to your elected representatives in Congress and to identify you to the recipient.

Prefix*: Mrs.   **Address 1*:** 11 Pine Ave.
First*: Helena   **Address 2:**
Last*: Tova   **City*** Pasadena
Email*: helenatova@e-mail.com   **State*:** TX
Phone: (306) 555-1212   **Zip*:** 87653

Based on your contact information, your Senators and Representative are listed below. The representatives who will receive this message from you are:

Senator Linda Swift
Senator Jacob Anderson
Congresswoman Joy McHale

Send Message

Powered by Hill Data Group (HDG)

Rather than offering to just forward the communications, it is important for grassroots organizations to inform their members to whom their communications will be sent and from whom they might expect a reply.

All grassroots organizations should ensure that every communication sent to Member offices involve the knowledge, consent, and action of each citizen.

Figure 13 is a mock-up of what the originating Web form might look like on the Web site of the sponsoring grassroots organization's Web site. (Note: All the information in this figure, including names, addresses, and the grassroots advocacy vendor interface and nomenclature, are fictitious and only used to illustrate the concept.)

Unique Identifier

The most important feature is that each message in each campaign from a given organization would contain a unique identifier, which for the purposes of this report is referred to as an "advocacy campaign code," assigned by the organization itself.[25] From the campaign organizer's perspective, the only aspect the advocacy campaign code would change is to add some new "meta" information in each message they send. The presence of this code within the communications, however, would allow them to be aggregated seamlessly, regardless of the content of the message or whether a constituent personalizes the message. There are a number of ways these communications could be transmitted, including the submission of all comments through one House or Senate entity similar to the House's current "Write Your Rep" system. However, we believe that individual submission of messages to each Member's system – just as they are currently done – would be more advantageous for all parties, could be implemented more quickly, and would require fewer infrastructure changes than other means would.

Unique Identifier Benefits	
For Citizens	• Because messages can be managed with far greater ease, the Member can be made aware of constituent sentiments more quickly.
	• Individual constituent messages can be easily aggregated by an office and the breadth of support or opposition is immediately evident.
	• Constituents can receive responses to their message much more quickly.
For Congressional Offices	• The inclusion of a unique ID allows staff to report constituent views to the Member in a timely manner prior to legislative action.
	• Staff can spend more time responding to citizen communications than in sorting and batching them.
For Grassroots Advocacy Organizations	• Advocacy campaigns are viewed in an aggregated form, allowing them to show a strength in numbers.

In theory, this code could be any unique identifier that would be common to all messages delivered as part of a specific advocacy campaign. One possibility for a unique ID would be a Web address on which congressional staffers could click to learn more about the campaign by reading the action alert or an extended overview of the issue on the organizer's Web site. Any message sent as part of a particular campaign would include that same identifier, thereby facilitating easy aggregation within the office's CMS/CSS package. This would also make it easy for congressional offices to differentiate between campaigns, which would help improve their ability to respond quickly and effectively to the messages.

We have discussed the advantages of organizations identifying themselves in their communications, and the URL identifier is one way in which that identification takes place. CMF believes that the identification of the sponsoring organization is a best practice, but also believes that each organization should be able to make the identification choice for itself and that it should not be mandatory. If an organization opts to not identify itself with its communications, it could, for example, generate and track its own list of 36-character unique ID codes that combines letters, numbers, and symbols for each one of its campaigns.

---

[25] Daniel Bennett, "Communicating with Congress by Way of Advocacy Groups: Using the Topic Code" (paper presented at CMF's *Communicating with Congress* Conference, Washington DC, October 1, 2007). http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CWC_Conference/cwc-conference-testimony.pdf

For congressional offices, this advocacy campaign view would eliminate the need to sort organized campaigns manually, but it would still enable them to respond to some or all of the messages individually, if they so choose. For the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns, it requires inclusion of new data in the messages generated through campaigns, but it also ensures those messages are delivered and processed in a more timely and organized manner.

For organizations, such as Congress.org, that facilitate citizen contact with Members of Congress that are not part of organized campaigns, it would require development of a unique identifier that makes it clear the messages are not part of an organized campaign, but self-motivated constituent messages. While the volume of this type of communications does not seem to be large, these messages should be easily identifiable because they are individual messages from citizens who simply chose to use a Web site other than the Member's to communicate.

