

#SocialCongress 2015



THE PARTNERSHIP FOR
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at the
CONGRESSIONAL MANAGEMENT FOUNDATION

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#SocialCongress 2015

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Special Thanks

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The Partnership for a More Perfect Union at the Congressional Management Foundation

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Methodology

This report is based on two online surveys conducted between July and August 2014, one of House and Senate Communications Directors and the other of House and Senate Legislative Directors and Legislative Assistants. CMF received a total of 116 responses. Of these respondents: 53% were communications staffers while 47% were legislative and policy staffers; 55% were employed by Democratic Members and 45% by Republican Members; 83% were employed in the House while 17% were employed in the Senate.

ANALYSIS OF RESPONDENTS	
Total Responses	116
Party	55% Democrat; 45% Republican
Chamber	83% House; 17% Senate
Position/Title	53% communications staffers; 47% legislative and policy staffers
Member Tenure	56% were in office 11 years or more; 44% were in office 10 years or less
Note: Surveys were in the field between July-August 2014. Source: <i>#SocialCongress 2015</i> , Congressional Management Foundation.	

Introduction

“Social media is the ultimate equalizer. It gives a voice and a platform to anyone willing to engage.” That statement by Internet entrepreneur Amy Jo Martin has profound implications in a democracy. Prior to the introduction of the Internet, the process of engaging elected officials was viewed as cumbersome and intimidating, perhaps only available to wealthy campaign donors. And prior to social media, email interactions with lawmakers were viewed by many as formal and robotic – mostly consisting of mass campaigns drafted by special interest lobbyists, forwarded to a congressional office by citizens who barely read the message, resulting in a bland form letter sent back by the legislator. (Sadly, this remains the most ubiquitous form of communication in our democracy.)

Yet social media is different, and is affecting the democratic dialogue in unexpected ways. The authenticity of a tweet or Facebook post, whether by a citizen or lawmaker, has the inescapable power to change minds. This report by the Congressional Management Foundation shows a glimpse at how that process happens. Through surveys of congressional staff, this research opens a window into the perceptions and motivations of how social media influences public policy decisions on Capitol Hill. For Members of Congress and congressional staff, the research offers a benchmark to compare their practices and attitudes with those of their colleagues. For citizens and advocacy groups, it offers exciting new ways to communicate with Congress.

Perhaps the most surprising and significant finding is how a relatively few number of citizens can affect Congress using social media. Eighty percent of congressional staff responding to these surveys noted that less than 30 posts to their office’s social media platform would cause them to “pay attention.” While the metric captured – getting an office to “pay attention” – may sound unimportant, it is not. It represents a conduit to the lawmaker and staff: access to policy decision-makers. And access is power. But on some levels the numbers shouldn’t be surprising. Members of Congress, staff, and professional advocates (i.e., lobbyists) know full well that a small number of people, strategically positioned to engage a legislator, can make a difference. Any lawmaker would readily agree that two dozen like-minded citizens showing up at a town hall meeting would definitely get their attention. Social media allow for similar interactions. What’s changed, though, is that now one can engage instantly from almost anywhere in the world with nothing more than a smartphone.

The other surprise to readers outside the Washington Beltway might be how much Congress seems to care about constituents’ opinions. Regrettably, negative (and inaccurate) portrayals of Congress permeate all forms of media. A 2015 national public survey asked Americans whether

Perhaps the most surprising and significant finding is how a relatively few number of citizens can influence Congress using social media.

“For those not regularly tuned in to what's going on in Washington, social media gives us the ability to share and engage with those people.”

—House Communications
Director

they agreed with this statement: “My representative in Congress cares what I think.”¹ Only 31 percent of respondents agreed. Yet in the CMF surveys of congressional staff, only three percent said “We don’t review comments” on their social media platforms – suggesting a whopping 97 percent *do* review comments. Congress *is* listening and *does* care what constituents think. Countless CMF surveys and research projects with Members of Congress and staff over more than three decades confirm this surprising truth. (For an education on how Congress actually works, CMF recommends readers skip the third season of *House of Cards* and re-watch a few segments of *Schoolhouse Rock*.)

While the primary purpose of this research is to provide some practical insight into how congressional offices and citizens can use social media to build stronger relationships, a welcome secondary outcome might be to chip a few bricks from the wall of cynicism that separates people from politicians. To quote Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” As this report shows, “a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens” can influence public policy. While we’re still at the dawn of the marriage between social media and Congress, it’s rather exciting to wonder about the potential this partnership could have for American democracy.

