Connecting to Congress: Project Highlights

David Lazer
Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University
Cambridge, MA 02138
david_lazer@harvard.edu

Kevin Esterling
Department of Political Science
University of California
Riverside, CA
kevin.esterling@ucr.edu

Michael Neblo
Department of Political Science
Ohio State University
Columbus, OH
neblo.1@osu.edu

Jane Fountain
Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University
Cambridge, MA 02138
jane_fountain@harvard.edu

Ines Mergel
Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University
Cambridge, MA 02138
ines_mergel@harvard.edu

Curt Ziniel
Department of Political Science
University of California
Riverside, CA
curt.ziniel@ucr.edu

ABSTRACT
In this paper we summarize the progress of the Connecting to Congress project.

General Terms
Management, Performance, Human Factors, Theory.

Keywords
Information Technology, Congress, Diffusion.

1. INTRODUCTION
The Internet has the potential to transform our democracy—a potential that has begun to receive substantial scholarly attention. This attention has focused on the potential transformational effects of the technology on civil society, and, in the political realm, how the Internet might transform political discourse (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Researchers have devoted little attention, however, to how the Internet might transform existing institutions for connecting citizens to elected officials. This relationship is the fundamental building block of a representative democracy, and it has come under increasing strain as our country has grown from a few million to a few hundred million; as congressional districts have swelled from a few tens of thousands to well over six hundred thousand; as the number of matters the state is involved in has multiplied; and as policy problems have grown more complex. Contemporary Washington politics is now almost exclusively the domain of entrepreneurial legislators, highly trained committee staff, legal counsel, agency heads, lobbyists, and expert policy analysts. Today, it is difficult for interested citizens to even understand the policy process, much

less have their voice heard in it (Heclo, 1974; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). As a consequence of this and other trends, citizens have become increasingly disengaged from the work of Congress. The Internet offers a set of tools that might help to arrest this trend, and to fundamentally alter the level of participation of citizens in the consultative process with their Representatives. A well-designed Internet strategy by Members of Congress can provide citizens with information useful for understanding a policy as it develops, while also allowing citizens to interact more symmetrically with both their Member of Congress and with each other. Wisely used, the Internet can re-connect citizens and Congress.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN
We combine statistical and qualitative research to identify the incentives for, and dynamic processes of, adoption and use of web-based technologies among congressional offices. In study I we build on prior statistical work to identify the organizational and situational variables that affect Members' propensity to adopt web-based technologies. This "large N" study analyzes the systematic determinants of the diffusion of web technologies both cross-sectionally and over time. Our objective in Study (II) is to gather detailed data on the informal processes that drive Members to adopt innovative Internet practices, based on in-depth comparative case studies of the offices of approximately 20 Members.

2.1 Previous research:
As we note above, there is wide variation in the quality of Members' web sites, and in previous research we have begun to uncover some interesting patterns. Early results indicate that there are a number of strong predictors of the quality of Members' websites. Quality of each Member's web site, as measured by the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) is based on an evaluation of websites along five dimensions: audience, content, interactivity, usability, and innovations.   The cross-sectional analysis suggest that the security and tenure of Members is inversely related to the quality of the websites on all five dimensions. We are currently working on the coding of the sites going forward in time, as well as sampling (through the "wayback

machine") sites in the past. We are also working on linking these data to a variety of variables for each Congress that measure differences in the information flows that Members' offices are exposed to, including: overlap of committee membership; adjacency of districts; and proximity of offices.

3. STUDY I: DIFFUSION OF INTERNET INNOVATIONS AMONG MEMBERS

The House of Representatives is a unique laboratory for understanding the effective use of information technologies in the public sector. Congressional offices function as 440 small, functionally identical, and independent public organizations (Salisbury & Shepsle, 1981). This decentralization enables a large N statistical study of innovation adoption, in essence to test our expectations that the behaviors of 7 Members of Congress can be explained by their recent electoral experiences, district characteristics, institutional resources (e.g., Fenno, 1978), and embeddedness in social networks (Walker, 1973).

4. STUDY II: CASE STUDIES OF THE DYNAMICS OF ADOPTION AND USE

The longitudinal study will provide much deeper insights into the dynamics of the diffusion of Internet practices within Congress than would be possible with a cross sectional analysis. However, it has significant limitations. Most notably, its proxies for internal variables are weak. Further, its proxies for social network factors, while stronger, are also limited, e.g., based on office proximity. Finally, and most importantly, the quantitative data cannot offer an understanding of these relationships in the contexts that particular offices are making decisions. How do Members and their staff view their websites in their broader communication strategies with the public? Why did offices change sites at particular points in time? Case studies involving extensive interviews with staff in relevant decision making capacities are necessary to provide this interpretive angle.

4.1 Archive of web practices

In conjunction with the interviews, we will make an archive of the web practices of each office included in the study. The coding will be much more intensive and comprehensive than could be done in the large N study, and would code the content on multiple dimensions for each site (e.g., how partisan material on the site was, characterization of opposing points of view, how rapidly the material on the site was changed, etc). We would also, to the extent possible, use the archives of Member sites using the wayback machine to identify the points in time when these offices changed the nature of their web sites in the past eight years. This information, in turn, will inform the interviews that we conduct at the beginning of the study. We will also, in a prospective fashion, monitor each case study web site on a weekly basis. Finally, we will also inventory the e-mail newsletters sent by those congressional offices that provide them.

4.2 Survey of 20 offices

The final component of the case studies involves surveying the staff of the 20 case study offices on the knowledge, attitudes, and communication patterns (internal and external), standard operating procedures, where the initial survey will be conducted Fall 2005.

5. SUMMARY

Studies I and II are designed to complement each other. Study I is currently identifying the broad patterns of diffusion of web practices in Congress: the relationship between the types of Members and the districts that they were from and the timing of the adoption of particular web practices. However, these data will not capture most of the internal factors that affect adoption decisions by Members, such as cognitions, routines, informal and formal structures within offices. Study II, while failing to detect the macro patterns that study I is aimed at, should provide insight into all of these micro-processes of innovation.

6. A UNIQUE COLLABORATION

This project leverages a unique collaboration anchored at the National Center for Digital Government (NCDG) at Harvard University, among academic political scientists, information technology researchers, CMF (a non-profit foundation that offers management consulting services to congressional offices), supplemented with the cooperation of the U.S. Congress itself. This collaboration combines deep substantive knowledge, research training, organizational capacity, and a ready access to Congress into a synergistic relationship, one that offers a research potential that is much greater than the sum of its parts.