Organization Position and Personalized Citizen Comments

This new model of citizen communications presents two distinct opportunities for grassroots organizers and their citizen members to communicate their messages to Capitol Hill. The first is through a static issue position statement formulated by the grassroots organization and transmitted as a basic description of the position of the group and its members. The second method is through providing citizens an opportunity not only to associate themselves with the overall position of the organization and its campaign, but a specific field where citizens can offer their personal thoughts and convey to the Member how the legislation will affect them as individuals. The presence of these personalized comments show the congressional office how the legislation will affect individual participants in a campaign, while also demonstrating that the campaign is from real citizens who proactively forwarded their communications. This model allows the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns the best of both worlds – the ability to allow the campaign to be aggregated together to convey the breadth of interest in the issue as well as provide a way for the personal stories to be seen easily within a campaign. Organizations would no longer have to choose between trying to generate a large volume of form communications and a smaller number of personalized communications. Members of Congress would have access to both.

Organization Position and Personalized Comments Benefits	
For Citizens	• Citizens participating in an advocacy campaign get the best of both worlds: the ability to associate themselves with the overall position of the organization they trust, while also communicating how the legislation will personally affect their lives.
For Congressional Offices	• Having all personalized comments from a campaign organized and easily accessible ensures that a congressional office can know how a bill or issue will affect their constituents. It is nearly impossible currently to pull out individualized comments that are included in form communications.
For Grassroots Advocacy Organizations	• The inclusion and accessibility of personalized comments in campaigns are an indication to congressional offices that the entire campaign was conducted through the knowledge, consent, and action of real constituents. • The grassroots organization gets to make its case to the Member through its static issue position statement, while also increasing the impact through accessible personal comments from their participants.

Organization and Vendor Identification

This concept also provides congressional offices with the ability to determine more easily the originating advocacy group and how to contact the organization. While this field should be optional, CMF highly recommends that organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns include this information. Because the vast majority of grassroots advocacy campaigns are born online, congressional staff have become quite adept at identifying the origins of each campaign, and they will take the time to do so before responding to the messages. The problem, however, is that the added time staff must spend to identify the organization is time that could be better spent responding to the constituents themselves and sharing citizen views with the Member. Organizations not wishing to be associated with their own campaigns, could inadvertently raise credibility questions with congressional staff.

In addition, we recommend including contact information for the advocacy vendor contracted to deliver the messages. This inclusion would provide congressional offices easy points of contact if they need to resolve any technical problems. It also helps guarantee that congressional offices receive the messages the groups are trying to send in an accurate and timely manner, maximizing their impact and effectiveness.

Organization and Vendor Identification Benefits	
For Citizens	• Because the identification of the sponsoring organization and its vendor increases the effectiveness of grassroots communications, participating citizens' views will be registered and responded to more quickly.
For Congressional Offices	• When organizations identify themselves in their communications, congressional staff can not only tell their Member how many of their constituents oppose a bill, but what organizations do too. • The identification of the advocacy vendor allows congressional offices to reach out and resolve technical problems that might otherwise cause a campaign to be rejected or given a lower priority.
For Grassroots Advocacy Organizations	• If a grassroots organization stands behind its communications and identifies itself, congressional staff are more likely to trust that the campaign is legitimate and sent by real constituents who are associated with an organization that they trust. While CMF believes that identification should be optional, if an organization chooses not to identify itself it may lessen a campaign's effectiveness. • If the vendors that grassroots organizations are using are identified, and technical issues with a campaign are able to be resolved, the campaign will arrive in a form that congressional offices can read, utilize, and respond to more effectively.

Bill or Issue Identification Information

The final component that makes grassroots advocacy communication more effective than those that originate through the Member's own Web form is the presence of fields in the advocacy campaign interface that would allow the organization to present additional data on the bill or issue. Fields would specifically reference the bill or amendment number, the bill name or the name of the general issue, as well as if they are supporting or opposing the legislation (Pro or Con).

Bill or Issue Identification Benefits	
For Citizens	• The more ease with which an office can identify the topic of a particular communication, the more quickly it can be communicated to a Member and responded to, which makes the message more effective.
For Congressional Offices	• If congressional staff immediately knew what bill – or even what general issue – a message is regarding, it would allow the message to be easily calculated in with all of the other communications and communicated to the Member. • Used in conjunction the identification of the bill/issue, quickly stating whether a campaign is in support or opposition through a Pro/Con field can help ensure that there is no confusion.
For Grassroots Advocacy Organizations	• Anything that eliminates confusion and more clearly conveys the organization's position on a particular bill or issue will increase the speed through which it can be communicated to the Member and responded to.