¹ The survey of 1,000 likely voters was conducted on September 8-9, 2015 by Rasmussen Reports. http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/mood_of_america/congressional_performance

Key Findings

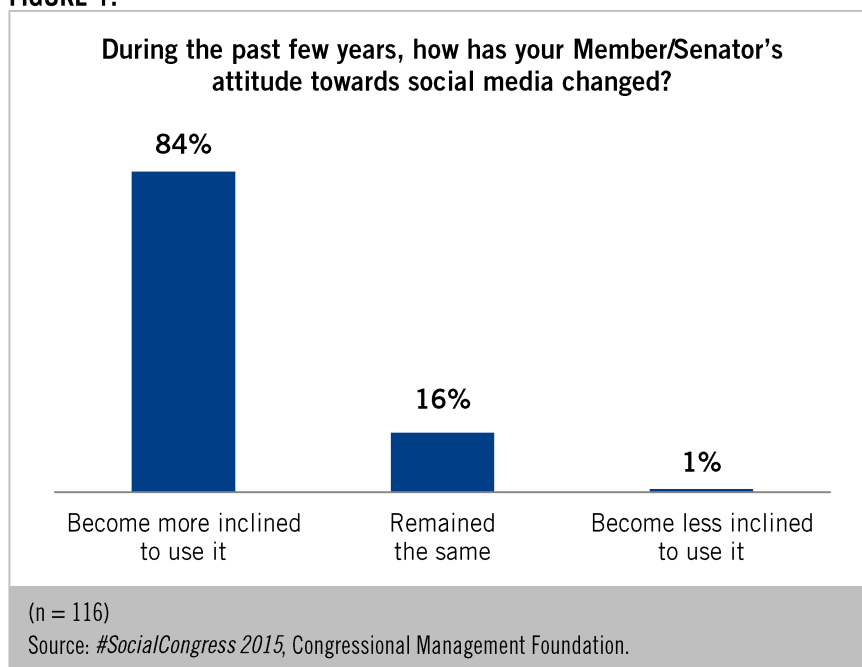
1. Senators and Representatives are more inclined to use social media than they were in the past.

Both communications and legislative staffers indicated that their bosses have become more open to social media in recent years. As Figure 1 shows, most of the respondents (84%) said Members of Congress have become more inclined to use social media while only 1% said their bosses had become less inclined to use it. This may seem an obvious statement, given the ubiquitous nature of social media in American society. However, Congress historically has been slow to adopt technology and integrate it into its operations. As noted in the 2011 CMF report, *#SocialCongress: Perceptions and Use of Social Media on Capitol Hill*, “[T]he legislative branch has adopted social media much more quickly than it adopted other technologies, such as fax machines, email and websites.”²

“It gives us a way to let people back home see behind the scenes.”

—Senate Legislative Staffer

FIGURE 1.



Implications:

This finding suggests the trend to integrate social media into congressional office operations will continue. As natural turnover occurs, with new Members of Congress and staff coming to Congress from other business and government sectors, they will bring their workplace habits and expectations with them. Congressional institutional offices will continue to

² Congressional Management Foundation, 2011. *#SocialCongress: Perceptions and Use of Social Media on Capitol Hill*. <http://www.congressfoundation.org/cwc-social-congress>

“[Social media] is real-time feedback, amplification of message, interaction with multiple viewpoints, and the ability to share different content via different platforms.”

—House Communications
Director

feel pressure from Members and staff to provide support for technologies and platforms in common use outside Capitol Hill. Congressional offices will need to look for ways to integrate social media comments into their processes and decision-making. And citizen groups increasingly will include social media strategies as part of any effort to influence public policy.

2. Staff generally feel social media have improved relationships between constituents and Congress.

As Figure 2 shows, more than three-quarters (76%) of the respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement “social media enabled us to have more meaningful interactions with constituents,” and nearly as many (70%) agreed that “social media have made Members/Senators more accountable to constituents.” Additionally, 63% of staff feel that social media will surpass email and other forms of communications (in volume) in the next five years.

