

Note: CMF has published more recent data on this topic in October 2015.
The report, #SocialCongress 2015, can be found at:
<http://www.congressfoundation.org/projects/communicating-with-congress/social-congress-2015>



THE PARTNERSHIP FOR
A More Perfect Union
at the
CONGRESSIONAL MANAGEMENT FOUNDATION

CongressFoundation.org

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DCI Group, Blue Cross Blue Shield Association and Convio

Special Thanks

We are grateful to our sponsors, **DCI Group**, **Blue Cross Blue Shield Association** and **Convio**, who have supported this research and report. Their contributions have enabled us to continue the important work of the *Communicating with Congress* project and to promote a more meaningful democratic dialogue.



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Introduction

Congress is often accused of being slow to adapt. Whether it be through institutional reforms or technological developments, the House and Senate are regularly criticized as being resistant to change. This has not been the case with social media. While congressional offices may lag behind some leading private-sector organizations in their use of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, the legislative branch has adopted social media much more quickly than it adopted other technologies, such as fax machines, email and websites.

The integration of social media into congressional operations is due to individual Members, congressional leaders and forward-thinking institutional offices driving the process and facilitating innovation. While difficult to precisely quantify, it is hard not to conclude that both legislators and citizens have benefited from a robust new offering of communications vehicles and platforms.

On one level, social media is merely another platform for politicians and the public to communicate, much the way the fax machine was in the 1980s. However, on another level, the use of social media is transformative – changing the tone, speed, and nature of the democratic dialogue. The *behavior* of Congress and citizens has been altered. Americans who previously had not participated in public policy debate are now engaged; congressional staffers have new and instant means for assessing public opinion on emerging policies and issues; and legislators are opening new windows into both the legislative process and their own personalities.

As the organization founded to aid in management-related issues in Congress, the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) created the *Communicating with Congress* project in 2003. Our goals for the project have been to help address the frustrations with, and barriers to, communications between citizens and their Members of Congress; facilitate increased citizen participation in the public policy process; and promote a meaningful democratic dialogue that benefits our country.

In 2010 CMF expanded its mission to seek ways to improve citizen engagement and to help Congress use continuously-changing technologies to facilitate and enhance interactions with citizens. To do this, we established the *Partnership for a More Perfect Union* at CMF. The *Partnership* will advance this vision by providing research and training to Congress, advocacy groups and citizens.

This is the second of three reports based on a survey of congressional staffers taken between October and December 2010. The first report, released in January 2011, *Communicating with Congress: Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill*, described congressional staffers' perceptions of constituent communications. This second report, *#SocialCongress: Perceptions and Use of Social Media on Capitol Hill*, represents the first research into congressional staffers' attitudes about their offices' use of social media. Our third report will be released in October 2011, examining how the Internet has affected constituent communications operations on Capitol Hill.

CMF has a perspective built on a 34-year history of aiding Congress, and we have seen how private-sector technological enhancements eventually are integrated into every aspect of congressional office operations. This will undoubtedly be the case with social media. It is our hope that this research will provide valuable information to advocacy organizations, citizens and Congress, so that they may gain a better understanding of how Capitol Hill is using social media. The ultimate goal of the project, and CMF's *Partnership for a More Perfect Union*, is to improve communications, understanding and the relationship between citizens and Congress. We believe that social media tools, when used ethically and correctly, hold the promise for enhancing that vital relationship, and strengthening our democratic institutions.

1. Congressional offices are using social media to help gauge public opinion, augmenting traditional tools used for that purpose.

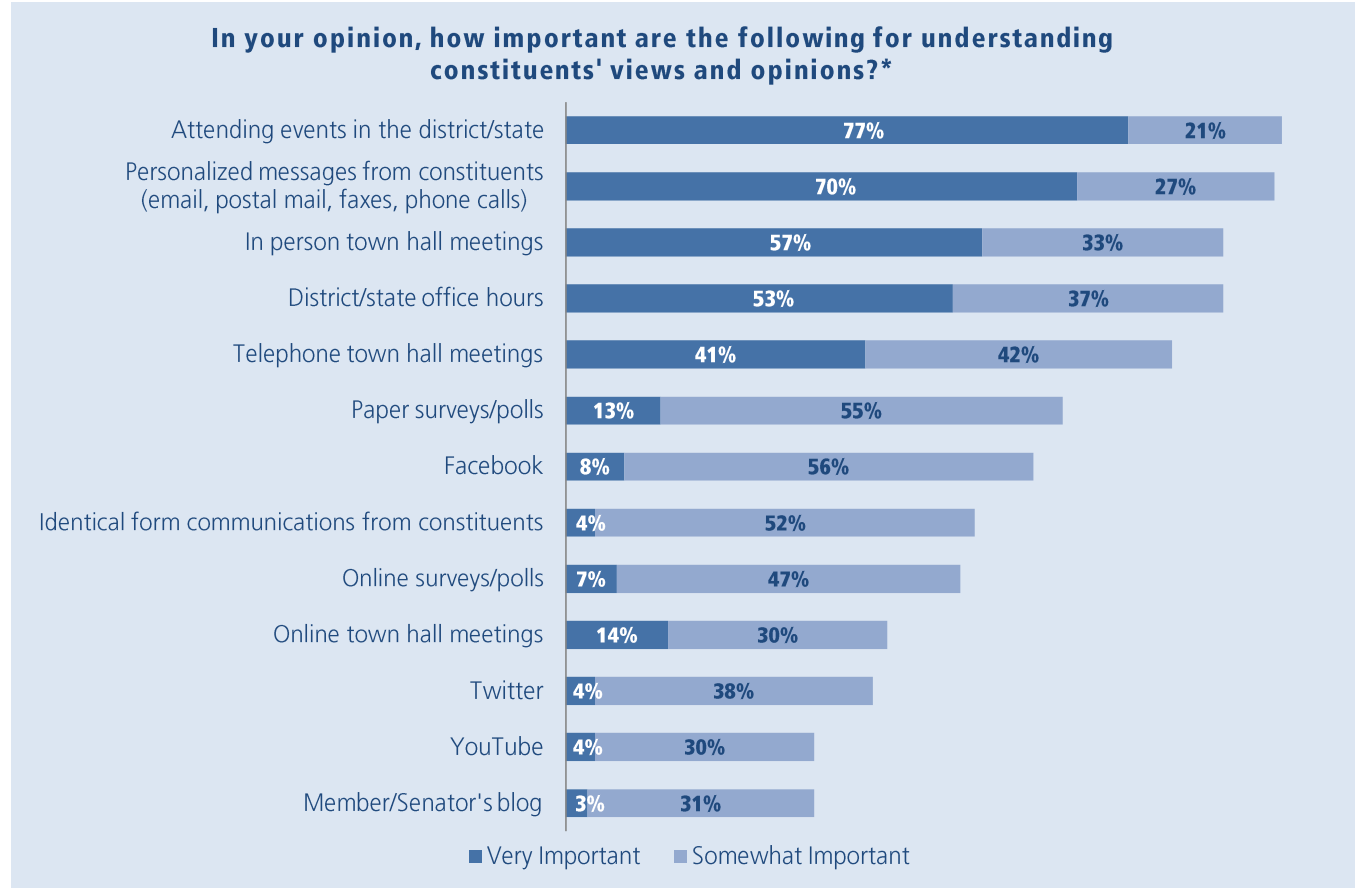
According to the senior managers (primarily Chiefs of Staff, Deputy Chiefs of Staff and Legislative Directors) and social media managers (staff who identified themselves as having responsibility for their office's social media practices) who responded to our survey, offices have integrated social media into the array of tools they use to understand constituents' views and opinions. Not surprisingly, these staffers say they rely most on the more tangible and verifiable forms of interaction with constituents, such as attending events in the district or state, receiving personalized messages from constituents, and holding town hall meetings. However, it is clear that congressional offices are taking Members' Facebook friends seriously. Almost two-thirds of the staffers view Facebook as an important source for understanding constituents' views and opinions. Twitter and YouTube have also clearly gained acceptance on Capitol Hill, with significant percentages of the staffers surveyed saying these tools are important sources for understanding constituents.

