



Communicating with Congress

How Citizen Advocacy Is Changing Mail Operations on Capitol Hill



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Special Thanks

We are grateful to our sponsors, **Convio**, **Fireside21** and **voterVOICE**, 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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The Partnership for a More Perfect Union
at the Congressional Management Foundation
513 Capitol Court NE, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20002
202-546-0100
CongressFoundation.org

Introduction

The Internet changed everything. This phrase is prevalent in our society, whether it refers to commerce, personal relationships, or even our democratic processes. The system and paradigm built over the years for citizens to interact with Members of Congress is not immune to this change.

As this report shows, and as the two previous *Communicating with Congress* reports published in 2011 by the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) demonstrate, Congress is working hard to adapt to and understand this new environment. *Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill* (January 2011) showed, among other things, that congressional staff felt the Internet made it easier for citizens to become involved in public policy. *#SocialCongress: Perceptions and Use of Social Media on Capitol Hill* (July 2011) showed, among other things, that Congress is quickly integrating social media tools as methods to gauge public opinion and communicate with constituents.

But are most Members and staff of the Congress fundamentally rethinking what they do, or simply trying to apply a 20th century paradigm, workflow and communications process to a 21st century challenge? This report, *How Citizen Advocacy Is Changing Mail Operations on Capitol Hill*, documents how Congress is better utilizing email to respond to incoming email from constituents; shifting resources to adapt to the increased volumes of communications; and how congressional offices that embrace technology are finding it easier to respond to the ever-expanding mail load.

CMF's research also suggests that "old school" habits on Capitol Hill are inhibiting the potential for Congress and citizens to have a more robust, active and meaningful relationship using online technologies. While responding to constituent communications is a high priority for congressional offices, a sizable number of offices are unable to respond to constituent emails with pre-existing responses in less than a week. And congressional staff who are primarily involved in answering constituent mail report that the office "review and approval process" – not increased volume – is the biggest inhibitor to quicker turnaround times for constituent mail.

These processes and findings are not abstract. When a citizen sends an email to his legislator and does not receive a prompt reply, the citizen feels that Congress isn't listening. This contributes to greater cynicism in our nation, and lower approval ratings and support for our democratic institutions. And yet, how can Congress solve this dilemma?

Consider these two data points: 1) Some congressional offices have experienced a 1,000% increase in communications volume in the past decade; and 2) Congress has not increased staff size in personal offices since 1979. When a seismic shift occurs in any work environment, such as managing a ten-fold increase in customer interest without a substantial increase in labor to support that interest, organizations should ask strategic questions about how they operate. Should we re-evaluate our organization chart? Should we shift resources from one division to another to respond to new stakeholder interest? Have stakeholders' expectations changed (such as how quickly they expect a response), and how well have we adapted to those new expectations?

CMF does not profess to hold all the answers, but we do hope that Congress wrestles with the questions. The answers may not be easy, and change will be difficult. But the research CMF has conducted in the past year and, indeed, during the past decade, suggests the promise that new technology holds for improving citizen engagement with, and understanding of, the Congress. CMF hopes this *Communicating with Congress* research will further that understanding by both Congress and citizens, and reveal both the opportunities and challenges presented by an entirely new paradigm in America's democratic dialogue.

1. Constituent communications to Members of Congress have significantly increased in the past decade, with offices experiencing a 200% to 1,000% increase in volume.

During the past decade, congressional offices have reported significant increases in constituent communications volume. Anecdotal data collected by CMF suggests that most congressional offices have seen a 200%–1,000% increase in constituent communication volume in the past decade. In particular, offices experienced a dramatic increase in 2009, when there was a great deal of legislative activity in the Congress (e.g., economic stimulus, health care reform, cap and trade). CMF estimates that the bulk of these communications sent to Capitol Hill are through advocacy campaigns, and that 5,000–10,000 associations, nonprofits and corporations have sections of their websites devoted to this purpose.¹

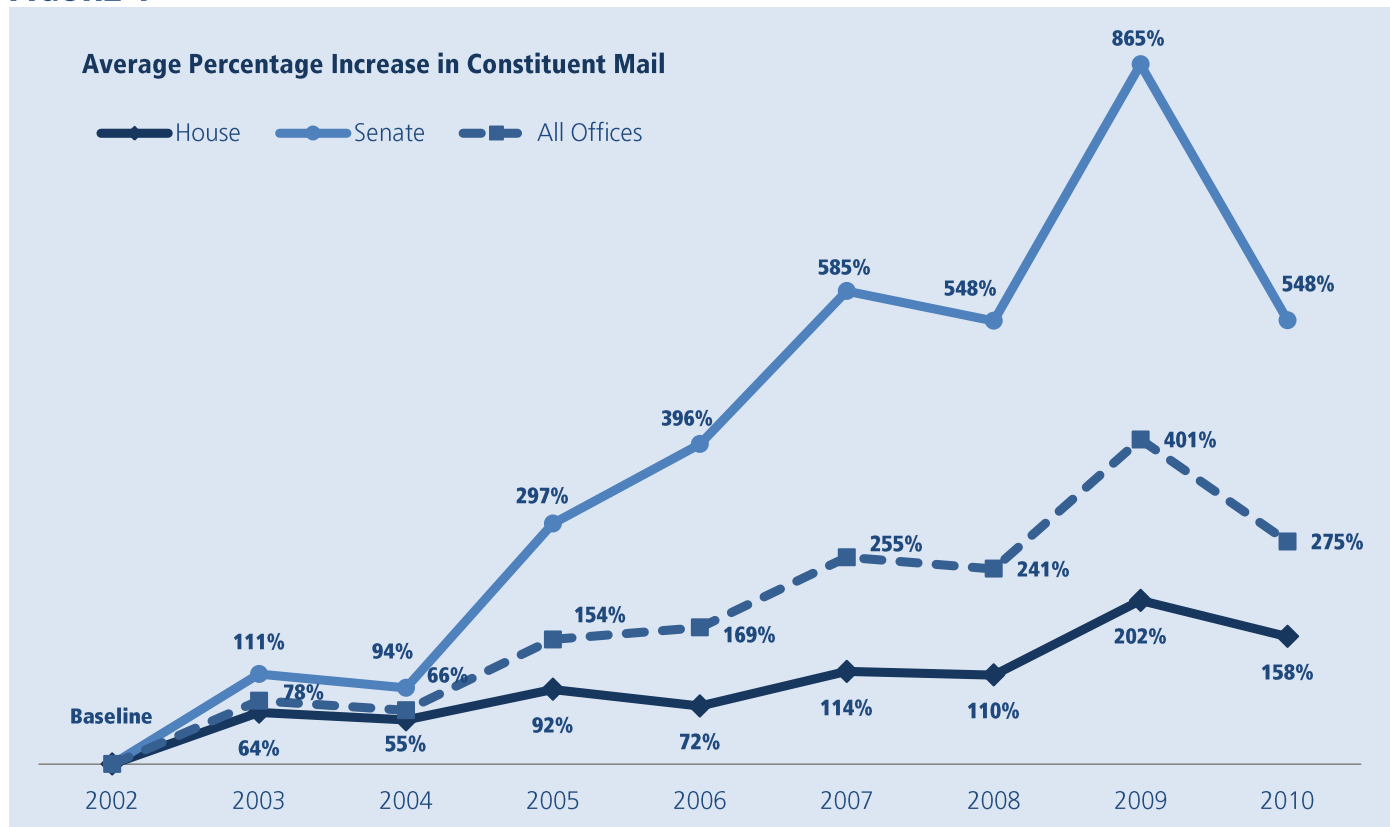
“Every year it gets more difficult to keep up with the level of correspondence that comes into the office. It’s overwhelming and it seems like we can never do enough to keep up with it.”