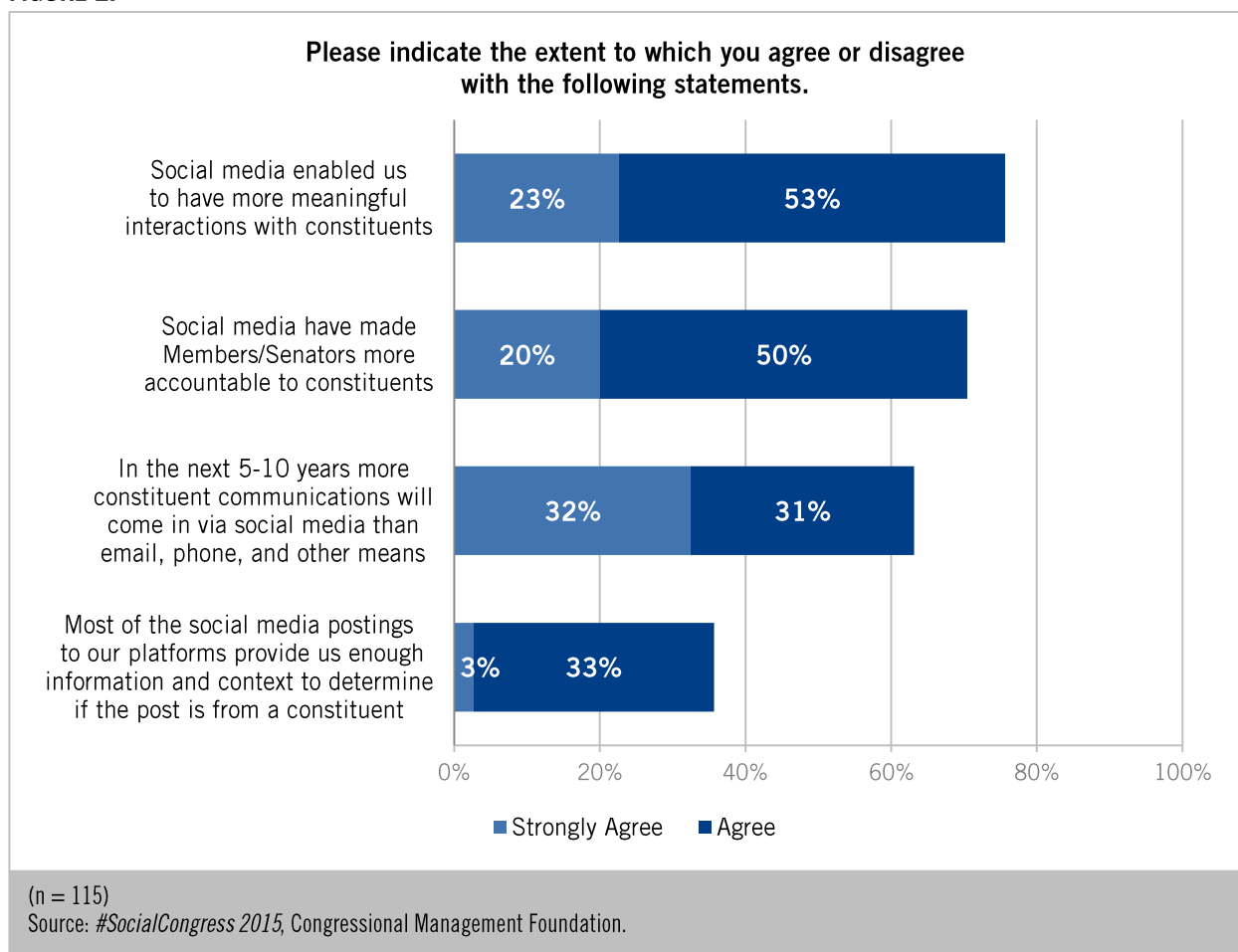
There appears to be a sense among staff that most of the comments they observe on social media are authentic. However, in their answers to open-ended questions, staff express some frustration with anonymous or angry rants that interfere with a thoughtful policy discussion. Nevertheless, staff value the immediacy and realism of these virtual public forums. This contrasts with staff views of mass email campaigns, which are viewed somewhat skeptically on Capitol Hill, in that they are usually facilitated by third party organizations, such as an association, nonprofit, or company. It is important to note, while congressional staff may view identical email form campaigns with skepticism, congressional staff also report that the results of these campaigns are tabulated and communicated to lawmakers, and therefore have some degree of influence over public policy discussions.³

Implications:

At this time, social media appear to be avenues for citizens and Congress to have honest and (sometimes) thoughtful conversations about public policy. For those lawmakers who embrace these forums, they offer another way to gauge public opinion on issues, albeit an unscientific one. For citizens represented by public officials who are regularly engaged in social media, these platforms offer inexpensive, convenient, and genuine methods for having their voices heard in Washington.

³ Congressional Management Foundation, 2011. *Communicating with Congress: Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill*. <http://www.congressfoundation.org/cwc-perceptions>

FIGURE 2.



Outstanding Use of Social Media in Congress

113TH CONGRESS GOLD MOUSE AWARDS FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

In 2014, CMF extended its research into best practices in online communications to congressional use of social media. CMF recognized 17 Members of Congress for their efforts in using these tools in specific ways to further transparency, accountability, and constituent service. For congressional staff, CMF summarized the common characteristics of winners and documented examples of legislators and staff using social media to connect with constituents and make Congress more understandable to the public.