“There are two different goals for communication – responding to those who are already engaged, and getting your message to those who aren't paying attention. Those goals aren't often met with the same techniques, but offices need to develop strategies for each.”

—House Chief of Staff

- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the senior managers and social media managers surveyed think Facebook is a somewhat or very important tool for understanding constituents' views and opinions.
- More than one-third (42%) say Twitter is somewhat or very important for understanding constituents.
- YouTube is viewed by just over one-third (34%) as somewhat or very important for understanding constituents' views and opinions.

FIGURE 1



*Question was asked only of senior managers and social media managers. Their responses are aggregated (n=138).

2. Congressional offices now include social media among the tools used to communicate Senators' and Representatives' views and activities.

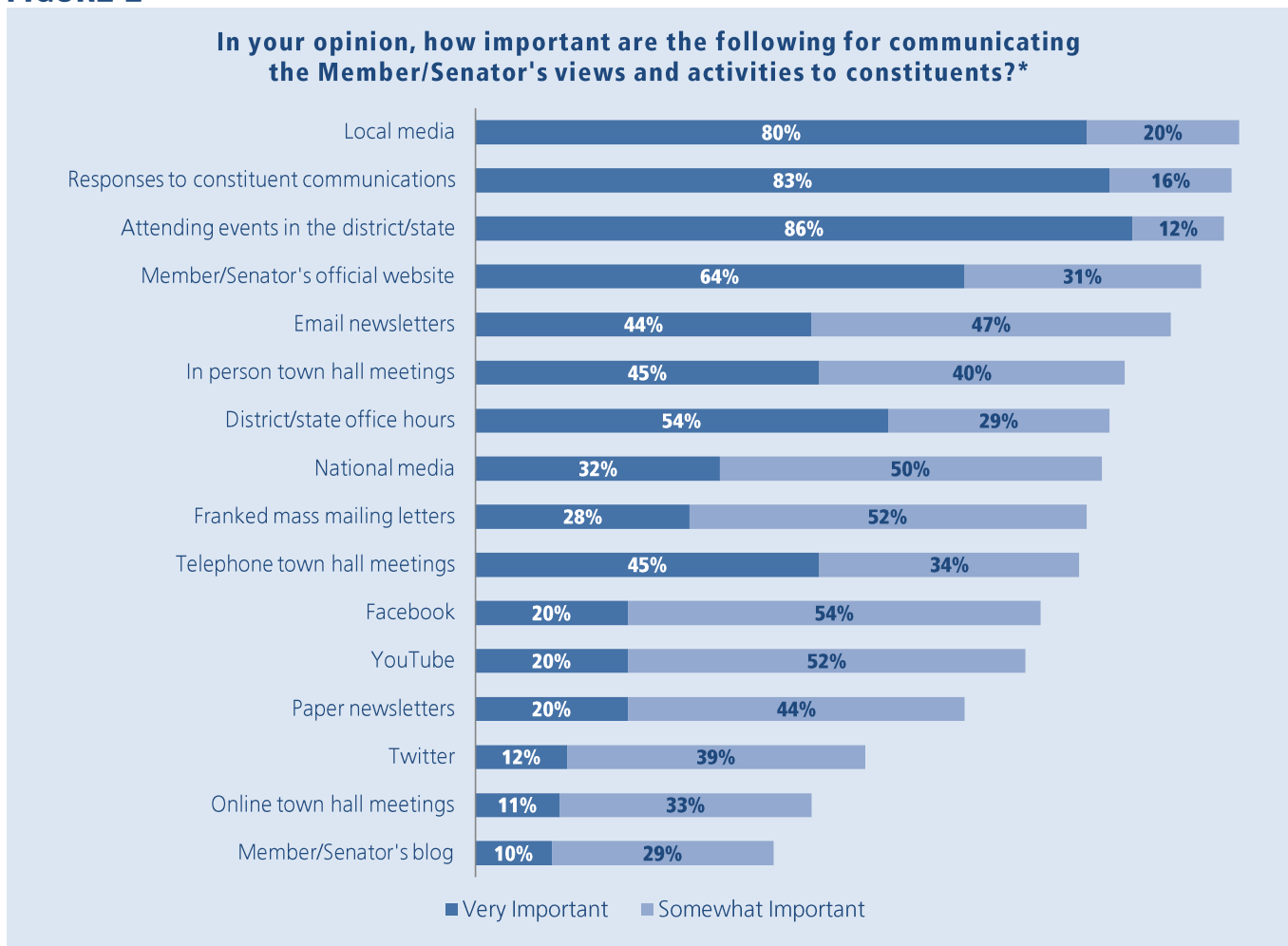
In addition to using social media to understand constituents' perspectives, congressional offices are using these tools to let constituents know about Senators' and Representatives' views and activities. According to the senior managers and social media managers we surveyed, social media has become a fairly important means for this purpose. However, traditional forms of communication are still their top choices to inform constituents about what the Senator or Representative is doing. When communicating online, websites and e-newsletters still reign, but social media is not too far behind.

- Nearly three-quarters (74%) of the senior managers and social media managers we surveyed think Facebook is somewhat or very important for communicating their Members' views.
- Twitter has also gained acceptance on Capitol Hill, with more than half (51%) of the staffers surveyed saying it is a somewhat or very important vehicle for their Member's communications.¹
- YouTube is viewed by nearly three-quarters of staffers surveyed (72%) as somewhat or very important for communicating their Members' views.

“When you go down on the House floor and you make a speech to the C-SPAN audience you [reach] three to four million... but take that video, put it on your YouTube site or put it in Twitter, put it on Facebook and then you're getting that multiplier effect.”

—Member, U.S. House of Representatives

FIGURE 2



*Question was asked only of senior managers and social media managers. Their responses are aggregated (n=138).

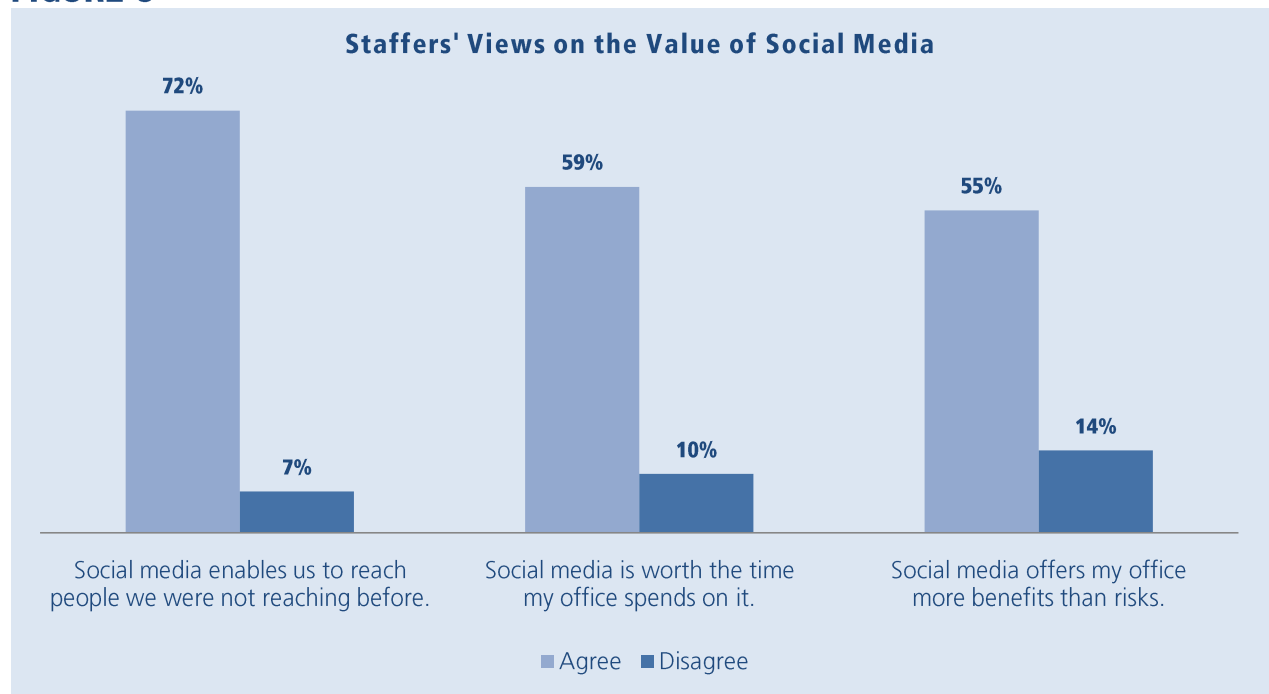
¹ Our data was collected October–December 2010. More recent research shows that Twitter has further penetrated Capitol Hill since that time.