IMPLEMENTING THE AGGREGATED COMMUNICATIONS DASHBOARD MODEL

The aggregated communications dashboard concept is not envisioned as a replacement to the current configuration, but rather as a refinement that builds on what is already in use. However, implementing this system would take a certain amount of effort. For example, infrastructure changes are needed to ensure that all stakeholders benefit from the increased efficiency and effectiveness this new model would allow. While there will be challenges for congressional offices and advocacy groups in the implementation of a new system, the bulk of the responsibility for change will fall to the vendors: congressional CMS/CSS vendors and the vendors used by grassroots organizers to generate their campaigns. The following is information about the types of alterations these vendors and the other stakeholders would need to make to implement this concept successfully.

CMS/CSS Vendors

A number of the infrastructure changes will fall to the approved CMS/CSS vendors used by House and Senate offices. The implementation of this enhanced functionality will require the development of the infrastructure within each vendor's software tools to effectively manage and display individual constituent communications from advocacy campaigns. In most cases, this will require modifications to the underlying infrastructure and user interface, though not a complete re-write of each product's basic architecture. In addition, CMF recognizes that this will not be a process that takes place overnight and that there will need to be a period of transition where the system is implemented and offices migrate to the new interface as they understand the increased value that it will offer them.

House and Senate CMS/CSS vendors will also play a big role in educating their clients about the new functionalities and assisting them in adjusting their own systems to migrate effectively and efficiently to the new model.

Advocacy Vendors

In much the same way CMS/CSS vendors assist and serve their congressional clients, advocacy vendors perform the same function for their clients who create the messages, motivate their memberships to action, and channel communications to Congress. They will need to make significant investments in the infrastructure of their products and service offerings as well. To help their clients' messages correctly interface with congressional CMS/CSS systems, advocacy vendor communications will need to contain the relevant information fields, such as the advocacy campaign code, individualized constituent comments fields, information about the bill or issue, etc. While we believe that the inclusion of the contact information for the advocacy organization should be optional, vendor contact information should always be provided to resolve technical issues with a campaign. It is important for both groups to understand that their communications will be more effective when this data is included.

Like their CMS/CSS counterparts, advocacy vendors will also need to help their clients understand the benefits and alter their systems as necessary to transfer to the new model.

House and Senate Offices

Congressional offices will face some challenges in implementing a new model for constituent communications, particularly in educating and training staff. It is not feasible to mandate that all congressional offices switch to a new system since each office operates independently with its own unique processes and personnel for managing constituent communications. There would need to be a transition period in which early-adopting offices could quickly convert to the new system to take advantage of the efficiencies the new dashboard provides. Those offices could then be helpful in educating other congressional offices about the benefits of migrating to the new system.

Congressional Institutional Offices

Because the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer of the House of Representatives and the Office of the Senate Sergeant at Arms provide contract, product development, and customer service oversight for all CMS/CSS providers, it will be essential for these organizations to fully review and vet any significant changes to these systems. If both organizations recognize that congressional offices are seeking improved systems and consider the aggregated communications dashboard concept worthwhile, it would be necessary for both organizations to determine how to work with approved CMS/CSS providers to develop and offer these product functionalities.

Organizers of Grassroots Advocacy Campaigns

Although the technical aspect of enabling the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns to execute this concept would fall to their vendors, the organizations themselves will be responsible for its use on a day-to-day basis. Most of the information necessary for properly formatted advocacy campaign communications would be developed by the organizations generating the campaigns. Some of these groups traditionally have been reluctant to share certain information, such as any reference to their organizations, in the form campaigns that they currently operate. Though this will obviously remain a voluntary decision, CMF believes organizations will see it as a way to distinguish themselves as leaders in best practices.

The development and implementation of any new system will most certainly have its challenges. CMF believes that it is not only possible to bring all of the stakeholders together to develop solutions, but that it is imperative to the future functioning of our representational government. We remain hopeful that because few, if any, current stakeholders believe that the existing system is meeting their needs, everyone will approach a new model with a sense of shared purpose and work together to implement a mutually beneficial system: a system that not only renews the public's faith in their elected representatives but helps Members of Congress communicate more effectively with their constituents.

Moving Forward

More than any other initiative CMF has undertaken in the past, the *Communicating with Congress* project, and specifically this capstone report, has required an astounding level of participation and collaboration from a broad and divergent list of both public and private organizations. Through this volume of input and collaboration, we have come to understand intimately the perspectives of all of the various stakeholders in the constituent communications equation.

It became clear early in the process that none of the key stakeholders were clinging to the current model of communications because they thought it was effective. Many even acknowledged that the current system was based on a communications paradigm of the past rather than the new, hi-tech communications environment of the 21st Century.