Find out more at: <http://www.congressfoundation.org/projects/gold-mouse-project/>

“With budget cuts, social [media] gives us a space outside of our Congressional website to share the Congressman's thoughts and stance on important issues, as well as gauge constituents' opinions.”

—House Communications
Director

3. Thirty or fewer similar comments on a social media post are enough to get an office's attention, but they need to be posted quickly or they may not be seen.

Legislative staffers and communications staffers were aligned on how many comments it takes for their offices to pay attention. As Figure 3 shows, about one-third (35%) of the respondents said it takes fewer than 10 similar comments for their offices to pay attention, and nearly half (45%) said their offices will pay attention to between 10 and 30 similar comments. Interviews with congressional staff and observations of congressional social media use suggest that respondents are primarily referring to reactions to *their own* posts. In essence, Congress appears to be using Facebook and Twitter as instantaneous means to receive feedback on legislators' statements.

However, as Figure 4 shows, the more time that passes after an office posts on social media, the less likely it will be that staff will review the response. One-quarter (25%) of the respondents indicated their offices will review comments no matter how long it has been since they posted, but most said their offices will be less likely to see comments to older posts as time goes on.

FIGURE 3.

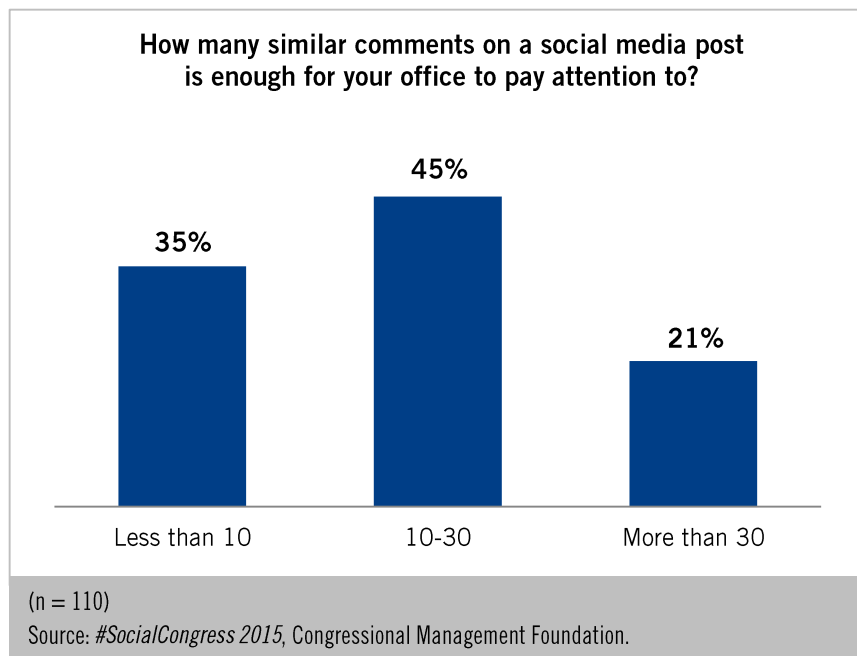
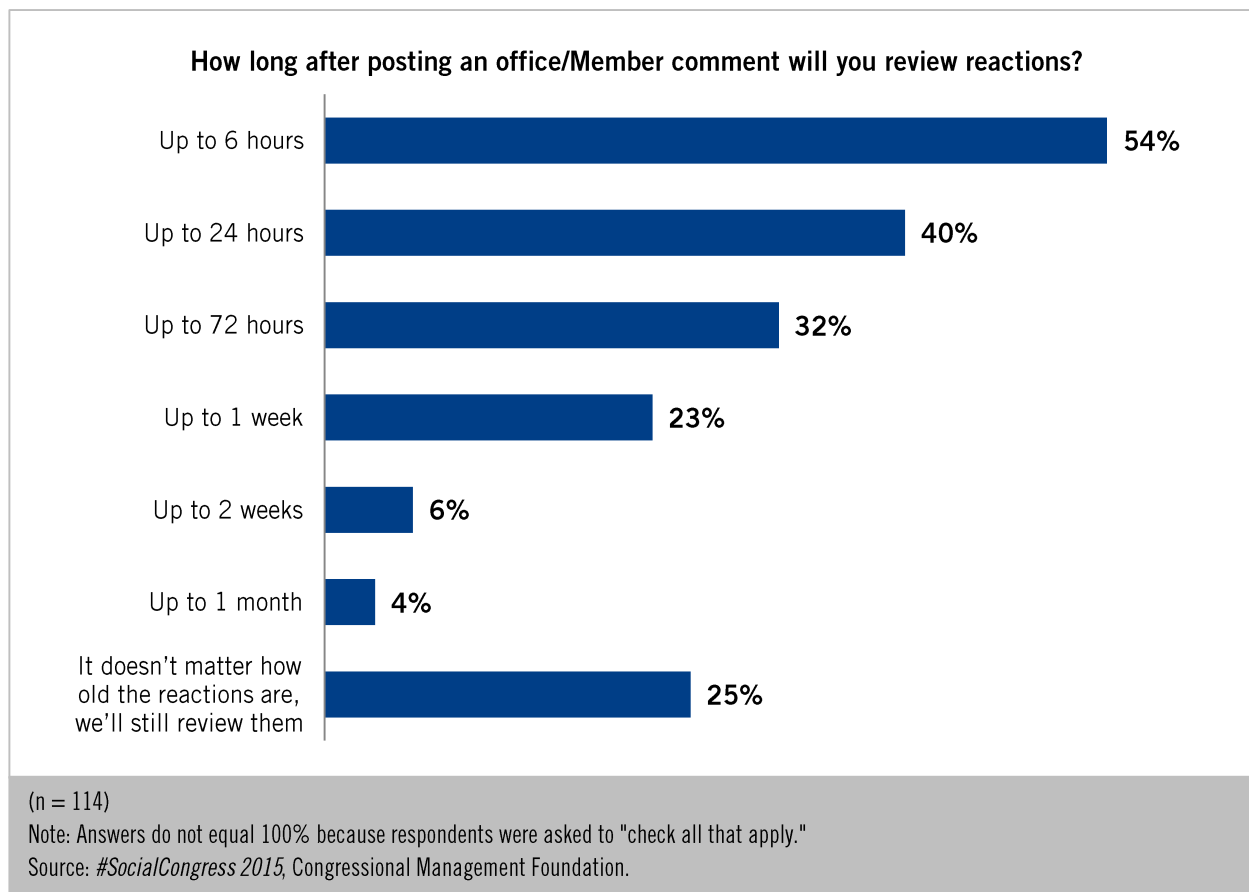