3. Congressional staff feel the benefits of using social media outweigh the risks.

The staffers we surveyed generally feel social media enables them to reach people they were not reaching before, and a majority feels social media is worth the time their offices are spending on it. A majority also feels the benefits of social media outweigh the risks. (Note: Findings 4 and 5 suggest that there are differences in opinion of congressional staffers on the risk-versus-benefit question, based on a staff member age and whether the staffer believes their office is an “early adopter” or “late adopter” of technology.)

- Nearly three-quarters (72%) of the staffers think social media enables their offices to reach people they were not reaching before.
- A majority (59%) feels social media is worth the time their offices spend on it. Only 10% feel it is not. The rest are undecided.
- A majority (55%) feels social media offers their offices more benefits than risks. Only 14% disagree, and the rest are undecided.

FIGURE 3



4. Younger staff see more value in social media than their older colleagues.

Staffers surveyed who were 30 years old and younger are much more likely to feel social media is worth their offices' time than their colleagues 51 and older. They are also more likely to feel their offices can control their message on social media. Staffers 30 and younger are only slightly more likely than older staffers to agree that social media offers their offices more benefits than risks. Staffers 51 and older were more likely to be unsure whether social media offers more benefits or risks than their younger colleagues.

- Two-thirds (66%) of the staffers 30 years old and younger feel social media is worth the time their offices spend on it, compared to only about one-third (32%) of their colleagues 51 and older who feel the same. (Figure 4)
- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of staffers 30 and younger feel their offices can control their message on social media, compared with slightly more than one-third (36%) of staffers 51 and older who feel the same. Staffers 51 and older also are more likely than their younger counterparts to be unsure. (Figure 5)
- Staffers 30 and younger are less likely than their older colleagues to disagree that social media offers more benefits than risks. Only 7% of staff 30 and younger disagreed, compared to nearly one-quarter (23%) of their colleagues 51 and older who did. (Figure 6)

“The people at the top are much less willing to use this as a tool than some of the more entry-level staffers.”

