

Can Congress Cope With The Communications Age?

By Lee H. Hamilton

When I first came to Congress in the 1960s, dialogue between members of Congress and their constituents was straightforward. Every so often, a lawmaker would get interviewed on radio or television. Many sent monthly newsletters to the folks back home. They responded to letters, fielded and made telephone calls, and met as often as possible with the people who had sent them to Washington. It was by no means a perfect system — unless they made extraordinary efforts, legislators were often in touch with a smaller cross-section of the population than they should have been — but it worked tolerably well and was readily managed.

Today, something very like the opposite situation prevails: lawmakers are deluged by e-mail messages from constituents and grassroots lobbying campaigns; they can be in touch with millions of people at the press of a “send” button or via a quick upload to YouTube; they can blog about their experiences on the floor of the House, hold videoconferences or telephone town meetings with people back home, and Twitter their thoughts to followers any time of the day or night.

The technology allowing communications between ordinary Americans and their elected representatives, in other words, is superb. Yet for all the words that flow back and forth between Capitol Hill and the country at large, it’s not at all clear how much actual dialogue is taking place.

Part of this is a function of sheer volume. As the Congressional Management Foundation wrote in a 2008 report after surveying ordinary citizens and lawmakers and their staffs about their use of the Internet, “[T]echnological developments have been so rapid that neither citizens and the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns (the senders) nor congressional offices (the receivers) have learned to use it in ways that facilitate truly effective communications between citizens and Members of Congress. As a result, while more messages are being sent to Congress, it seems less actual communication is occurring.”

The survey found that no one is happy with the situation: Hill staffers feel overwhelmed, while almost half the people who wrote to Congress and received a reply were dissatisfied with the response and almost two-thirds believed their representatives “were not interested in what they have to say.”

Let’s be clear about what’s at stake here. A representative democracy depends on the give-and-take between lawmakers and those they represent. When that discourse breaks down — whether it’s because high-rolling campaign donors drown out ordinary voters, or because changing technology overwhelms the ability of congressional offices to understand and represent public sentiment adequately — then it threatens the legitimacy of the system.

This presents a true challenge for Congress. Where the White House under President Obama has shown that it can use the Internet and social networking tools to mobilize a political base, it is largely a one-way street; no one expects a quick reply from the President to a letter or a text message. Congress is different. It is the tribune of the American people and we treat it accordingly: we not only expect two-way communications, we need them. That’s how the system is supposed to work.

In this period of transition to the new technologies, there are some promising signs. A few members of Congress have learned to make effective use of blogs, Facebook and even Twitter to stay in touch with constituents; the House and Senate both have channels on YouTube now, and though they’re mostly filled with the equivalent of video press releases, I have no doubt that legislators will figure out more compelling ways to use them. Meanwhile, the Congressional Management Foundation, after a decade of study, is working to convene congressional staff and grassroots advocates to develop ways to aggregate, verify, and manage online communications, so that Capitol Hill doesn’t find itself so engulfed by citizens’ messages that it tunes them out.

In the end, adapting to new communications technology will require work on both sides of the equation. Members of Congress will need to develop the tools that allow them to manage immense volumes of “mail,” and let constituents know the best and most effective ways of passing along their thoughts. Voters who want to have an impact will need to pay attention, and not just assume that sending a quick email or filling out a form provided by their favorite advocacy group will command attention.

In the age of instant communications, in other words, it’s not just the volume of words but the quality of the communication that matters.

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