FIGURE 4.



Implications:

Prior to social media, in order to gain the attention of lawmakers and staff, individuals and groups either had to: organize small cadres to attend in-person events where lawmakers and staff were present; generate significant numbers of constituent comments through postal, email and phone campaigns; or develop long-term relationships with the staff and Member through repeated interactions and/or involvement in the legislator's election campaigns. These other methods are still available to citizens, and research by CMF and other organizations show they remain successful strategies for getting heard by lawmakers. Social media now offer an alternative, with significant efficiency and effectiveness benefits.

However, facilitating grassroots advocacy via social media also presents a challenge. The average citizen doesn't have two dozen advocates ready to act on a moment's notice. And grassroots experts at associations, nonprofits, and companies often remark that mobilizing their supporters on social media is extremely hard. Therefore, this suggests that organized groups with access to constituent lists employ strategies to *anticipate* a lawmaker's social media postings. Consider when a lawmaker will make a statement at a committee hearing or introduce a new bill. They must also train and prepare their network *before* they need them. (Said another way by communications experts, once you hear the thunder it's too late to build the ark.) By encouraging supporters to build social media relationships

“Because of the high number of Internet users who maintain some level of anonymity on social media, the level of dialogue can devolve and inter-actions can seem counterproductive at times.”

—House Communications
Director

with Congress as an ongoing practice, citizens and groups will be in position to offer comments and reactions to legislators’ posts when it is most relevant.

4. Social media posts by constituents can influence undecided Senators and Representatives, but staff generally do not feel social media posts provide enough information to identify constituents.

Though few of the respondents said constituent input via social media would have “a lot” of influence on their boss if he/she had not arrived at a firm decision on an issue, many felt it would have “some” influence (see Figure 5).⁴ Legislators’ constituents using social media clearly can get the attention of a congressional office, particularly if they self-identify, which increases their influence.

However, as previously shown in Figure 2, congressional staff indicated that they have a hard time identifying when social media posts are from constituents. Just over one-third (36%) of the respondents indicated they “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement, “Most of the social media posts to our platforms provide us enough information and context to determine if the post is from a constituent.”

Implications:

Despite overwhelming cynicism as to whether Congress “listens” to citizens, this finding supports previous CMF research indicating that constituents can have an impact on lawmakers’ decisions.⁵ For Congress, this finding could help to reaffirm citizens’ trust in their democratic institutions, knowing that their elected officials actually care about what they think.

