



# Communicating with Congress

## Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill

THE PARTNERSHIP FOR

*A More Perfect Union*

at the

CONGRESSIONAL MANAGEMENT FOUNDATION

*Made possible by grants from*

Adfero Group, Blue Cross Blue Shield Association and CQ Roll Call

## Special Thanks

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



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# Introduction

“We in America do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate.” That statement by Thomas Jefferson is a commentary on citizens’ right to “petition the government for a redress of grievances.” Effective communications and interactions between citizens and elected officials are essential to the democratic process, both to sustain the credibility of government and to maintain a free flow of ideas which can be integrated into policy decisions.

However, since the introduction of the Internet, maintaining that free flow has been a challenge both for Congress and citizens. Congressional offices are overwhelmed with the significant increase in volume and the diversity of delivery methods used by advocate organizations. On the other hand, citizens and the advocacy community have been frustrated by the myriad of technological tools utilized by offices to authenticate that actual constituents are sending messages, yet result in technological and “user interface” obstacles to communications.

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 goal is to help address the current frustrations and barriers, facilitate increased citizen participation in the public policy process, and promote a meaningful democratic dialogue that benefits our country. In these eight years we have produced a series of reports to illuminate the challenges that both sides of the communications equation face, and offer ideas to improve the process.

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 a new center at CMF, the *Partnership For A More Perfect Union*. The *Partnership* will advance this vision by providing research and training to Congress, advocacy groups, and citizens. This effort would not be possible without the generous support of our Founding Partners: **Fleishman-Hillard**, **Convio**, **AT&T**, and the **Hansan Family Foundation**, and we deeply appreciate their support.

This report is the latest in CMF’s and the *Partnership’s* effort to provide Congress, advocacy groups, and citizens a greater understanding of constituent communications on Capitol Hill. The research is based on a survey of more than 250 congressional staff, many of them senior managers, on attitudes and practices related to managing constituent communications. Throughout 2011 we will release research that will assess current communications practices by congressional staff and offer data on how Congress has integrated social media tools to send communications and gauge constituent opinion. We will also expand our research on the importance of town hall meetings and their effectiveness in various formats. Finally, later this year, we will once again identify the best congressional websites through the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress Gold Mouse Awards.

In a democracy, as in any relationship, it is critical for both parties to have a degree of trust in one another. Trust between Members of Congress and those they represent depends on an honest and robust exchange of ideas. If Congress and citizens use the information in this report and material available on the *Partnership’s* website (<http://pmpu.org>), we know it will contribute to a more trusting and stable relationship between those who govern and those who are governed.

## 1. The Internet, Participation and Accountability

According to the congressional staffers we surveyed, email and the Internet have increased both citizens' participation in the public policy process and lawmakers' accountability to their constituents. However, they feel that electronic communications have reduced the quality of constituents' messages to Capitol Hill, and have had questionable impact on citizens' understanding of what goes on in Washington.