—House Legislative Director

Increases in communications volume widely vary by district and state. Figure 1 shows the increase since 2002, as reported by 10 offices. (The chart shows average percentage increase in the volume of constituent mail in seven House offices and three Senate offices.)²

(Important Note: While constituent communications volumes have increased significantly, congressional personal office staff have not increased. The total number of staff allotted to a House Member personal office was set by law in 1979. Senate personal office sizes also have remained relatively unchanged in the past three decades.)

FIGURE 1



¹ These estimates are based on an anecdotal review of congressional office communications and CMF’s experience working with and studying the grassroots software vendor community during the past eight years.

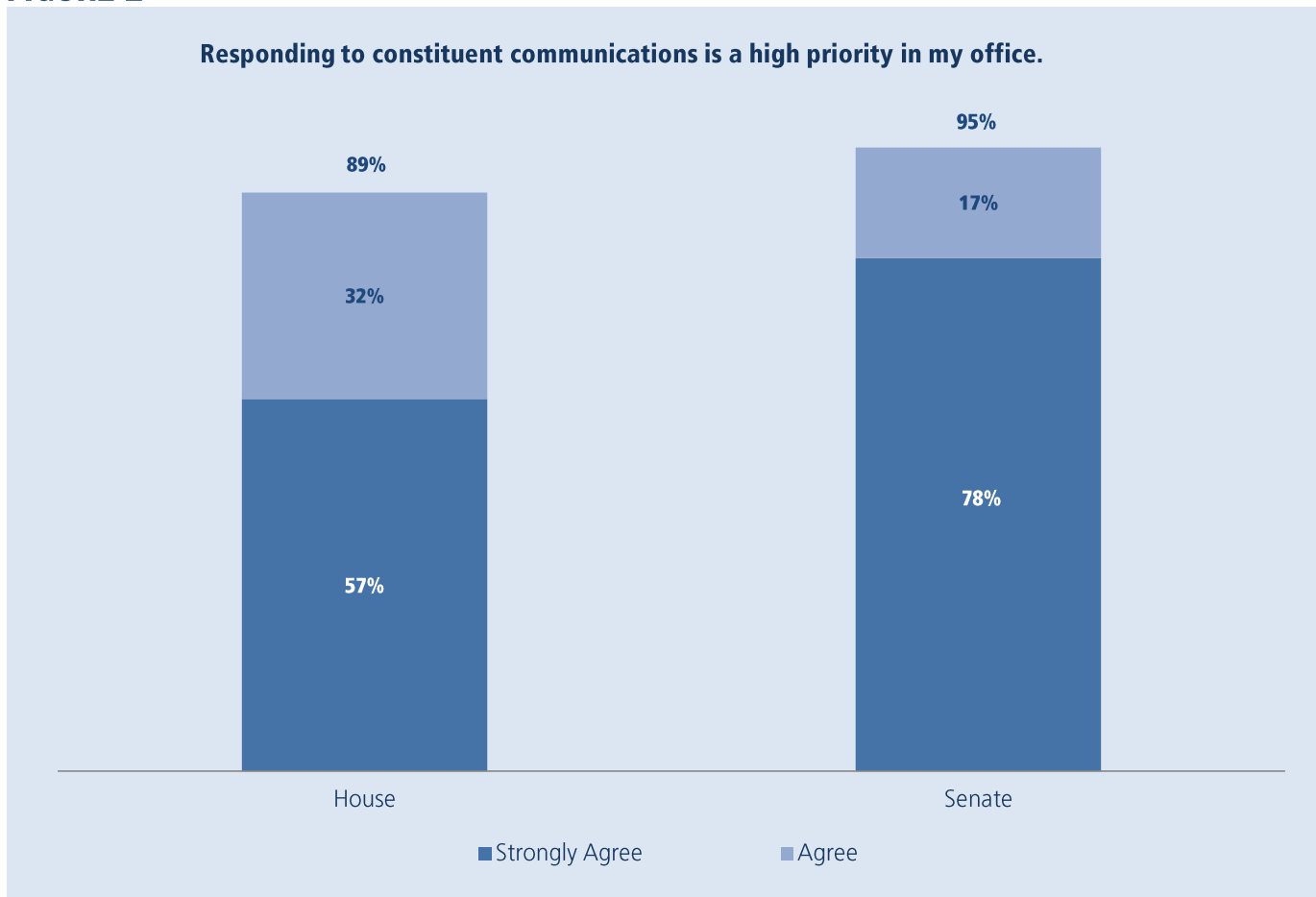
² Data was collected from offices in July–September 2011. Offices maintained roughly similar methodologies for tracking incoming mail.