—House Staff Assistant

FIGURE 4

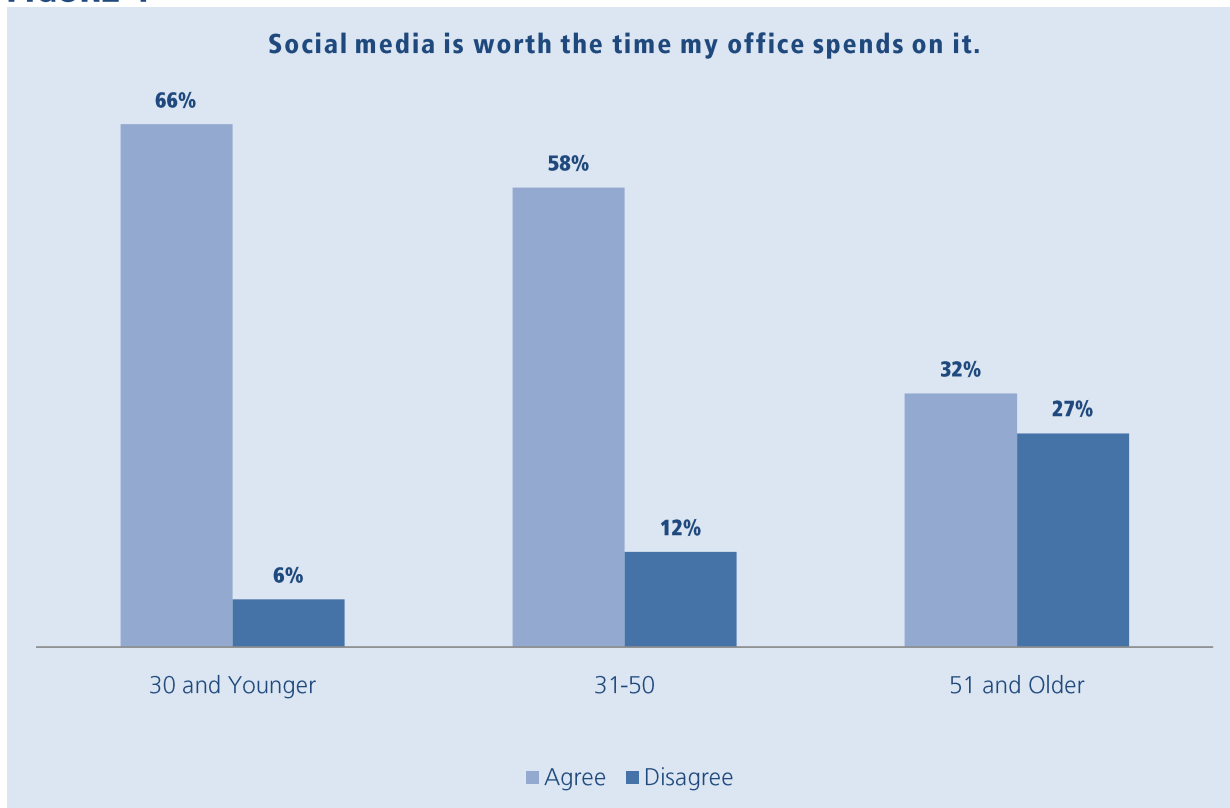


FIGURE 5

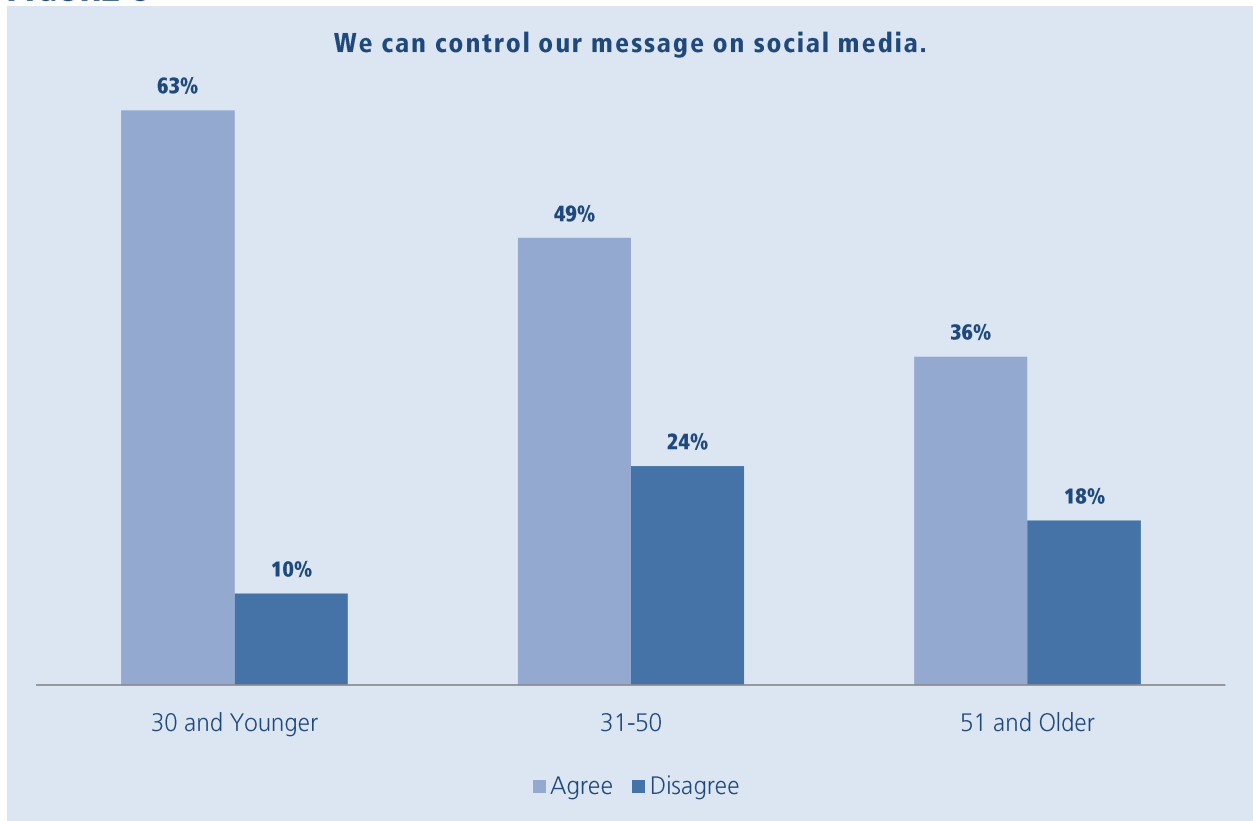
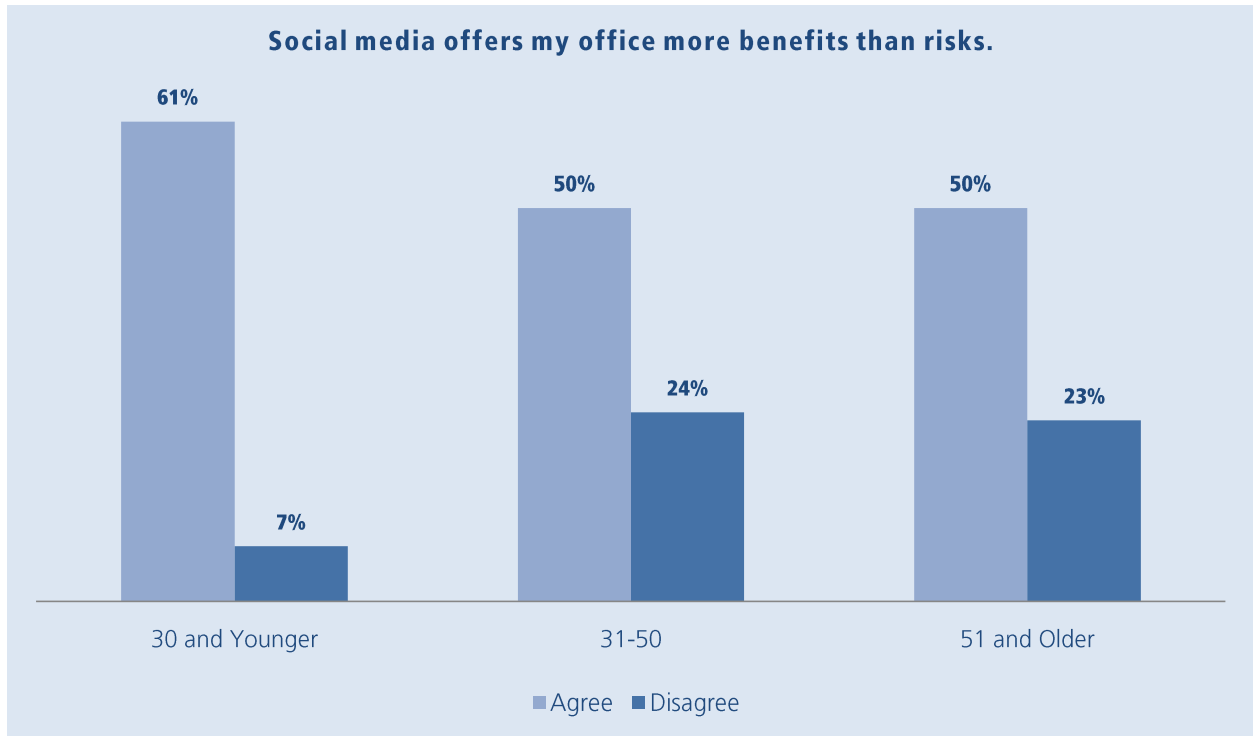


FIGURE 6



NOTE ABOUT FINDING 5:

Classifying Offices as Early Adopters, Mainstream, or Late Adopters of Technology

CMF sought to identify varying attitudes and practices related to social media based on the staff's perception of whether their office was open to integrating technology into office operations or reluctant to do so. To determine whether a staffer was from an office that is an early, mainstream, or late adopter of technology, we used staffers' responses to the question, "In your opinion, which of the following best describes your office's approach to using new communications tools?" Those that responded "My office is among the first to use new communications tools" were defined as early-adopters. Those that responded "My office waits until other offices have proven new tools" were mainstream-adopters, and those that responded "My office is among the last to try new tools" or "My office is not interested in using new tools" were considered late-adopters. In our sample, 34% of the staffers identified their offices as early-adopters, 48% identified as mainstream, and 12% identified as late-adopters. The remaining 6% responded "don't know."

5. Staffers from offices that embrace technology are more likely to see social media as a benefit to the office and to believe the Internet has improved the dialogue between citizens and Congress.

A significant gap exists in Congress between those offices that understand and embrace technology and those that do not. The staffers we surveyed who identified their offices as early-adopters of communications tools were far more likely to see the benefits of social media than those who identified their offices as late-adopters. Early-adopters feel their offices have the expertise for social media and that social media is worth their offices' time.

Additionally, staffers from offices that adopt communications tools early were more likely than their colleagues to feel that email, the Internet and social media offer more benefits than risks. Many feel their offices can control their message on social media, and they are more likely to believe email and the Internet have made Members of Congress more accountable and responsive to constituents. They worry less about information being taken out of context or leaked prematurely, and most feel social media enables their offices to reach people they were not reaching before. Staff in early-adopter offices are also much more inclined than their counterparts in late-adopter offices to feel social media enables them to have more meaningful interactions with constituents and provides them with a sense of constituent views.

- Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the staffers from early-adopter offices feel social media offers more benefits than risks. Only about one-third (34%) from late-adopter offices agree. (Figure 7)
- Nearly two-thirds (62%) of the staffers from early-adopter offices feel email and the Internet have made Senators and Representatives more responsive to their constituents, compared to 43% of late-adopter offices who agree with that statement. (Figure 8)
- Most (88%) of the staffers from early-adopter offices feel that social media is enabling their offices to reach people they were not reaching before, compared to 54% of late-adopters who agree with that statement. (Figure 9)
- Nearly three-quarters (72%) of the staffers from early-adopter offices feel social media is worth the time their offices spend on it. Only about one-third (32%) from late-adopter offices thinks it is. (Figure 10)

"We continue to explore new ways to use technology to reach out to our constituents. Social media is less expensive and reaches a broader audience so we plan to expand our use."