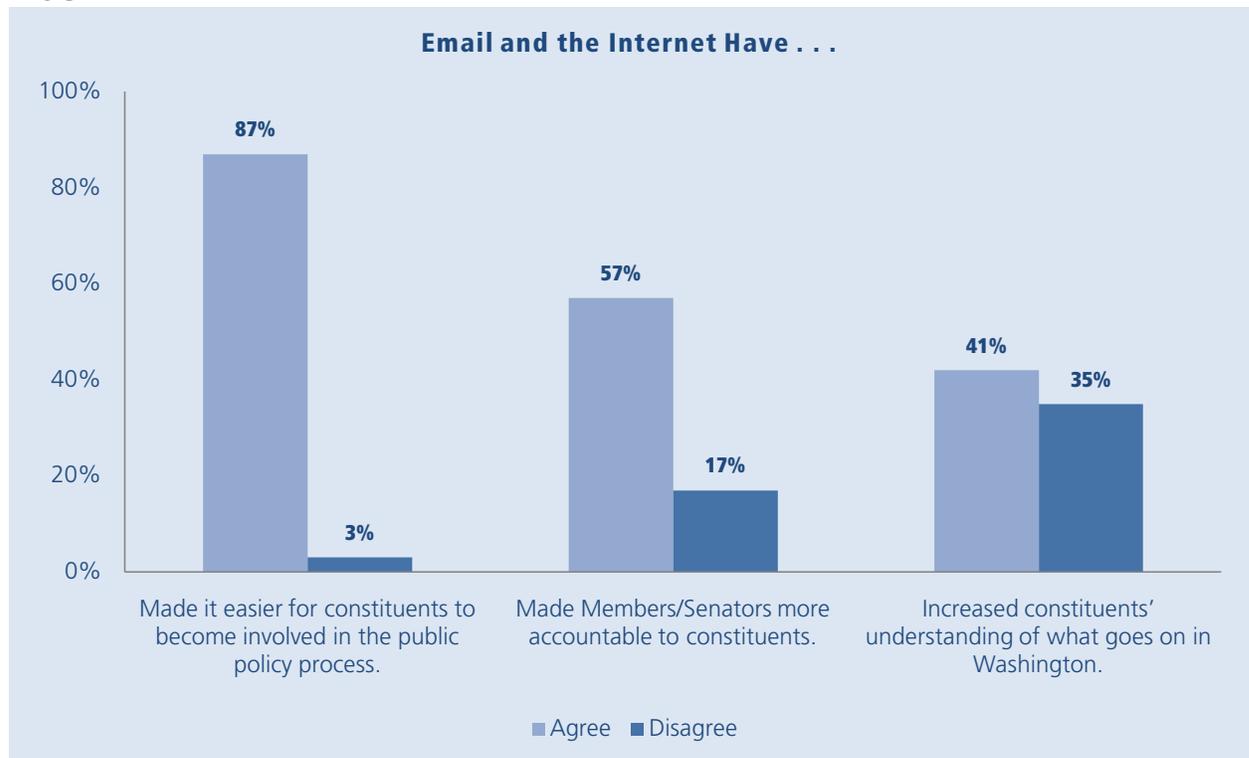
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*“The ease with which constituents can communicate with their Member has really diluted the quality of communications overall. We get way too many email inputs that forward the Congressman some email or YouTube link with ‘is this true’ as the only message.”*

—House Legislative Director

- Most staffers (87%) thought email and the Internet have made it easier for constituents to become involved in public policy.
- Almost all (97%) felt electronic communications have increased the number of constituents who communicate with their offices.
- A majority of staff (57%) felt email and the Internet have made Senators and Representatives more accountable to their constituents.
- Nearly two-thirds (65%) thought email and the Internet have reduced the quality of constituents' messages.
- Less than half (41%) thought that email and the Internet have increased citizens' understanding of what goes on in Washington.