2. Responding to constituent communications is a high priority for congressional offices.

Both survey research and CMF’s continuing work with congressional offices indicate that staff believe that responding to constituent communications is a high priority for their offices. Generally, staff report that constituent communications are a valuable source of public opinion in the district or state – both to gauge quantitative opinion and the strength of constituent views.

- 95% of Senate staff and 89% of House staff surveyed said that responding to constituent communications is a high priority in their offices.
- Senate staffers were slightly more emphatic about the priority of constituent communications (78% of the Senate staffers strongly agreed, compared to 57% of House staffers).

FIGURE 2



3. Offices are primarily sending email to respond to constituent email, instead of responding with printed letters, improving their use of technology in the past five years.

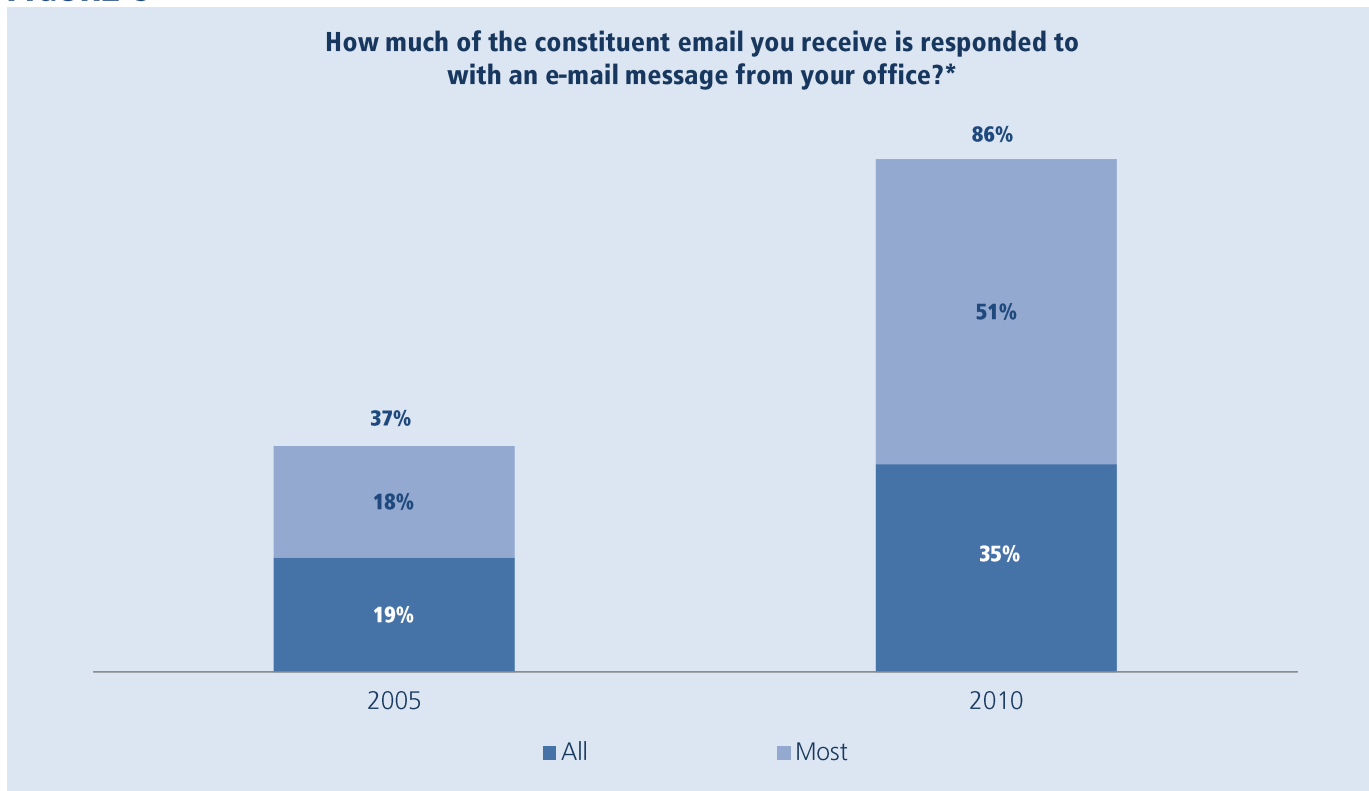
One of the ways congressional offices are trying to be responsive to the increase in constituent communications is by more effectively utilizing technology. In particular, responding via email can help offices more efficiently process the mail and more quickly respond to constituents. In the past, more offices did not make greater use of outgoing email because of a prevalent concern among Members and staff that their email responses would be altered, which could result in the misrepresentation of the Member’s position. However, these misgivings have been largely dispelled in the last five years, with the number of offices answering *all* or *most* of their incoming constituent email with email more than doubling between 2005 and 2010.

“We’re now responding to emails with emails... and we are hearing some very good things from constituents who appreciate the immediacy, the timeliness.”

—Senate Communications Director

- 86% of congressional offices answer *all* or *most* of their incoming constituent email with email, compared to only 37% in 2005.
- In our 2010 survey, 35% of offices responded to *all* email with email, compared to only 19% of offices in 2005.
- However, 6% of the staffers said their offices do not reply with email to *any* of the email from constituents and 9% said their offices only reply to *some* email with email (not shown).

FIGURE 3



*In 2010, question was asked only of mail staffers (2005 n=212, 2010 n=87).

4. In the last several years, many congressional offices have engaged in an ongoing shift of resources to constituent communications.

In our 2005 and 2010 surveys, congressional staffers report they were spending more time on constituent communications than they did in the prior two years, and that they are shifting resources from other responsibilities to constituent communications. Additionally, in interviews and open-ended questionnaire responses, managers indicated they are responding to the increase in volume by: developing improved triage techniques; reassigning personnel under a single communications manager; and enhancing training of staff on use of the office correspondence software.