—Senate Administrative Director

- More than half (57%) of the staffers from early-adopter offices feel their offices have the necessary time to manage social media, compared to 29% of late adopters who agree with that statement. (Figure 10)
- More than three-quarters (79%) of the staffers from early-adopter offices, compared to only 38% of staffers from late-adopter offices, feel their offices have the expertise to manage social media. (Figure 10)

FIGURE 7

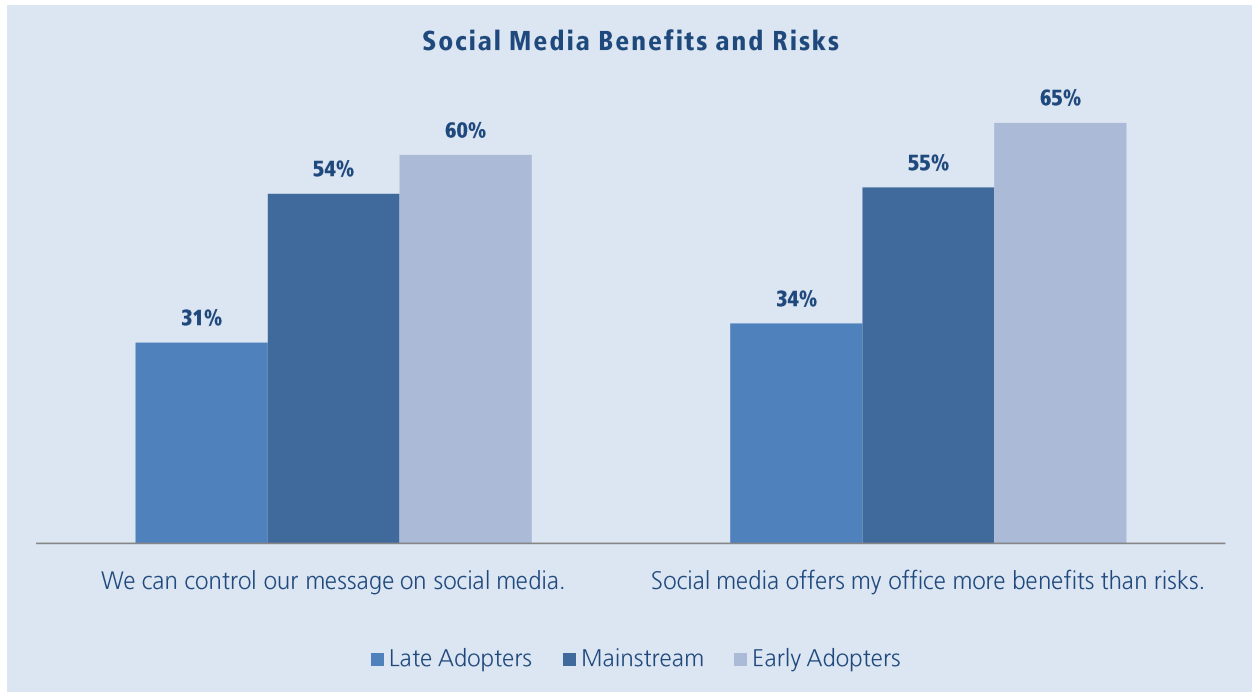


FIGURE 8

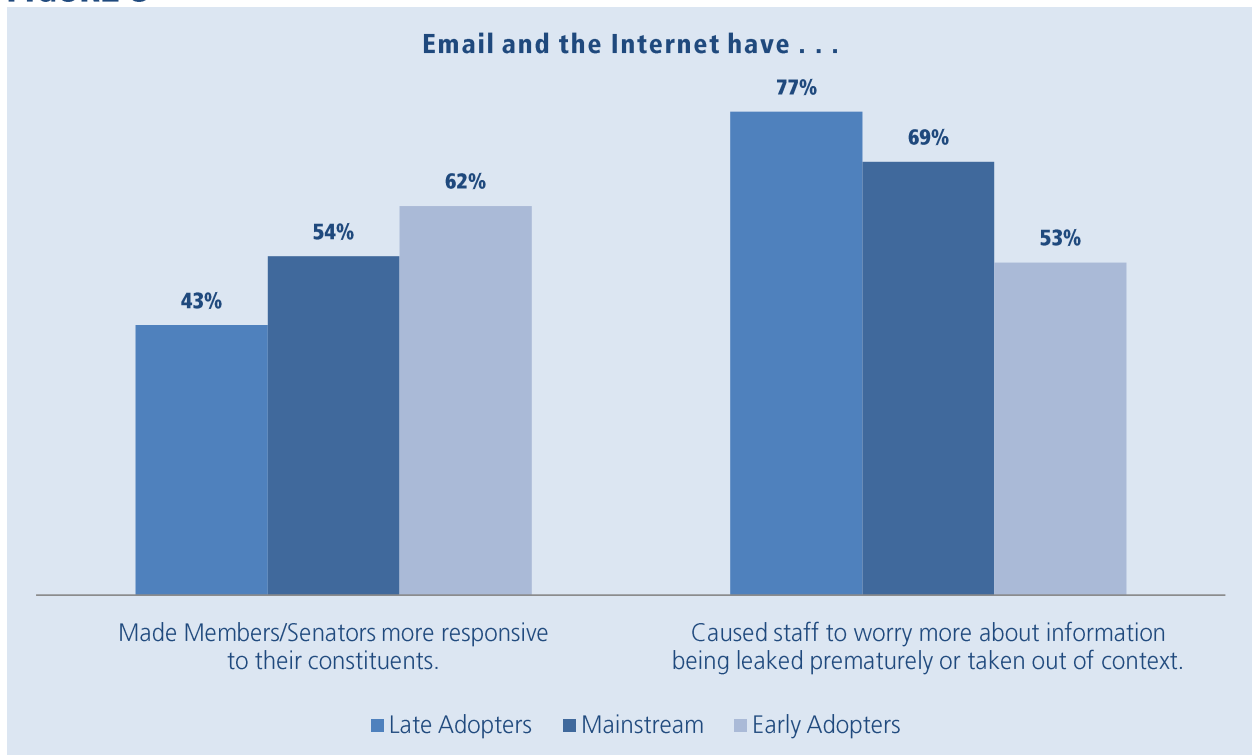


FIGURE 9

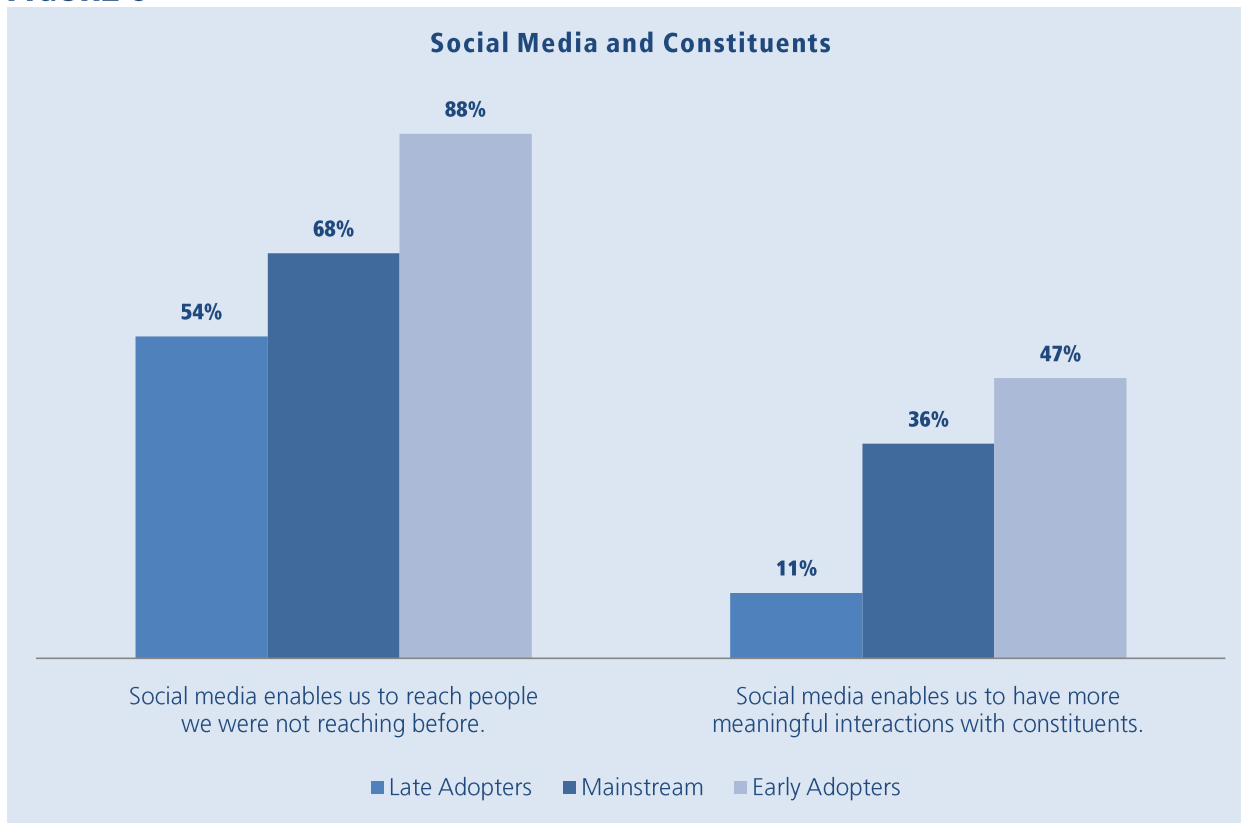
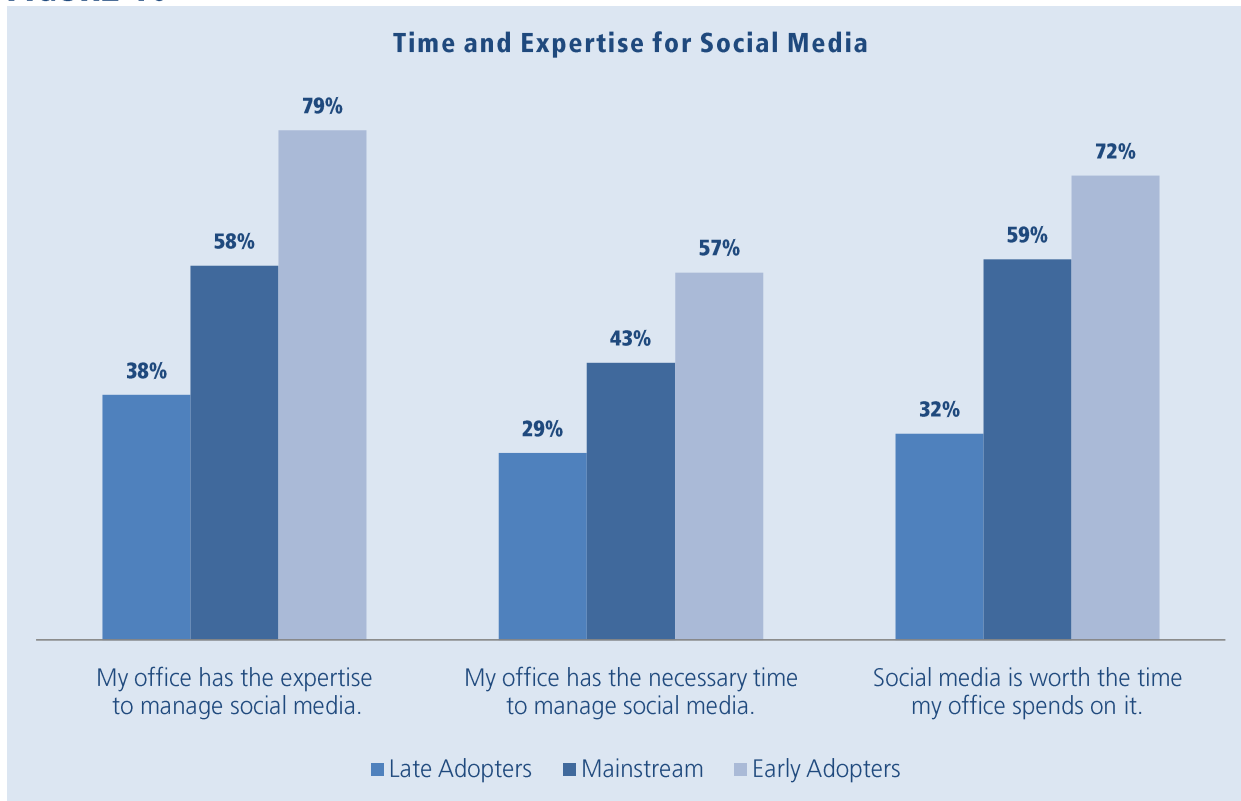


FIGURE 10



6. Social media managers have a more positive view of constituent communications than senior managers or staffers who are primarily tasked with answering mail.

The 30 staffers in our survey who identified themselves as managers of social media tended to have a more positive outlook on constituent communications than those who identified themselves as senior managers or staffers who are responsible for responding to constituent communications. The social media managers were much more likely than other staffers to feel that email and the Internet have made Senators and Representatives more responsive and accountable to their constituents.

Social media managers were also less inclined to believe email and the Internet have had a negative impact on the quality of constituents' messages to Capitol Hill. In addition, social media managers were more likely than senior managers to feel that advocacy campaigns directed at Congress are good for democracy. We must note, however, that one possible reason social media managers have a more positive view of constituent communications is that they usually do not have a significant role in responding to traditional forms