Additionally, unlike other forms of communications (email, letters, phone calls), social media appear to be the only communications platforms in which *non-constituents* can influence lawmakers. Since the age of the modern Congress – established in the 1970s, when offices were accorded staff and resources enough to manage and respond to growing amounts of correspondence – lawmakers have used both human and technological filters to ensure only constituent messages get through. Yet no such filters exist for Facebook and Twitter. Therefore, while lawmakers value the authenticity of comments in social media, they cannot be certain the messages are from constituents *unless* the constituent identifies

⁴ This question is based on and is similar to a question posed in previous CMF surveys: “If your Member of Congress has not arrived at a firm decision on an issue, how much influence might the following advocacy strategies directed to the Washington office have on his or her decision?”

⁵ Congressional Management Foundation, 2011. *Communicating with Congress: Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill*. <http://www.congressfoundation.org/cwc-perceptions>

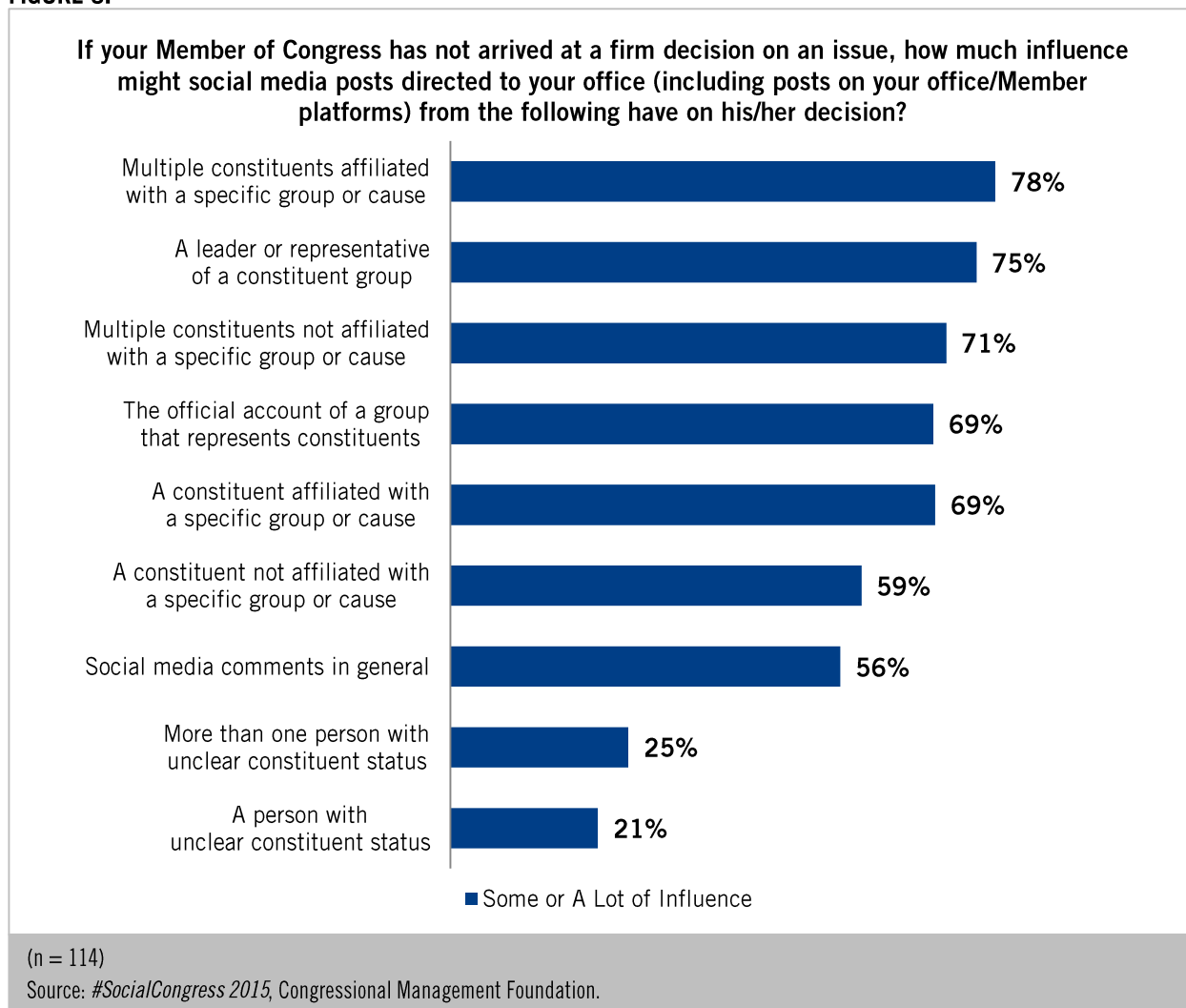
themselves as such. According to this data, those individuals who do confirm their constituent status are more likely to influence decision-making than those who do not.