- A majority of staffers (58%) reported spending more time on constituent communications than they did two years ago. (Figure 4)
- A significant number of survey respondents (46%) indicated that their offices have shifted resources to the mail operation to manage the increase in volume. (Figure 5)
- Though roughly the same percentage of House and Senate staffers reported spending more time on constituent communications, a majority of the Senate staffers (68%) believe their offices have sufficient resources to manage constituent communications, compared to less than half of the House staffers (48%) who do. (Figure 6)

“With a huge increase [in constituent mail] it was kind of hard for us to continue the same process we had. So we had to readdress the situation, kind of re-tweak the system, to make sure we get the message out quicker.”

— Senate IT Director

FIGURE 4

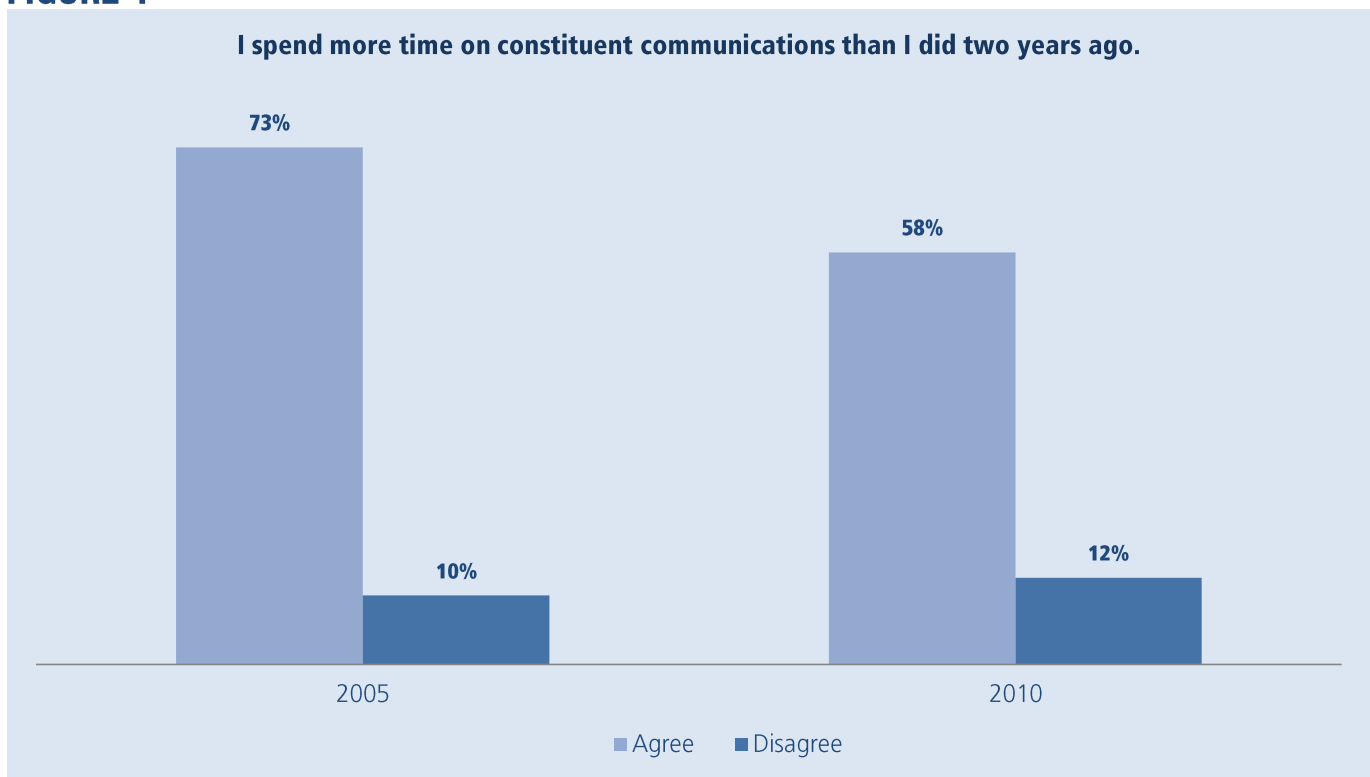


FIGURE 5

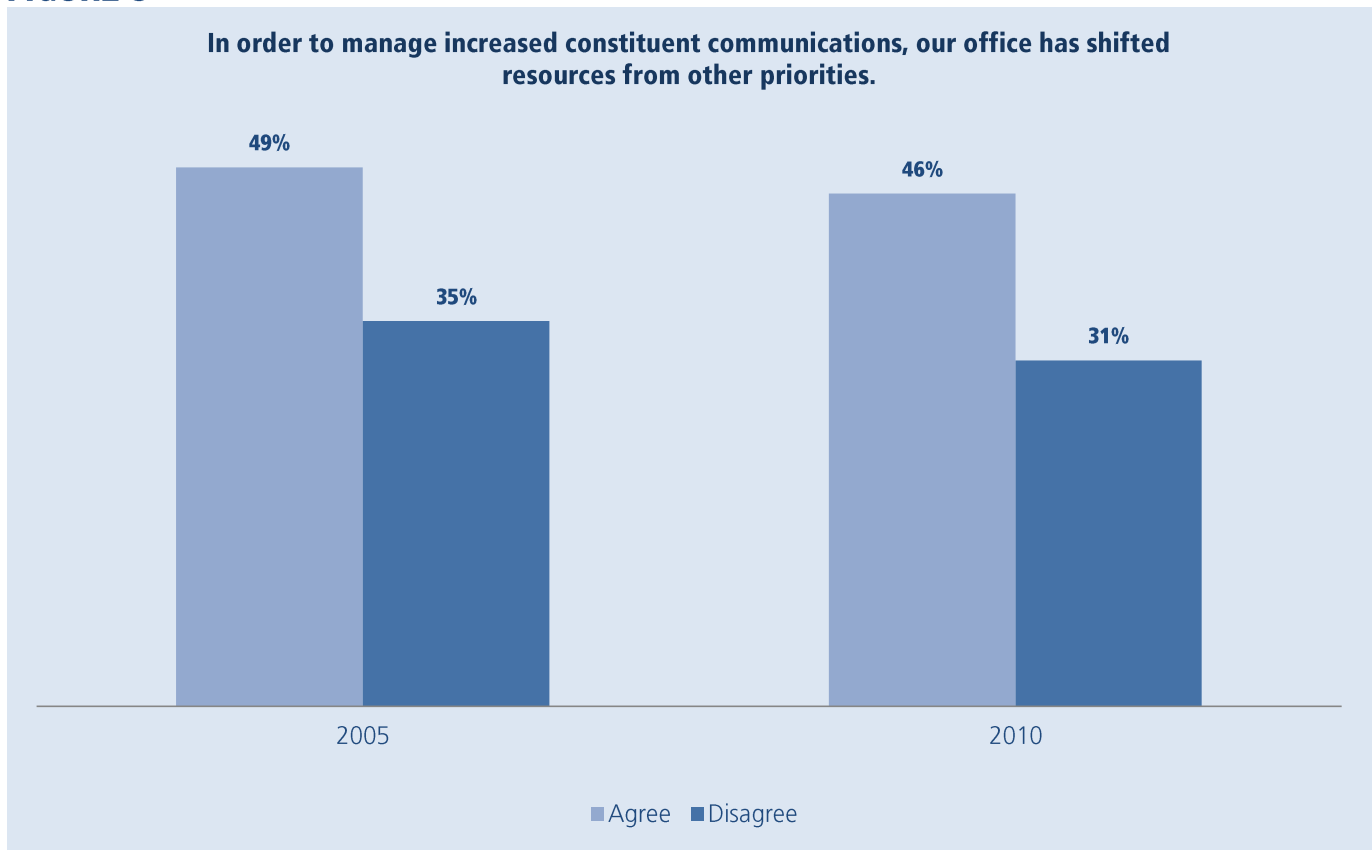
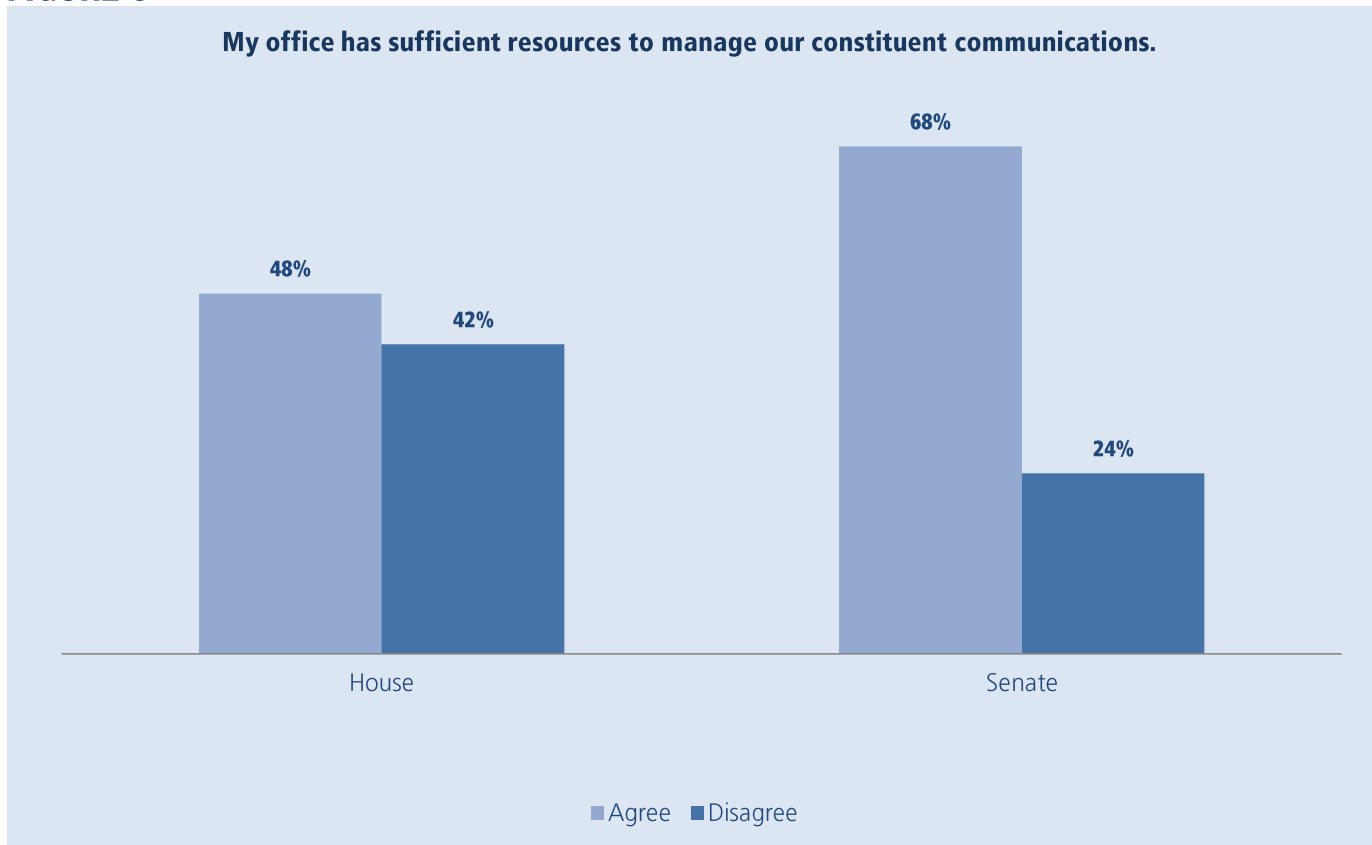


FIGURE 6



5. A significant number of congressional offices require more than three weeks to respond to a constituent communication if the office does not have a pre-existing, prepared response.

When analyzing congressional response times to constituent mail, how quickly an office responds usually depends on whether the office has pre-approved text prepared on the topic.