of constituent communication (e.g., email). Most staffers who manage social media are communications directors, press secretaries or new media directors without direct responsibility for answering mail in a congressional office. This reasoning would be consistent with this thread of findings throughout CMF's *Communicating with Congress* research: the rising volume and workload of constituent correspondence is influencing the opinions of the staffers involved in sorting and responding to these messages.

“The ever-changing landscape of social media moves so quickly that it can sometimes be difficult to recognize the benefits and implications of new tools. A lot of the time is spent worrying about the message, and not the method of messaging, so newer and possibly better social media tools may not get enough consideration.”

—Senate Systems Administrator

- More than two-thirds (68%) of social media managers feel email and the Internet have made Senators and Representatives more *responsive* to their constituents, compared to less than half (46%) of the senior managers. (Figure 11)
- Nearly three-quarters (74%) of social media managers believe email and the Internet have made Senators and Representatives more *accountable* to their constituents. More than half (59%) of senior managers believe that, and just under half (47%) of mail staffers do. (Figure 11)
- Less than half (45%) of the social media managers feel that email and the Internet have reduced the quality of constituents' messages to Capitol Hill, compared to about two-thirds of senior managers (70%) and mail staffers (66%). (Figure 11)
- Nearly half (48%) of the social media managers feel that advocacy campaigns directed to Congress are good for democracy, compared to only about one-third of mail staffers (33%) and senior managers (32%). (Figure 12)