**FIGURE 1**

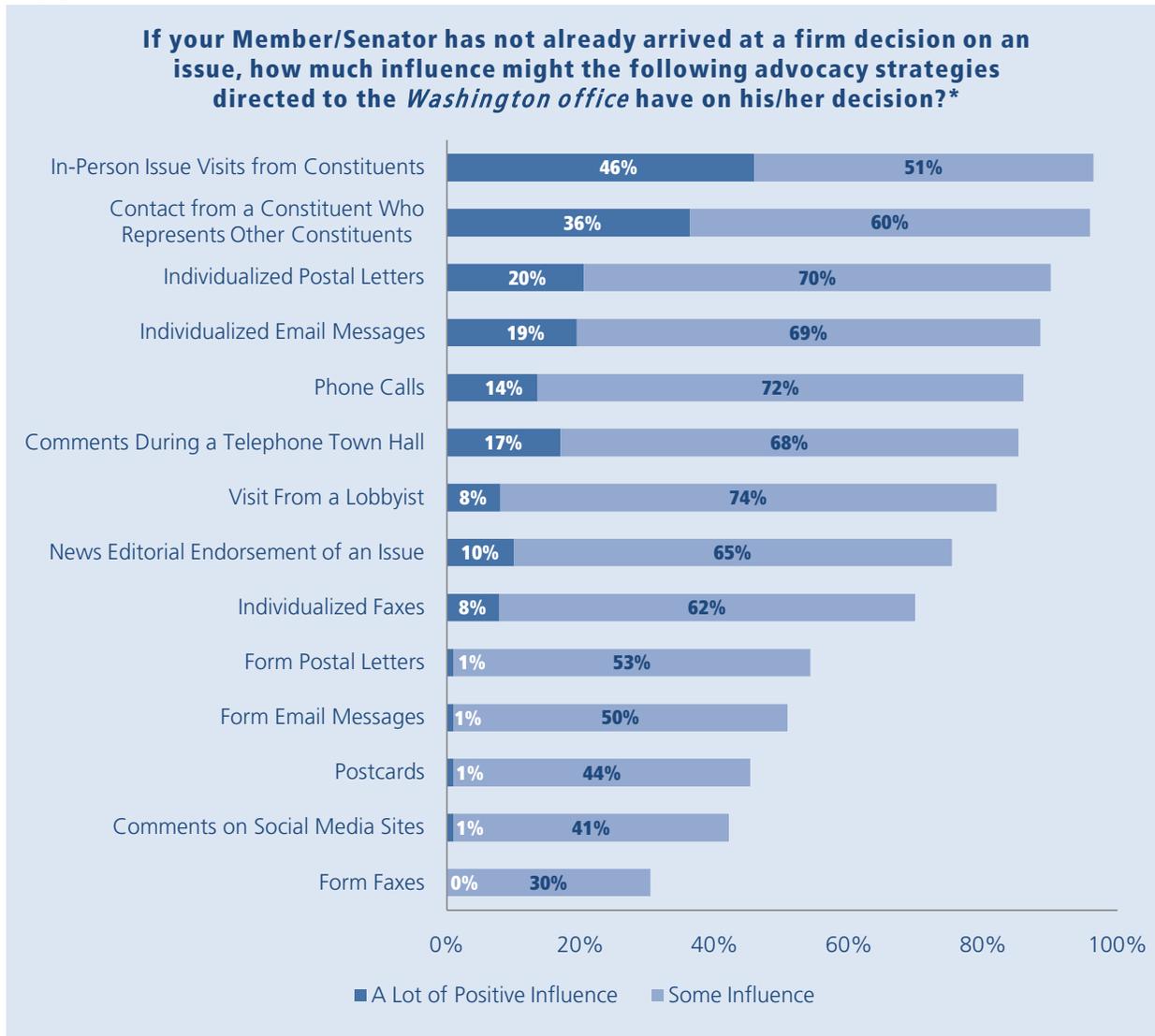


## 2. Citizens Have More Power Than They Realize

The most influential advocacy strategies for swaying an undecided Member of Congress depend on personal communications from constituents. Whether individuals make contact face-to-face, by phone, or through personalized email or postal mail, Senators and Representatives are influenced by their constituents' own views about the public policy issues before them.

- Most of the staff surveyed said constituent visits to the Washington office (97%) and to the district/state office (94%) have some or a lot of influence on an undecided Member.
- When asked about strategies directed to their offices back home, staffers said questions at town hall meetings (87%) and letters to the editor (80%) have some or a lot of influence.<sup>1</sup>
- Constituents who make the effort to personally communicate with their Senators and Representatives – except via fax – are more influential than lobbyists and news editors.

**FIGURE 2**



\*Question was asked only of senior managers and mail staffers. Their responses are aggregated (n=194).

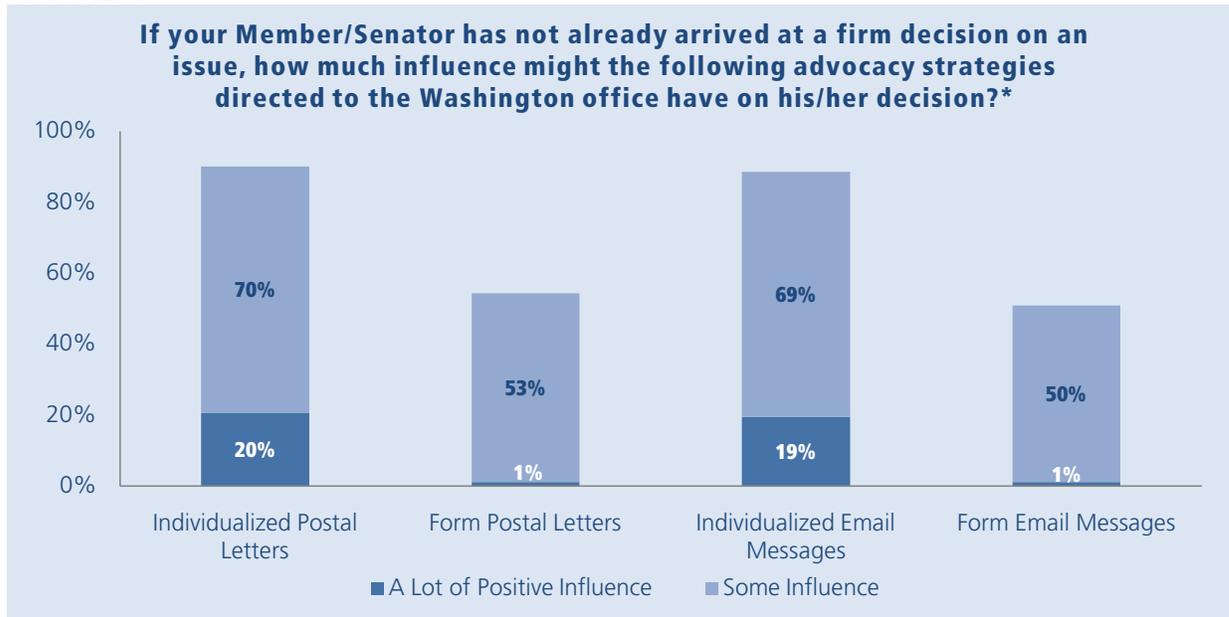
<sup>1</sup> A similar question was asked of senior managers and mail staffers about advocacy strategies directed to district and state offices. The results were comparable to those shown here.

