

Style Conscious: How Members of Congress Learn New Ways to Communicate

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ABSTRACT

Ronald Reagan once quipped: "Politics is supposed to be the second-oldest profession. I have come to realize that it bears a very close resemblance to the first." One needn't think that politics is generally dishonorable to see that Reagan's remark captures two related truths about democratic politicians: first, their goal is to convince people that they will give them what they want; and, second, that the means to that goal is selling oneself, not just one's policies. Thus, the way that a politician "represents" herself to the public is intimately related to how well the public believes that she will "represent" them. Professional efforts to make this connection are indeed ancient. From Athenian times up to our own, politicians have had to learn to adapt the basic principles of rhetoric to evolving fora and media of communication.

However, the rapid rise and massive importance of computer mediated communication has been more revolutionary than evolutionary. As a result, politicians have had to adapt very quickly, exposing themselves to risks even as they compete to capitalize on new opportunities. Over the last decade, Members of Congress have struggled to deploy their typically formidable communication skills effectively in the uncharted waters of the Internet and the World Wide Web. This struggle involves, in part, learning from experience, but just as importantly, learning from the experiences of others. Thus we cannot fully grasp the dynamics of individual adaptive processes without analyzing their relational dimension as well. As researchers, then, we can fruitfully characterize diffusing practices as a collective learning process within the Congress.

Clearly, such collective learning has been considerable. The quality of Congressional websites has improved dramatically over the last decade. Indeed, as late as 1997, 167 Members did not even have websites. Today, all Members have websites, and there is a significant "floor" in their quality. However, there is still enormous variation in the content, communication style, and quality of Member websites on numerous dimensions such as the kinds of information, the quantity of information, usability, etc. In Esterling, Lazer, & Neblo (2005) we examined the external and institutional determinants of this variation.

We extend that analysis here by analyzing diffusion processes for website innovation within the Congress. Our objectives are three-fold: first, and most narrowly, to understand when

and why Members with different characteristics adopt the e-communication strategies that they do; second, to use this case as leverage in analyzing more general diffusion pathways in Congress; and third, to capitalize on the rich, high quality data that this particular medium creates to illuminate the dynamic elements of broader Congressional communication strategies.

How would these diffusion processes within Congress work? There are many plausible mechanisms. First, and most obviously, Congressional offices engage in informal interaction. Staff, for example, can simply ask each other how they manage their websites. Second, the publicly observable nature of such sites (as opposed to say strategies for managing constituent mail) makes unilateral surveying possible. Under such conditions, we might observe greater and more rapid convergence toward models that show obvious promise. Third, formal institutions might induce diffusion (e.g., coordinated party action or shared web authoring firms). In this paper we focus on the first mechanism, informal interaction, but future research will address the others. In the statistical analysis, we will test hypotheses regarding the following social diffusion pathways:

Committee and caucus overlap: there are a variety of institutional mechanisms that facilitate the interaction of Members and their staffs. Most relevant is shared committee membership, where each Member belongs to several committees. Common membership creates natural interdependencies among those offices through increased collaboration and negotiation, interactions that can lead to discussions over the effectiveness of communication innovations. Overlapping caucus memberships function in the same way.

Bill co-sponsorship: while each bill must be sponsored by at least one Member, most are sponsored by many (with some bills sponsored by hundreds). Such co-sponsorship is likely to either reflect and/or induce some degree of communication among offices due to substantive collaboration and negotiation over bill provisions, again driving increased informal interactions regarding communication innovations.

State delegations and district adjacency: there is ample evidence that communication occurs at high rates within state

caucuses, largely because of the shared legislative interests that they induce.

Party: Every modern account of Congress indicates that the amount of communication across party lines has plummeted in the last decade; this suggests that diffusions are more likely to occur within legislative parties than between parties.

Physical proximity of offices: in many network studies, simple proximity strongly predicts the strength of ties. Moreover, the probability of communication tends to drop geometrically with distance. It is likely, therefore, that Members and their staff whose offices are physically closer to each are also more likely to communicate.

Cohort: studies of organizational communication suggest that entering an organization at the same time as someone else (i.e., sharing a common cohort) powerfully predicts communication.

We are in the first year of this research, and data collection for all of these social network variables is nearing completion. We will analyze the diffusion processes using statistical models to formally test hypotheses regarding social network dependence using models that are outlined in the literature on spatial econometrics. We also have data on the descriptive attributes of Members' offices. It is plausible that similarity of attributes also predicts an increase in communication—most notably, demographic similarity (age, race, gender, etc), and district similarity (rural/urban, SES, partisan breakdown, etc). Our statistical models can control for these factors. Combining these attribute and social network data allows tests of the marginal impact of informal social communication processes, as well as for possible interactions. For example, it may be that an innovation that improves Web page usability is more likely to spread among Members in competitive districts, but innovative policy-related content may be more likely to spread among Members from uncompetitive Members who would be less threatened by the possibility that a policy statement on their website would damage them politically.