Finally, it seems important to note that 59% of the survey respondents indicated that “a constituent” could have some or a lot of influence. One constituent. Through CMF’s work with Congress during the last 38 years we have regularly heard stories from lawmakers about the “one constituent” who told them a story or made a personal plea regarding public policy that moved them to action. They may have encountered that person during an organized fly-in to Washington, at a town hall meeting, in the grocery store, or at their child’s baseball game. The power of that single person’s story or argument could influence a tie-breaking vote in committee, lead to the introduction of legislation, or become the human face that symbolizes the impact of policy on an entire community of Americans. This finding suggests that one voice now has another way to influence public policy: social media.

“It’s an opportunity to have an unfiltered view of the member’s stance on a particular issue or reaction to a news story.”

— House Communications Director

FIGURE 5.



When Social Media Tipped the Scales in Congress: The SOPA-PIPA Debate 2011-2012

While analysts, reporters, and researchers have sought to identify clear examples where social media changed the outcome of a legislative debate, nothing comes remotely close to the case study involving the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect Intellectual Property Act (PIPA) that raged from late 2011 to early 2012. As the debate unfolded, CMF initiated a research study on the topic. In real time, we collected data on the activity of proponents and opponents, interviewed congressional staff on the impact of advocacy efforts, and assessed how this campaign compared to other campaigns.

In part through the effective use of social media, the anti-SOPA-PIPA coalition won the day after then-Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid pulled the bill from the floor and cancelled a vote due to lack of support for the legislation. Prior to that decision, 18 Members of Congress who had cosponsored the bills took the unusual action of “un-cosponsoring” the bills. Politicians reversing themselves on positions and legislation are rare – and the number who actually removed their names as cosponsors of the bills is likely the largest number to do so in the history of the Congress.

BACKGROUND

The Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect Intellectual Property Act (PIPA) were introduced respectively by the chairs of the House and Senate Judiciary Committees, Representative Lamar Smith (R-TX) and Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT). According to bill sponsors, the legislation was intended to restrict access to pirated material online and “expand the ability of U.S. law enforcement to fight online trafficking in copyrighted intellectual property and counterfeit goods.”

Initially, the bills had bipartisan support and the backing of a wide swath of businesses with a stake in protecting their interests and content including: Comcast, Wal-Mart, the AFL-CIO, Disney, the Motion Picture Association of America, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. However, in the summer of 2011 opposition started to coalesce under a “free speech” and “anti-censorship” banner. Eventually, opponents included: Google, Yahoo, Facebook, Wikimedia, Mozilla, ACLU, and Human Rights Watch. (Despite the “internet grassroots” versus “big media businesses” appearance of the battle, according to lobbyist disclosure forms, opponents actually hired more paid lobbyists than proponents.)

THE BATTLE

While the bills moved through committee in 2011, the American Censorship coalition (opponents) didn’t officially form until November of 2011. The rapid rise of this coalition, primarily using social media, was one of the unique hallmarks of this debate. In December 2011 through January 2012, legislators, outside groups, and especially Internet-related organizations and companies quickly began to voice opposition. On January 13, 2012, a group of Republican Senators sent a letter to Senator Reid asking him to delay the vote. On January 14, the White House announced

its opposition. And the climax occurred on January 18 when major internet companies including Google, WordPress, Wikipedia, Tumblr, Craigslist, and Twitter “blacked-out” their websites in protest of SOPA-PIPA. (Note: only Wikipedia actually denied access – others used graphics to denote their protest.)

When the campaign was tallied the numbers told an incredible story. More than 4 million emails were sent to Congress in protest through three major websites. More than 10 million petition signatures were collected by five organizations. Twitter logged 2.4 million PIPA-related tweets on blackout day. And on January 18 blackout day was the lead story on nearly every major media outlet in the U.S.

CONGRESSIONAL RESPONSE

In early November 2011, 37 Senators had announced support for the bill, while one was opposed. By January 18, 2012, 30 Senators supported the bill and 33 opposed. But the numbers don’t provide a complete picture of Congress’ reaction to this campaign. In CMF interviews with congressional staff, some staffers felt that the anti-SOPA-PIPA campaign used misleading tactics, exaggerating or misrepresenting the impact the bill would have on “Internet freedom.” On blackout day, Wikipedia was inaccessible, except for a message asking visitors to “Imagine a world without free knowledge” and declaring that the legislation “could fatally damage the free and open Internet.”