### 3. It's Not the Delivery Method – It's the Content

There is virtually no distinction by the congressional staff we surveyed between email and postal mail. They view them as equally influential to an undecided Member. What matters most is the content, not the vehicle. Whether they are delivered via email or postal mail, messages that are customized in some way by the constituents sending them are much more influential than identical form messages. The personal touch from a constituent goes a long way toward differentiating a message.

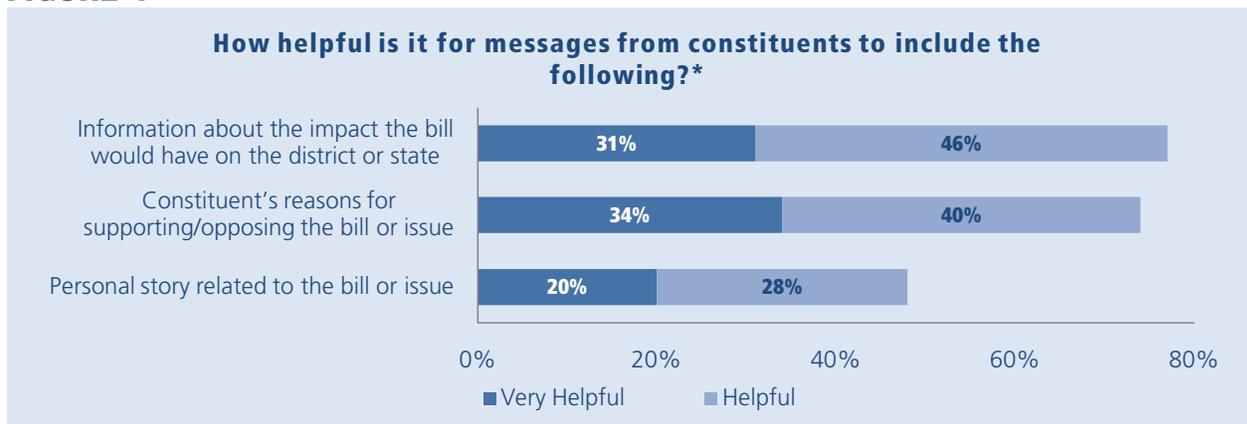
- Nearly identical percentages of staffers said postal mail (90%) and email (88%) would have influence on an undecided Member of Congress.
- About 20% of staffers said individualized email and postal mail would have a lot of influence on an undecided Member and only one percent said identical form email and postal mail would.
- Some helpful ways for constituents to personalize their messages include discussing the impact of a bill on the state or district, providing the reasons they support or oppose the bill or issue, and providing a relevant personal story.

**FIGURE 3**



\*Question was asked only of senior managers and mail staffers. Their responses are aggregated (n=194).

**FIGURE 4**



\*Question was asked only of mail staffers (n=87).

## 4. Grassroots Advocacy Campaigns – Staff are Conflicted

The congressional staff we surveyed have conflicting views and attitudes about the value of grassroots advocacy campaigns. Many believe they are good for democracy, and a significant majority believes that responding to constituent communications – most of which are the result of grassroots campaigns – is a high priority for their offices. Identical form campaigns also have some degree of influence on undecided Members of Congress, yet a majority of staffers also believes that most identical form communications are sent without constituents’ knowledge or approval.