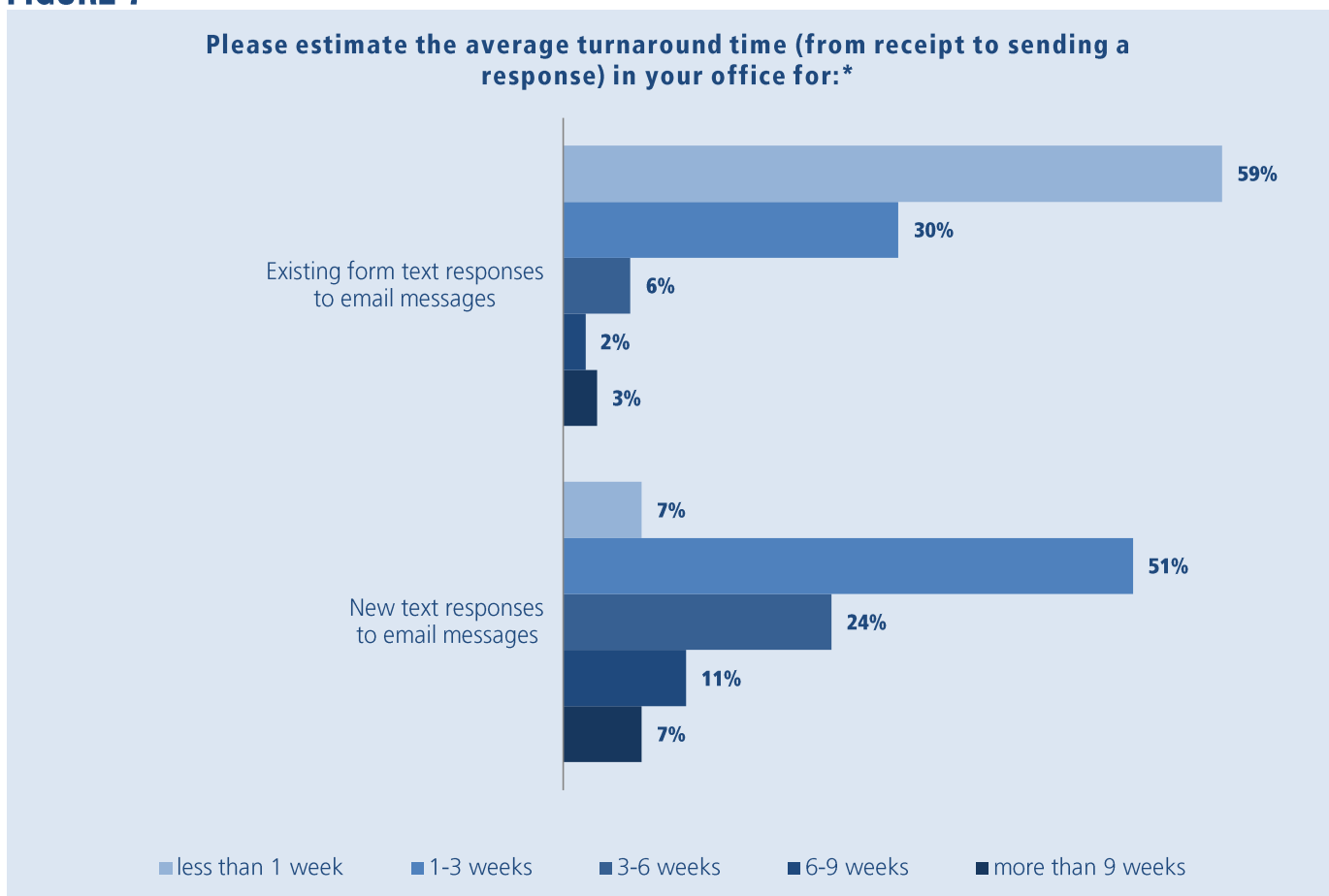
- When pre-existing text is available, 59% of staffers estimate that their office can respond to constituent emails in less than one week, and an additional 30% respond in 1-3 weeks.³
- When pre-existing text is not available – meaning the office must draft, edit and approve new text in order to respond to the constituent – 58% of staffers estimate they are able to respond within three weeks.
- However, that means a significant number of staffers (42%) estimate that their offices take longer than three weeks to respond to constituent emails when new text needs to be drafted, edited and approved.

“It takes a long time to sort the mail because of the large quantity and we struggle to write responses quickly.”

— House Legislative Correspondent

(Important Note: Most congressional offices aim for a two-week turnaround time, meaning that they strive to respond to every constituent communication within that time frame.)

FIGURE 7



*Question was asked only of senior managers and mail staffers. Their responses are aggregated (n=197).

³ Survey question also asked staffers about estimated turnaround times using new or existing text in response to constituent postal letters. Our analysis showed minimal differences between the response times for postal letters and email messages.

6. Many staff – especially those primarily responsible for answering mail – report that the office review and approval process is a significant inhibitor to quickly responding to constituent mail.