FIGURE 11

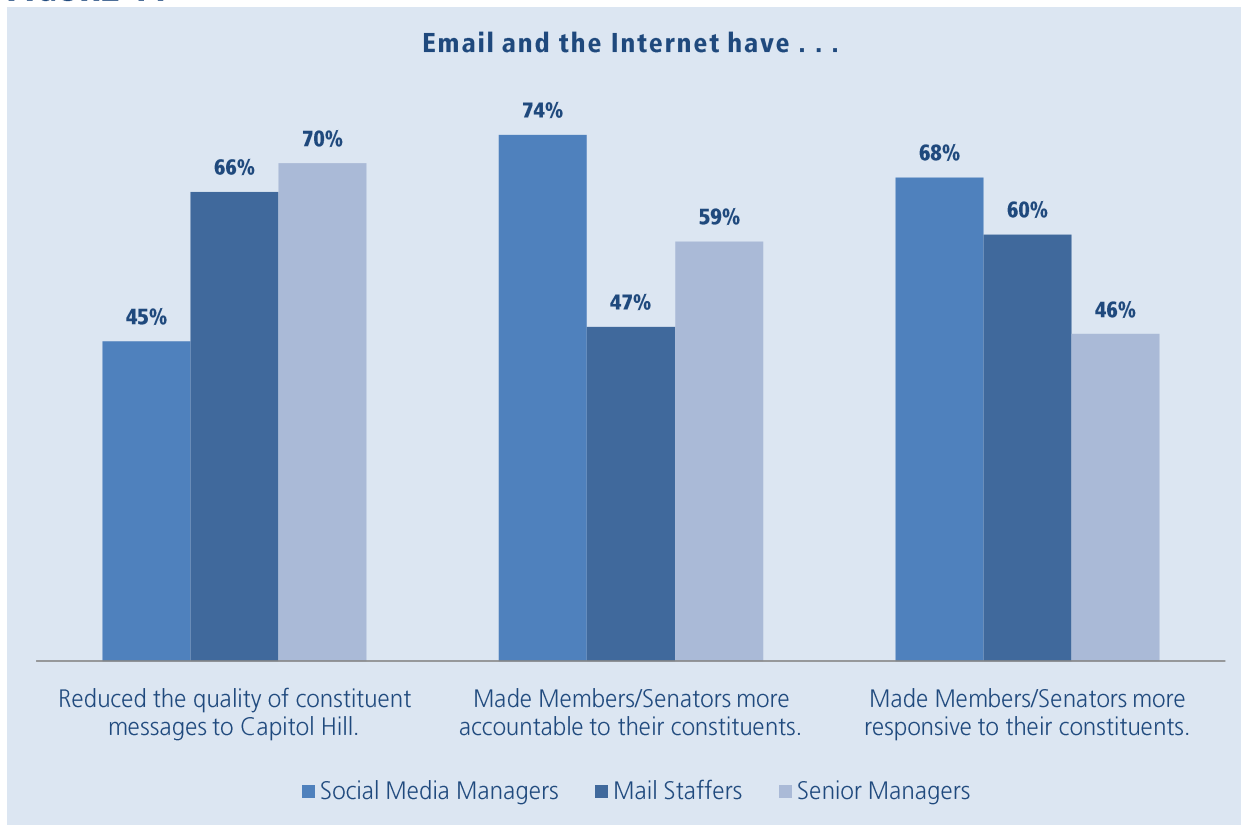
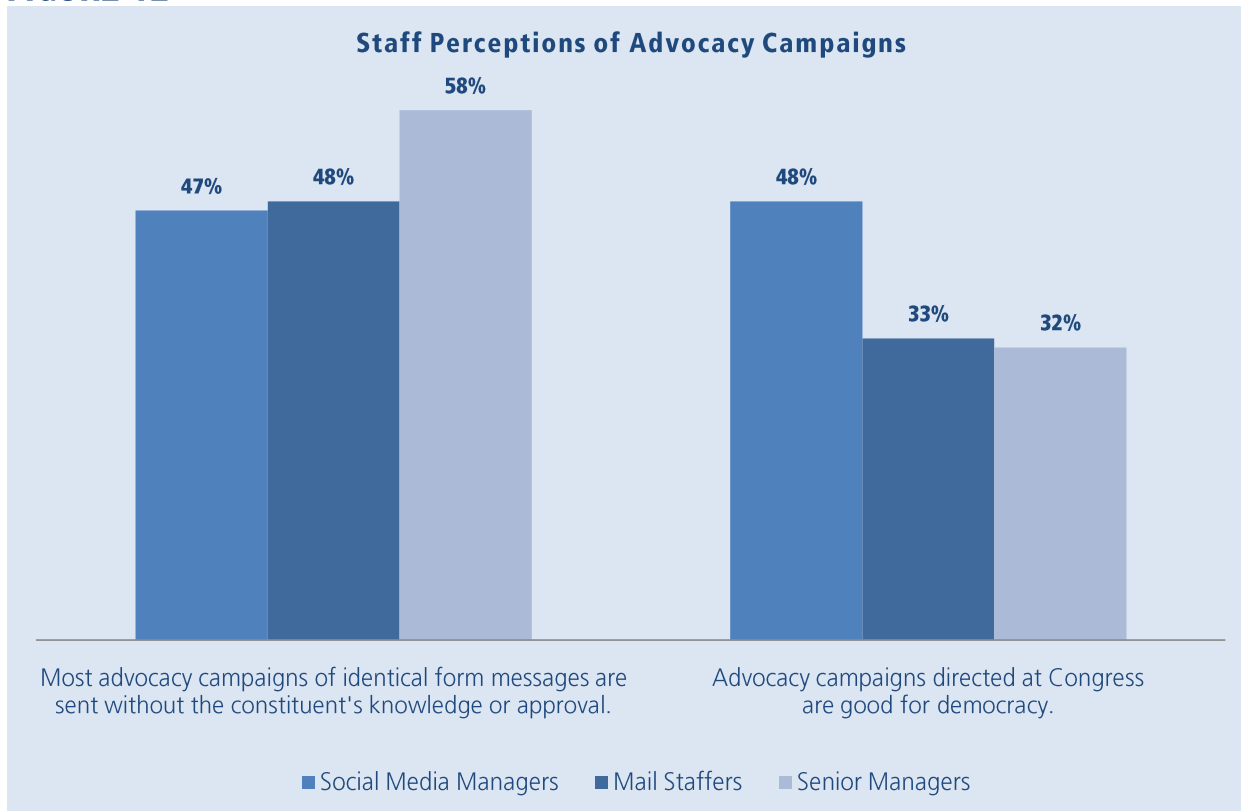


FIGURE 12



7. Many staffers – especially in Democratic offices – feel their office spends too little time on online communications.

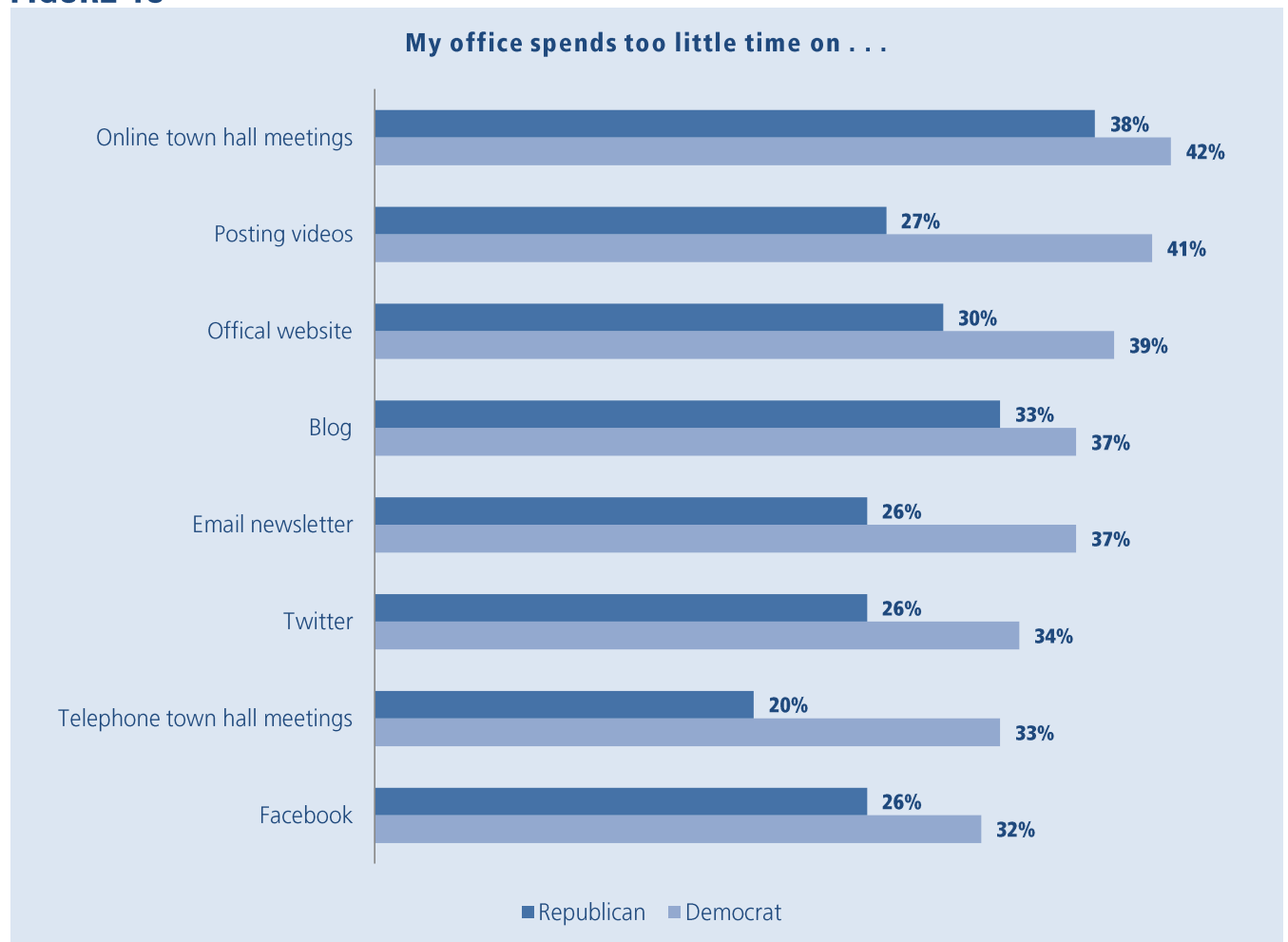
Many of the congressional staffers we surveyed feel their offices spend too little time on a range of online communications activities, especially online town hall meetings, video, and the Member’s official website and blog. Across the board, Democratic staffers were somewhat more inclined than Republican staffers to feel their offices were spending too little time on various online communications activities.