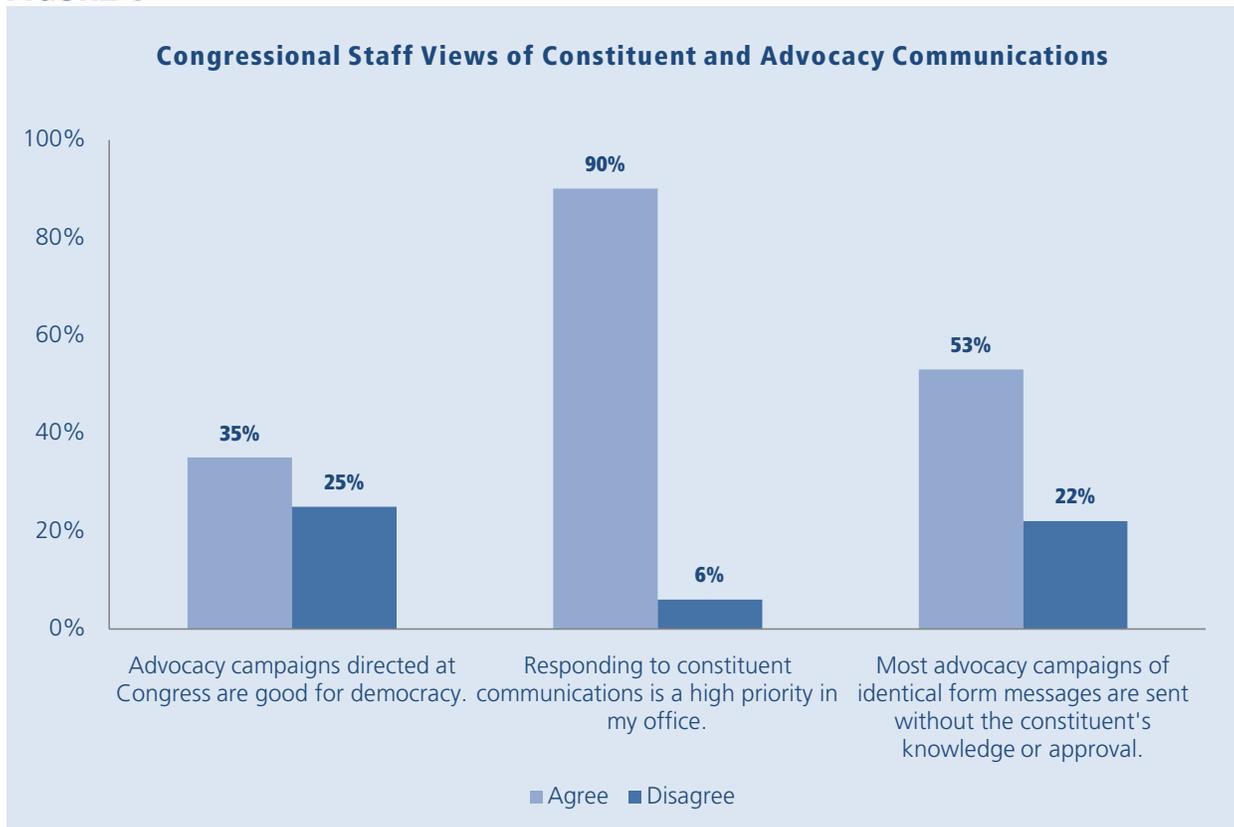
- More than one-third of congressional staff (35%) agreed that advocacy campaigns are good for democracy.
- Most staff (90%) agreed – and more than 60% strongly agreed – that responding to constituent communications is a high priority in their offices.
- More than half of the staffers surveyed (53%) agreed that most advocacy campaigns of identical form messages are sent without constituents’ knowledge or approval.

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*“One of our office’s top priorities is maintaining a high quality of dialogue with the people we represent.”*

—Senate Correspondence Manager

**FIGURE 5**



## 5. Social Media Used to Listen and Communicate

Congressional offices are integrating social media tools into their operations, both to gain an understanding of constituents' views and to communicate the Member's views. Facebook even surpasses identical form messages in importance for understanding constituents' views and opinions. However, comments from social media applications have little influence on undecided Members (see Figure 1), most likely because Members and staff cannot tell whether comments are made by constituents.