Neither bill has been considered in the 114th Congress.

ANALYSIS

After the campaign, some technology experts heralded it as the “political coming of age of the tech industry.” Another said it would “reinvent how we carry out democratic politics.” While these predictions still may come to pass, they have not yet. Congress has not seen a social media campaign approaching the scope and impact of the SOPA-PIPA debate.

Congressional staff reported that this episode did contain aspects different from traditional campaigns. They noted the demographic of constituents contacting Congress was younger. Additionally, many legislators were caught by surprise that a relatively arcane issue (intellectual property) could catch fire, with events changing so rapidly. Both of these observations suggest that social media was a key contributor to these aspects of the campaign.

However, the SOPA-PIPA debate also had the fundamental components of any successful organic grassroots campaign, irrespective of the social media component. Proponents used a powerful word, “censorship,” which has an emotional appeal connecting to citizens’ values and beliefs. They had a specific “ask”: “don’t cosponsor” or “vote no,” which provided clear means for holding legislators accountable. And there was a deadline: a vote was to be held in January 2012. These same elements have been seen before, including the immigration debate of 2006, which resulted in the demise of bipartisan legislation backed by President George W. Bush and powerful economic interests in Washington. The emotional word used then was “amnesty,” but it had the same effect: tens of thousands of Americans petitioned their Congress to do their bidding ... and the Congress obeyed.

About the Congressional Management Foundation

Established 1977

Who We Are

Citizen trust in an effective and responsive Congress is essential to democracy. Since 1977, the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) has advanced this goal by working directly with Members of Congress and staff to enhance their operations and interactions with constituents. CMF also works directly with citizen groups to educate them on how Congress works, giving constituents a stronger voice in policy outcomes. The aspirations are: a Congress more accountable, transparent, and effective; and an informed citizenry with greater trust in their democratic institutions.

What We Accomplish

CMF enhances the effectiveness of congressional offices, enabling them to provide better services for their constituents and create better policy outcomes for all Americans.

CMF promotes transparency and accountability in Congress, affording citizens data and tools to become more informed about decisions that affect them, their families, and communities.

CMF educates and motivates individuals to become active and informed citizen-advocates, providing them with an understanding of Congress, the skills to influence public policy, and the value of citizen engagement.

CMF enhances the public's understanding of how the Congress really works, providing a window into our democratic institutions through its unique relationship with lawmakers and staff.

How We Do It

CMF conducts professional development training and consultations for all levels of congressional staff to strengthen their office operations and management. CMF provides research, training, and publications to citizens and groups so they can better to enhance their interactions with Congress. CMF critiques and explains Congress—demystifying its operations. CMF conducts primary research on Congress and provides best practices guidance on office operations.

Quick Facts

- More than 350 congressional offices participated in the 80 training programs CMF conducted in 2014.
- In 2014, CMF conducted 67 educational sessions with groups involving thousands of citizens on effective interactions with Congress.
- Since CMF has been assessing congressional websites and urging more transparent practices, the percentage of Members of Congress who post their voting record online has doubled.
- Since 2000, CMF has conducted more than 500 strategic planning or other consulting projects with Members of Congress and their staffs.

For more information, contact CMF at 202-546-0100 or visit www.CongressFoundation.org.

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“We in America do *not* have government by the majority.
We have government by the majority who participate.”

—Thomas Jefferson

Become a Partner in Enriching the Relationship Between Citizens and Congress

The *Partnership* is a subscription program within CMF that seeks to further our nation’s progress toward “a more perfect union” by fostering the genuine and effective exchange of ideas between Members of Congress and citizens.

We conduct communications best practices research and help forge relationships between congressional staff, advocates, and citizens through presentations, webinars and videos based on CMF research.

Topics of Presentations

- “Screaming Monkeys, Roaring Lions: Making Noise vs. Making a Difference on Capitol Hill”
- “Use Social Media to Build Relationships with Lawmakers”
- “Build an Event in the State Members of Congress Will Attend”
- “Turn a 10-Minute Meeting with a Legislator into a Life-Long Relationship”
- “Tell a Story to Win the Hearts, Minds, and Votes of Lawmakers”
- “Build Relationships with Freshmen Lawmakers”

“Our members were buzzing about the CMF presentation! The facts, charts, and anecdotes not only engaged them but captured them. They left the session knowing that their work in member advocacy is more important than ever.”

—Laura Vogel, Manager of Federal Member Advocacy, National Association of REALTORS®

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