“We have devoted more effort to social media as the technology has allowed it to be productively incorporated into our regular office communications (for instance, simultaneous posting of videos on YouTube and our website).”

—House Deputy Chief of Staff

- More than one-third of the staffers surveyed feel their offices spend too little time on online town hall meetings (40%), posting videos (37%), their official website (36%), and their official blog (34%). Twitter and Facebook are not far behind, with nearly one-third of the staffers (31%) saying their offices spend too little time on these activities. (chart not included)
- Democrats were more likely than Republicans to say their offices do not spend enough time on online communications, with the greatest disparities being with posting videos (41% of Democrats versus 27% of Republicans), telephone town hall meetings (33% D, 20% R), and email newsletters (37% D, 26% R).

FIGURE 13



Methodology

These data are based on an online survey of congressional staff on their opinions and practices related to constituent communications, including social media. The survey was in the field between October 12 and December 13, 2010. Congressional staffers were invited to participate through email requests to all House Chiefs of Staff and Legislative Directors, all Senate Administrative Directors, and numerous staff affinity groups (e.g., the House Systems Administrators Association). The survey had 260 respondents (the demographics of which are described below); 72% from the House of Representatives and 28% from the U.S. Senate.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

- 60% of respondents worked for Democrats and 40% for Republicans. (At the time of the survey, 59% of House offices were held by Democrats and 41% by Republicans.)
- 29% were Chiefs of Staff; 21% Legislative Directors; 9% Communications Directors; and 41% “mail staff” (legislative and administrative staffers with responsibility for researching, writing, and/or processing constituent communications).
- 44% had three or fewer years of experience on Capitol Hill; 35% had 4–10 years; and 21% had more than 10 years of experience.
- 59% were 30 years old or younger; 31% were between 31 and 50; and 10% were 51 and older.

SENATE

- 64% of respondents worked for Democrats and 36% for Republicans. (At the time of the survey, 59% of Senate offices were held by Democrats, and 41% by Republicans.)
- 28% were Chiefs of Staff; 17% Communications Directors; 25% Correspondence Directors; and 30% “mail staff” (legislative and administrative staffers with responsibility for researching, writing, and/or processing constituent communications).
- 36% had three or fewer years of experience on Capitol Hill; 29% had 4–10 years; and 35% had more than 10 years of experience.
- 40% were 30 years old or younger; 51% were between 31 and 50; and 9% were 51 and older.

Acknowledgments

The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) gratefully acknowledges the contributions of our sponsors **DCI Group**, **Blue Cross Blue Shield Association** and **Convio**, whose support made this report possible.

For their feedback on the survey and help generating responses, we thank Rob Pierson, former Director of New Media at the House Democratic Caucus; Nick Schaper, former Director of New Media for Speaker John Boehner; and Janice Siegel, Administrative Director for Rep. Jerrold Nadler. Thanks also to George McElwee, President of the House Chief of Staff Association, for helping generate responses from Chiefs of Staff.

CMF is very fortunate to have such a dedicated and talented team of people work on this report. In particular, we thank Kathy Goldschmidt, the primary author of this report, who was instrumental in shaping this research project and related reports. We are also deeply appreciative of the vital contributions of Bradford Fitch and Tim Hysom, who oversaw all aspects of the project and the editing of this report. Fellows Jason Tortora and Jinglin Wang provided masterful assistance with survey design, research methodology and data analysis. Collin Burden also assisted with the research methodology and data analysis, while Nicole Folk Cooper contributed her design and editing skills, and Sarah Cunningham assisted with the release and distribution. CMF also thanks research associates Joseph Kim, Josh Oppenheimer, Jessica Reed and Alex Young for their varied contributions, including data checking, proofing, and media assistance, all of which improved the final report.

Finally, this research and CMF's work to improve communications, understanding and the relationship between Congress and citizens would not be possible without the generosity of the Founding Partners of CMF's *Partnership for a More Perfect Union*: **AT&T**, **Convio**, **Fleishman-Hillard** and the **Hansan Family Foundation**. Thank you for your support.

Related Research

In the past decade, communications, and online communications in particular, have become one of the most prominent management challenges Congress faces. As the challenges have evolved, so too have the resources CMF provides Congress. Below is some of the research CMF has conducted to further our mission to explain how Congress works and help foster understanding, communications, and the relationship between citizens and their elected officials.

111TH CONGRESS GOLD MOUSE PROJECT

Since 1998 CMF has evaluated all Member, committee, and leadership websites. We then bestow the CMF Gold, Silver, and Bronze Mouse Awards on the best sites on Capitol Hill and identify best and innovative practices that can be more widely adopted by House and Senate offices.

PERCEPTIONS OF CITIZEN ADVOCACY ON CAPITOL HILL

This report is based on an online survey of 260 congressional staff on their opinions and practices related to constituent communications, including social media. The survey was conducted between October 12 and December 13, 2010.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE DEMOCRATIC DIALOGUE

In 2008, after nearly 10 years of research, outreach, and study of the communications between citizens and Congress, CMF released recommendations for all stakeholders and suggested improvements to the structure and processes for managing congressional communications.

HOW THE INTERNET HAS CHANGED CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

In 2008, to understand how citizens are communicating with their Members of Congress and what motivates them to do so, CMF commissioned a nationwide survey of citizens to address their methods, reasons, and expectations with regard to their communications with Capitol Hill. The resulting report discusses the results of this research with over 10,000 citizens.

HOW CAPITOL HILL IS COPING WITH THE SURGE IN CITIZEN ADVOCACY

In 2005, CMF surveyed and interviewed more than 300 House and Senate staffers on their opinions and practices related to constituent communications. This report explores the surge in communications to congressional offices, how offices are reacting to the increased workload, and how they view constituent communications practices.

To download these reports and for more information on all of CMF's research and projects, please visit <http://CongressFoundation.org/Projects>.

About the Congressional Management Foundation

Founded in 1977, the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) is a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to helping Congress and its Members meet the evolving needs and expectations of an engaged and informed 21st century citizenry. Our work focuses on improving congressional operations and enhancing citizen engagement through research, publications, training, and management services.

IMPROVING CONGRESSIONAL OPERATIONS

CMF works internally with Member offices, committees, leadership, and institutional offices in the House and Senate to foster improved management practices. From interns to Chiefs of Staff to Members themselves, CMF provides services adapted to the unique congressional environment, including:

- **Management books and guidance**, including our signature publication *Setting Course, Keeping It Local* for district and state offices, the *Congressional Intern Handbook*, and staff employment studies.
- **Customized management services**, such as strategic planning, teambuilding, executive coaching, mail workshops and complete office assessments.
- **Staff training and professional development**, including programs for senior managers, courses on writing constituent correspondence, webinars for district/state staff, and an orientation workshop for the aides of Members-elect.

ENHANCING CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

CMF's *Partnership for a More Perfect Union* is a center dedicated to enriching the relationship between citizens and Congress by comprehensively addressing the communications challenges faced by both sides. The goal of the *Partnership* is to further meaningful civic engagement through education, re-establishing trust, and providing innovative yet pragmatic tools to facilitate purposeful two-way communication. Ongoing programs include:

- **Communicating with Congress Project**, improving communications between Congress and citizens.
- **Gold Mouse Awards**, recognizing the best online communications on Capitol Hill.
- **21st Century Town Hall Research**, examining and enhancing online and offline forums.
- **Inside the Hill**, offering a behind-the-scenes look at how technology is changing the way Congress works.

To learn more about CMF and the *Partnership for a More Perfect Union*, please visit <http://CongressFoundation.org>.



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