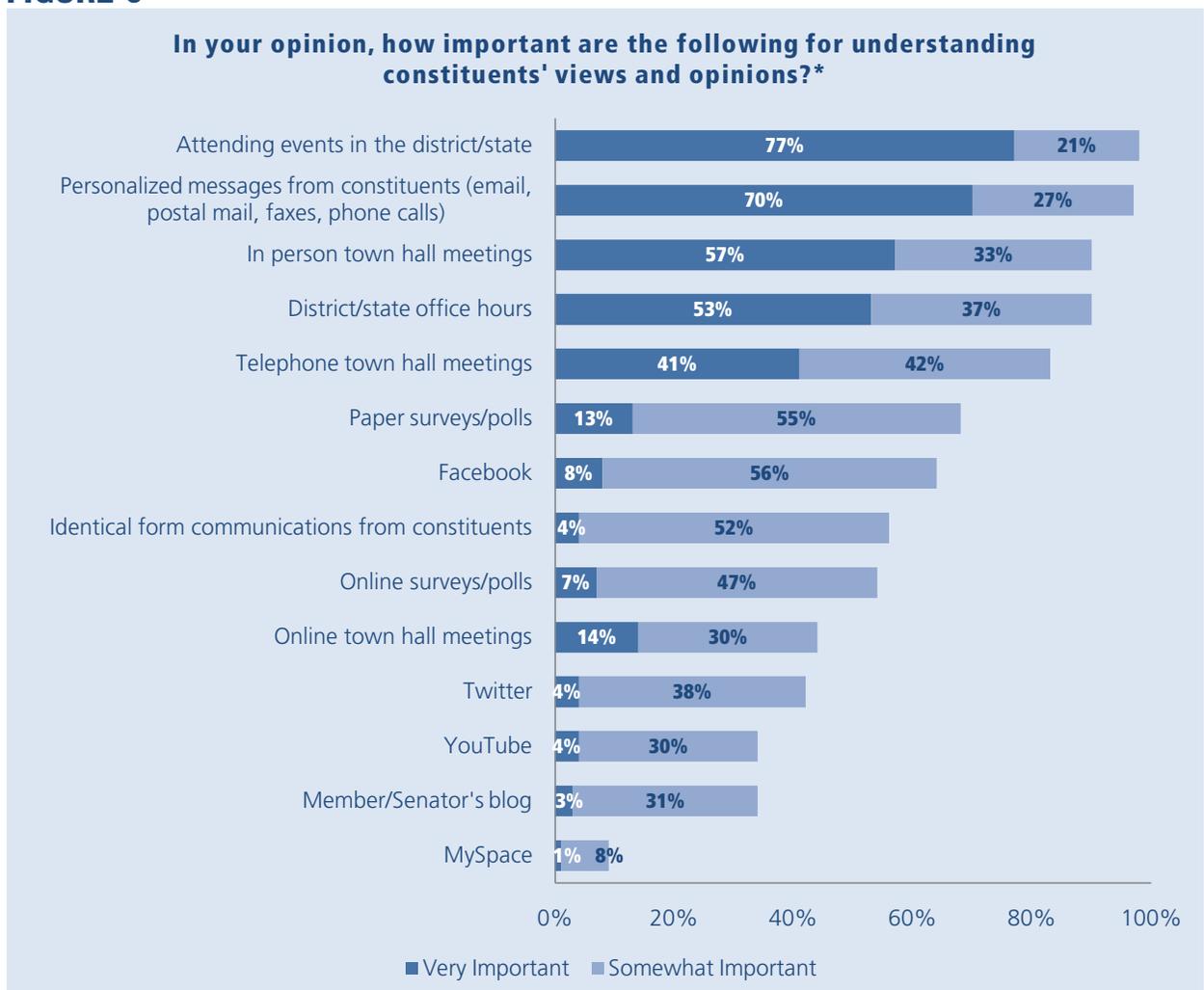
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*“We continue to explore new ways to use technology to reach out to our constituents. Social media is less expensive and reaches a broader audience so we plan to expand our use.”*