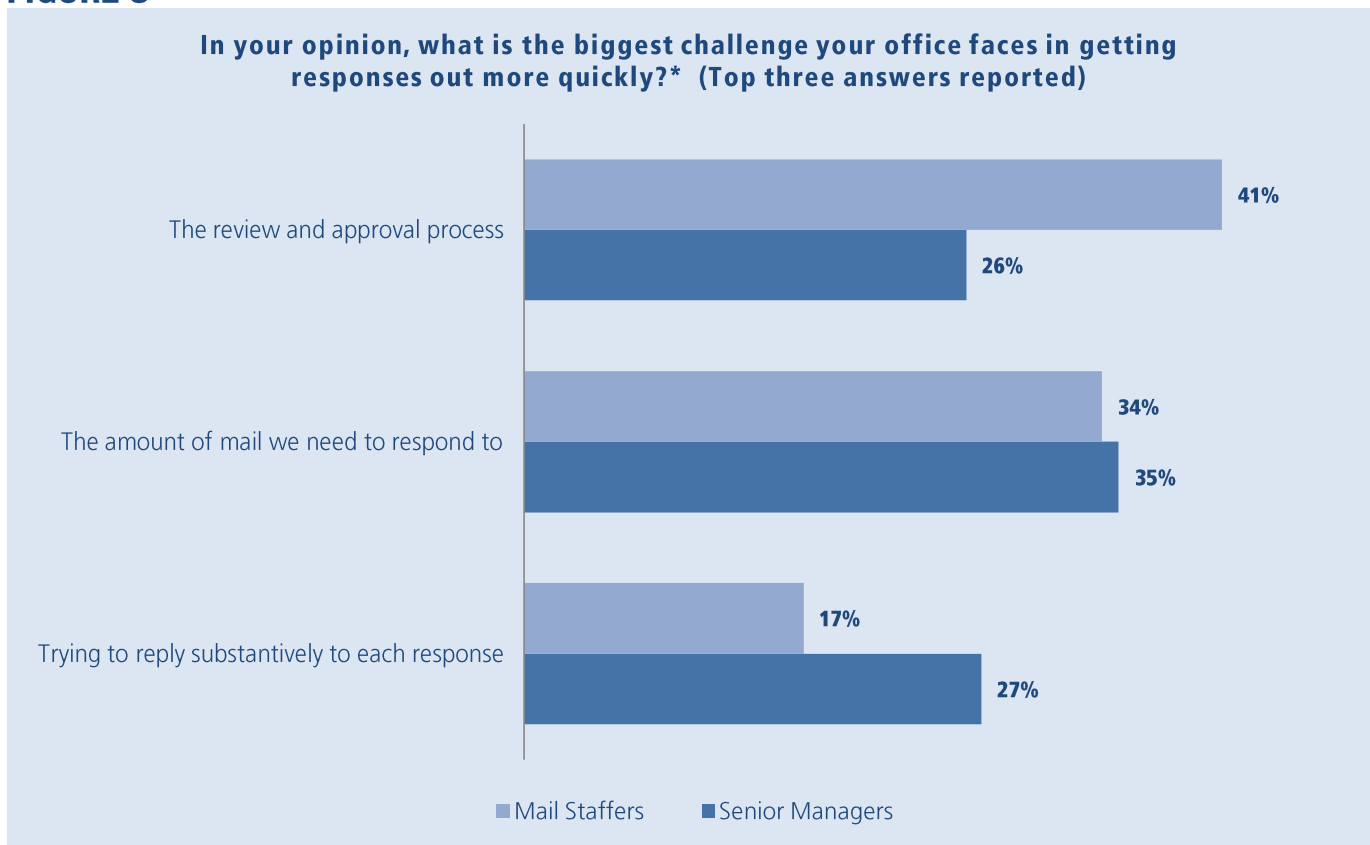
When asked about the biggest challenge their offices face in getting responses out more quickly, both senior managers and mail staffers – those primarily responsible for answering the mail – responded with the same top three answers, though not in the same order. Senior managers note that “amount of mail” was the biggest inhibitor to responding quickly to constituents. However, staff with primary responsibility for answering mail reported that the “review and approval process” – even more than mail volume – is a significant factor in delaying responses to constituents.

“The approval process is extremely inefficient, and we struggle to hold policy advisors accountable for their procrastination in approving responses.”

— Senate Correspondence Director

- Almost the same number of mail staffers (34%) and senior managers (35%) believe that mail volume is the biggest challenge to sending timely responses to constituents.
- However, greater numbers of mail staffers (41%) believe that the review and approval process is their office’s biggest turnaround challenge.

FIGURE 8



*Question was asked only of senior managers and mail staffers. Their responses are aggregated (n=196).

NOTE ABOUT FINDING 7:

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

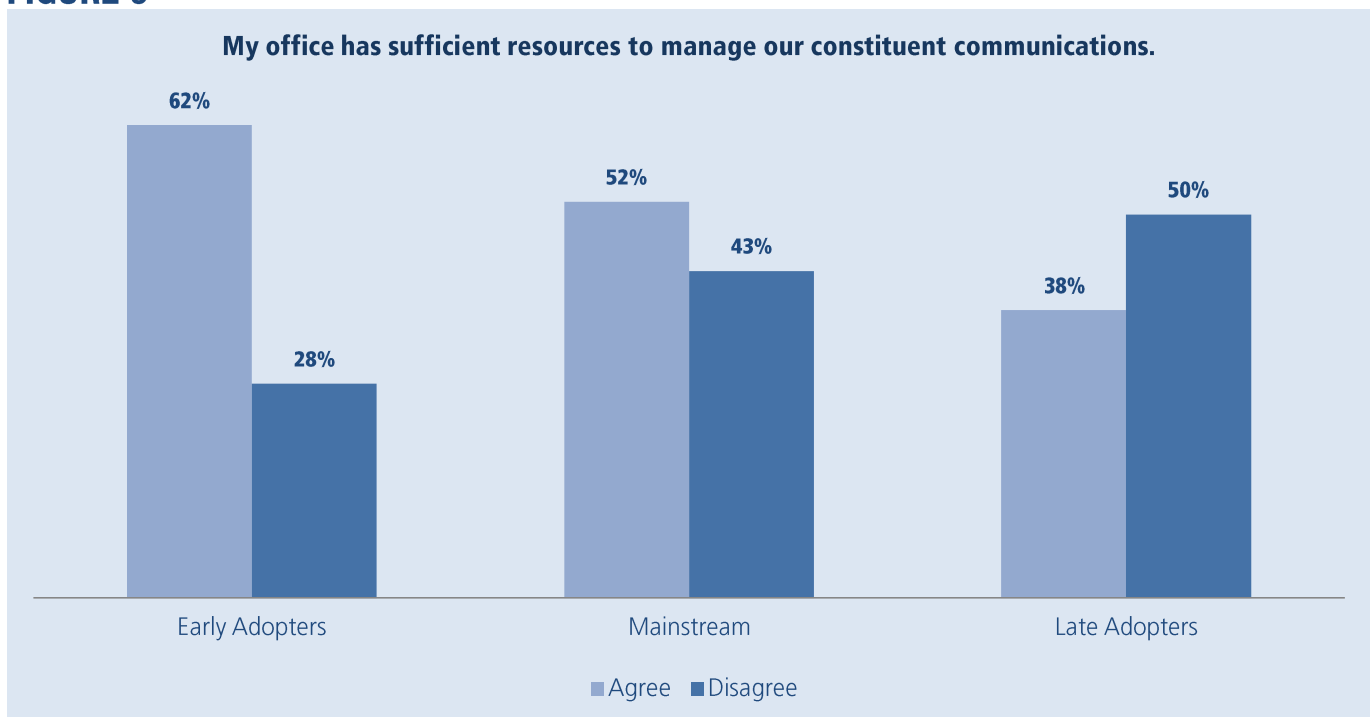
CMF sought to identify varying attitudes and practices related to social media based on the staff’s perception of whether their office was open to integrating technology into office operations or reluctant to do so. To determine whether a staffer was from an office that is an early, mainstream, or late 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.”