This report has identified all of the stakeholders involved in the constituent communications equation, explained the processes of each side, and identified the communications challenges the face, and puts forward common-sense recommendations to improve communication. Through detailed and rigorous analysis, this report has also put forth a new model of communication that will ease the tremendous administrative burden on everyone involved. Regrettably, the mere publishing of this report will not bring about the change that is necessary, however, and CMF alone cannot force the change required to shift the communications paradigm. In order for that transformation to occur, the stakeholders themselves must agree to change.

A SOLUTIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION TASK FORCE

After the publishing of this capstone report from the *Communicating with Congress* project, CMF envisions the creation of an implementation task force made up of key influencers in each stakeholder group: House and Senate Member offices, congressional CMS/CSS vendors, the institutional offices of Congress, citizens, grassroots organizations, and advocacy vendors. This task force would be responsible for developing a framework for vetting and developing a strategy to create the systems that would be necessary to implement a new model for constituent communications. We should be clear that even after the extensive vetting of the ideas, concepts, and recommendations contained in this report, it is not a perfect solution. The task force must take up this work product – viewing it as a starting point – and begin the discussions and negotiations necessary to bring about a new system that is mutually beneficial to everyone.

Given our status as an independent third party and our extensive work and research on this project, CMF has identified the key participants from each group and we are prepared to convene an initial meeting to begin the process of improving communication to and from Capitol Hill. The initial first task force meeting should be used to determine a structure for the group, how it will operate, as well as when and how often it will meet. Because this group would be comprised of the various decision-makers in each group, and given that there seems to be overwhelming consensus that the current processes are no longer adequate, CMF is hopeful that this can be the beginning of a new chapter in communications between citizens and Members of Congress.

Those interested in participating in or following these next steps can view updated information about the process on the CMF Web site at www.cmfweb.org or by sending your contact information to cmf@cmfweb.org.

While there is a history of animosity and mistrust between both sides of congressional communications, it is critical that everyone interested and invested in this process understands that all sides have the same goal: meaningful communications between the American citizenry and Capitol Hill. Each side's definition may be slightly different, but with agreement on such a fundamental and important objective, CMF believes that a mutually agreeable and – more importantly – mutually beneficial solution is possible.

Our American experiment is based on the premise of self-governance and an individual citizen's right to participate in the public policy process, and that is what is at stake today. Collectively, we can either agree to work together to develop more effective solutions to address these new challenges, or we can continue on the current and unsustainable path. We believe that all of the stakeholders we have engaged throughout this process are ready to move forward and create a new solution that benefits both sides of the communications equation, and reflects the ideals on which our nation was founded. CMF stands ready to support that effort in any way possible.

About the Congresssional Management Foundation

The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to promoting a more effective Congress. CMF has pursued this mission for over 30 years by working internally with Member offices, committees, leadership, and institutional offices in the House and Senate to foster improved management practices. Simply put, CMF advocates good government through good management. CMF engages in three primary activities, outlined below.

MANAGEMENT BOOKS AND RESEARCH TAILORED FOR CONGRESS

Though there are ample books on the general topic of "management," only CMF produces publications adapted to the unique congressional environment. Our management handbooks for congressional staff include: *Setting Course: A Congressional Management Guide*; *Frontline Management: A Guide for Congressional District/State Offices*; *The Insider's Guide to Research on Capitol Hill*; and the *Congressional Intern Handbook: A Guide for Interns and Newcomers to Capitol Hill*. CMF also conducts research on timely topics of importance to managers in congressional offices, which has resulted in reports such as: *2007 Gold Mouse Report: Lessons from the Best Web Sites on Capitol Hill*; *Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy*; *Communicating with Congress: How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement*; studies on House and Senate office compensation, and benefit practices; and a brief on managing the transition process for new committee chairs.

OFFICE MANAGEMENT SERVICES

CMF provides a range of confidential services to congressional offices including: facilitating office retreats that typically focus on strategic planning and improving office operations; conducting office assessments to examine overall office operations, identify office strengths and weaknesses, and develop strategies for improving performance; and conducting assessments to improve constituent correspondence management. CMF also provides consulting services to House and Senate institutional offices, primarily on training, human resources, operational effectiveness, and strategic technology projects.

STAFF TRAINING

To meet the distinct needs of congressional offices, CMF provides free training workshops to top level congressional staff on topics including: strategic planning; motivating staff and reducing turnover; assessing management skills; measuring office performance; supervising staff; and improving internal office communications. Under contract with the House of Representatives, CMF has also provided orientation programs for interns and Staff Assistants and courses on writing constituent correspondence.

For more information, contact CMF at (202) 546-0100 or visit www.cmfweb.org.

Notes

CONGRESSIONAL
MANAGEMENT
FOUNDATION