—Senate Administrative Director

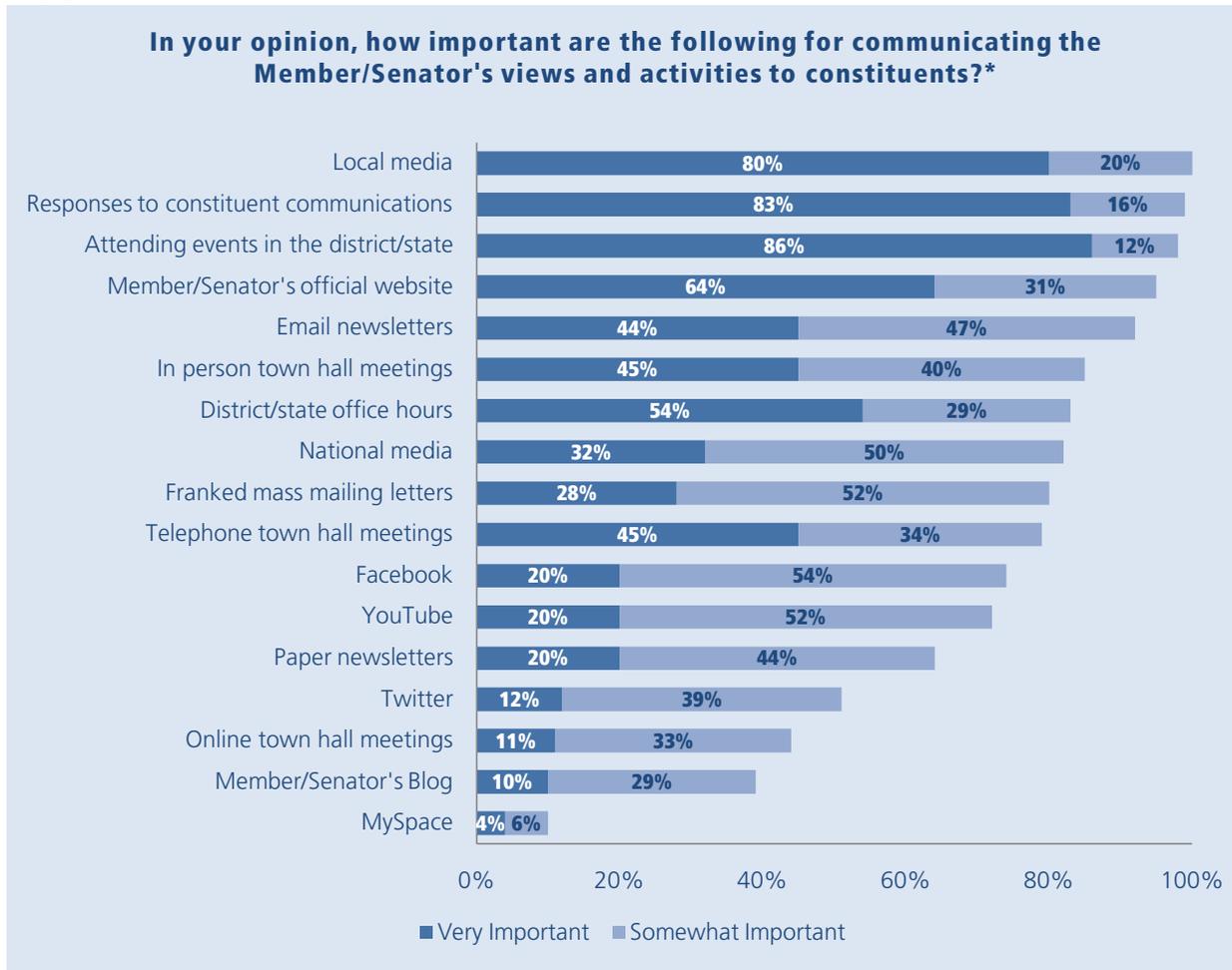
- Nearly two-thirds of staff surveyed (64%) think Facebook is an important way to understand constituents' views and nearly three-quarters (74%) think it is important for communicating their Members' views.
- Twitter has also gained acceptance on Capitol Hill, with 42% of staffers saying it is an important way to understand constituents' views and more than half (51%) saying it is an important vehicle for their Members' communications.
- YouTube is viewed by nearly three-quarters of staffers surveyed (72%) as important for communicating their Members' views, and 20% considered it very important.

**FIGURE 6**



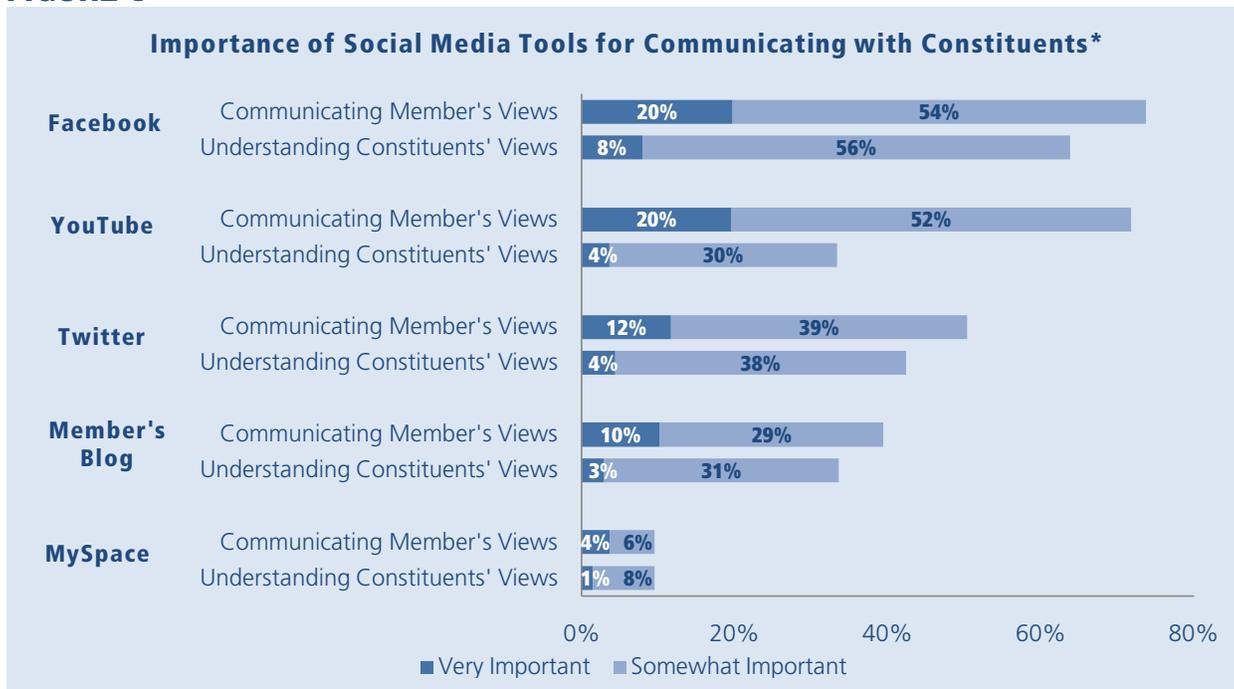
\*Question was asked only of senior managers and communications staffers. Their responses are aggregated (n=138).