7. Staffers from offices that embrace technology are significantly more likely to report that their offices have sufficient resources to manage their constituent communications.

Staff who identified their offices as early adopters of technology have significantly different attitudes about the impact of constituent communications on congressional offices than those considered late adopters of technology. (For more on this trend, see the previous report in this *Communicating with Congress* series, “#SocialCongress: Perceptions and Use of Social Media on Capitol Hill.”) With regards to resources, late adopters of technology on Capitol Hill feel much more overwhelmed.

- When asked whether their office has “sufficient resources to manage” constituent communications, 50% of late adopters believed they did not have sufficient resources, compared to 28% of early adopters.

FIGURE 9



Methodology

This report includes data collected by CMF in 2005, 2010 and 2011. The report's findings are based primarily 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.

For this report, CMF compared the 2010 survey results with a similar CMF survey conducted in 2005. Additionally, CMF augmented this survey data with interviews and data collected in July – September 2011, primarily to quantify the growth in communications volumes to congressional offices.

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 **Convio**, **Fireside21** and **voterVOICE**, whose support made this report possible.

We also thank the Founding Partners of CMF's *Partnership for a More Perfect Union*: **AT&T**, **Convio**, **Fleishman-Hillard** and the **Hansan Family Foundation**, for their generosity and support.

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. We also extend our gratitude to the House and Senate offices that generously shared their mail data with us for this report.

CMF is very fortunate to have such a dedicated and talented team of people work on the *Communicating with Congress* project. We thank the co-authors of this report, Kathy Goldschmidt, Nicole Folk Cooper and Bradford Fitch, as well as Beverly Bell, Collin Burden, Tim Hysom, Quantesa Roberts, Karen Shanton, Jason Tortora and Jinglin Wang, whose varied contributions were instrumental to the final report.

Finally, this is the latest and, for a time, last CMF report co-authored by our Deputy Director, Kathy Goldschmidt. Kathy has overseen or led nearly every aspect of CMF's technology and communications research since 1998, beginning with the first report she authored, "Building Web Sites Constituents Will Use." For more than a decade Kathy designed and wrote dozens of reports, articles and surveys on how Congress and citizens interact using online technologies. She coordinated research efforts with major U.S. universities; helped create a grading system for congressional websites (the Congressional Gold Mouse Awards); and co-authored a 10-year technological roadmap for the U.S. House of Representatives. Kathy is leaving CMF to focus on two other important projects (Emelia, age 4; and Hannah, age 1). The management, staff and Board of Directors of CMF thank Kathy her insights, diligence and thoughtful contributions to enhancing the use of technology by Capitol Hill.

Related CMF Resources

Communications, and online communications in particular, have become one of the most prominent management challenges Congress faces. CMF offers a variety of services related to congressional mail operations, and has conducted more than a decade of research on constituent communications.

Research

#SOCIALCONGRESS: PERCEPTIONS AND USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CAPITOL HILL

This report, based on an online survey of House and Senate staff, represents the first research into congressional staffers' attitudes about their offices' use of social media.

PERCEPTIONS OF CITIZEN ADVOCACY ON CAPITOL HILL

This report, based on an online survey of 260 congressional staff, gauges Capitol Hill opinion of various influences on lawmakers' decisions and the impact of the Internet on the Congress and public policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE DEMOCRATIC DIALOGUE

After nearly 10 years of research, outreach, and study of the communications between citizens and Congress, CMF released recommendations for improving the structure and processes for managing congressional communications.

HOW THE INTERNET HAS CHANGED CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

To understand how citizens are communicating with their Members of Congress and what motivates them to do so, CMF commissioned a nationwide survey of more than 10,000 citizens to address their methods, reasons and expectations with regard to their communications with Capitol Hill.

HOW CAPITOL HILL IS COPING WITH THE SURGE IN CITIZEN ADVOCACY

This report, based on CMF research with more than 300 House and Senate staff, explores the surge in communications to congressional offices, how offices are reacting to the increased workload and how they view constituent communications practices.

GOLD MOUSE AWARDS

Since 1998 CMF has evaluated all personal office, committee and leadership websites to determine which Members of Congress are best using the Internet to communicate with and serve citizens. We then recognize the best with CMF Gold, Silver and Bronze Mouse Awards and identify best and innovative practices that can be more widely adopted by House and Senate offices.

Services

WRITING EFFECTIVE CONSTITUENT CORRESPONDENCE COURSES

Under contract with the House Chief Administrative Officer, CMF periodically offers beginner and advanced level training programs, in which House staff learn how to write better, faster and more effective constituent mail.

ONE-DAY MAIL WORKSHOPS

CMF's one-day mail workshop is designed to deliver immediate results to an office's mail operation by facilitating an intense discussion among all staff involved with the mail. The workshop helps offices improve turnaround, their ability to handle high mail volumes, their use of technology.

MAIL ASSESSMENTS

CMF also offers comprehensive assessments for congressional offices seeking a more thorough review and consultation on their mail system. Mail assessments are customized to the specific needs of each office and are usually conducted within 3-6 weeks, depending on the desired outcomes of the office.

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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