**FIGURE 7**



\*Question was asked only of senior managers and communications staffers. Their responses are aggregated (n=138).

**FIGURE 8**



\*Question was asked only of senior managers and communications staffers. Their responses are aggregated (n=138).

## 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 staff were invited to participate through e-mail requests to all House Chiefs of Staff and Legislative Directors, all Senate Administrative Directors, and a variety of 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 Senate. Many of the questions asked were identical to those asked in a 2004 survey, the results of which were published in the report *Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy*.

### 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’ experience.
- 22% were younger than 25 years old; 60% were between 25 and 40; and 18% were over 40.

### 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’ experience.
- 14% were younger than 25 years old; 60% were between 25 and 40; and 26% were over 40.

## Conclusion

This report is the first release of the data from our survey. We will be producing additional reports based on this data throughout 2011. All of this research will be available online at the Congressional Management Foundation’s *Partnership For A More Perfect Union* website (<http://pmpu.org>). The goal of the *Partnership* is to further meaningful civic engagement through research, education, programs to re-establish trust, and by providing innovative yet pragmatic tools to facilitate meaningful two-way communication between Members of Congress and their constituents.

If you would like to receive notice of future releases and other updates from CMF’s *Partnership For A More Perfect Union*, please register for email updates on the *Partnership*’s website.

## Acknowledgments

The contributions of a number of people helped produce this data. For their feedback on the survey and help generating responses, I thank Rob Pierson, former Director of New Media at the House Democratic Caucus, Nick Schaper, 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.

I also must express my appreciation for the contributions of my CMF colleagues. Fellows Jason Tortora and Jinglin Wang provided masterful assistance with survey design and research methodology, and Jason's data analysis contributions were invaluable. Collin Burden assisted at every stage, from research methodology to graphics design, and his insight and edits were critical. Without Nicole Folk Cooper's graphics design skills, as well as her critical thinking and detailed editing, this would be a far inferior product. I also thank interns Harshdeep Dhillon and Joe Glass for their fresh eyes and astute questions. Finally, I gratefully acknowledge the vital contributions of Bradford Fitch and Tim Hysom, who oversaw all aspects of the project and the editing of this report.

Kathy Goldschmidt

## About the Partnership For A More Perfect Union

Since our nation's founding, an active and engaged citizenry has been imperative for a healthy democracy. Fast forward to the 21st century: the population of congressional districts has grown exponentially; Congress' approval ratings are consistently low; incivility and political polarization are on the rise; and the number and complexity of issues is greater than at any time in our history.

Launched by the Congressional Management Foundation in 2010, the *Partnership For A More Perfect Union* is dedicated to enriching the relationship between citizens and Congress by comprehensively addressing the deteriorating relationship and 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.

Join us! Learn more about how to become a partner at [pmpu.org](http://pmpu.org).

## About the Congressional Management Foundation

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.

CMF has pursued this mission for 34 years by working internally with Member offices, committees, leadership, and institutional offices in the House and Senate to identify and disseminate best management, communication, and citizen engagement practices through research, publication, training, consulting, and facilitation activities.

To learn more about CMF, please visit [cmfweb.org](http://cmfweb.org).

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