Research Agenda

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Members of Congress have more ways to reach the public than at any point in the institution's history, and very few of these mediums were designed with a geographic constituency in mind. American political discourse has become increasingly nationalized, as citizens devote more attention to what happens in Washington and rely more heavily on national media for political information. Lawmakers have adapted to that environment by curating content for partisan media, buying digital advertising, sending mass text messages, and building followings on platforms that reach national and even global audiences. These tools allow members to cultivate a digital constituency of copartisans, journalists, activists, and donors who share their political commitments regardless of where they live, and the platforms themselves tend to reward the national issues and partisan conflict that engage those audiences. The voters who decide whether members keep their seats, however, still live in the districts and states they represent. Lawmakers must therefore weigh the reputation they are building with national audiences against their electoral connection to the constituents who send them to Washington.

These choices matter for representation because communication is where lawmakers explain their Washington activities, advertise their records, and signal whom they understand themselves to represent. Fenno (1978) described this presentation of self as a member's home style and rooted it in the personal ties members cultivated with their districts over the course of their careers. The digital environment complicates that model, since members can now present themselves to audiences that play no role in their reelection and that may reward very different behavior than voters at home do. Because outreach draws on a member's limited time and office budget, these choices also reveal how much lawmakers are willing to invest in their relationships with constituents. My research examines how legislators navigate the tension between their geographic and digital constituencies and what their choices reveal about representation in a nationalized political environment. I ask three related questions. First, whom do members choose to address when they communicate? Second, how much of their limited office resources do they invest in reaching constituents? Third, how do electoral incentives shape both of those choices as communication technologies change?

Across my published and ongoing work, the answers to these questions point in a consistent direction. Electoral vulnerability continues to pull lawmakers back toward their geographic constituencies even as the tools for reaching those constituencies change. Senators who are up for reelection, serving their first terms, or holding seats they previously won by narrow margins emphasize their states more heavily on Twitter, and House members in similar positions invest more in paid official outreach to their districts. Senators with greater electoral security, by contrast, have more latitude to cultivate a digital constituency of copartisans, journalists, and donors who live well beyond their states. These patterns have held as congressional outreach shifted from printed newsletters to digital advertising and mass texting, which suggests that new technologies have changed the channels of representation more than the electoral incentives behind it. In this sense, my work treats the digital transformation of Congress as a test of the electoral connection that Mayhew (1974) and Fenno (1978) described. To make these choices observable, I build original datasets on how lawmakers communicate. I scraped, cleaned, and assembled each of the

datasets that underlie this work, including more than 1.6 million tweets from sitting senators and the House's records of members' franked communications and office spending.

Scholarly Contributions

Digital Home Styles in the Senate

My published work on the Senate addresses the first question by asking how senators divide their attention between voters at home and the digital constituency that platforms like Twitter make available. Fenno (1978) observed that junior and electorally vulnerable members work to expand their support at home, while more senior members adopt a protectionist style built on the reputation they have already established among key supporters. In "Redefining 'Expansion' in Congressional Communication," published in *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Annelise Russell and I ask how that distinction applies when senators can build a digital constituency that extends well beyond their states. Drawing on the Senate Twitter dataset I built, which includes more than 1.5 million tweets from 150 senators, we find that senators emphasize their states more heavily when they are up for reelection, serving a first term, or holding a seat they previously won by a narrow margin, while more secure senators have greater latitude to engage national audiences online. Expansion and protection now operate differently depending on whether a senator is building a reputation among voters at home or among a digital constituency.

If senators turn toward home when their seats are at risk, that local emphasis should also be connected to the political support they receive. In "U.S. Senators' Tweets: The Tweets of Single-Minded Seekers of Donations," published in *American Politics Research*, we test that connection. After I linked senators' tweets to monthly campaign-finance records, we find that local messages are associated with more donors both inside and outside the state, even when accounting for how often a senator tweets overall. A message framed around a senator's home state can reinforce ties with constituents while also reaching donors elsewhere who identify with the issue or community being discussed, which suggests that geographic and digital constituencies overlap more than a simple division between them implies.

Representation as an Investment

My research on the franking privilege addresses the second question by shifting from what lawmakers say to what they are willing to spend to say it. Since 1999, members have paid for franked communications out of the same office budget that funds their staff and other office needs, so every investment in outreach carries an opportunity cost. In "Boosted and Branded," published in *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Russell and I introduce the first systematic dataset of House advisory-opinion requests for franked communications, which I built from the House Clerk's records and which includes more than 64,000 submissions from 2018 through January 2025. We find that first-term members, less-senior members, and members who previously won by narrow margins send more franked communications, which reflects traditional explanations of representation in which junior and vulnerable members work to solidify their reputations and build name recognition. We also find that digital advertising and text messaging have become primary tools of constituent outreach.

Because these data cover only recent congresses, they cannot tell us on their own whether these patterns are new or reflect long-standing incentives. Our revised and resubmitted manuscript at *American Politics Research* places these choices in historical perspective by comparing inflation-adjusted communication spending from 1991 through 1995 with spending and communication output from 2018 through 2024. While congressional outreach has moved from traditional mail toward digital advertising and mass texting, electoral vulnerability and career stage continue to shape how heavily members invest in constituent contact.

Work in Progress

My published work measures electoral pressure through general-election margins and tenure, and my ongoing work addresses the third question by examining how lawmakers communicate when their electoral circumstances change in other ways. Two coauthored projects with Russell and Maggie Macdonald take up these changes. As competitive general elections have become increasingly rare, the primary is where many House incumbents' electoral fates are decided, and the voters who participate in primaries are a narrower and more attentive slice of the electorate. In "Paid to Please: How Primary Threats Turn Legislators into Messaging Machines," we draw on data I assembled that combine monthly counts of franked communications with the House's quarterly disclosures of member spending to examine how incumbents respond to intraparty challengers. Members facing serious primary challengers send more communications in the months before the primary and spend more on digital outreach in the quarter leading up to it. Importantly, these members also shift their communication spending away from the general election and toward the primary, which reflects their recognition that the primary electorate determines their political survival.

Where a primary challenger intensifies electoral pressure, a departure from the chamber removes it. In "Don't @ Me, I'm Already Leaving: Senators Communicating with Nothing to Lose," we turn to senators whose time in the chamber is limited, including those who announce their retirement, those who run for higher or alternative office, and those appointed to serve on a temporary basis. Much of what we know about congressional communication assumes that the pursuit of reelection shapes what members say and how often they say it, and these senators allow us to observe what happens when that incentive is removed or redirected. We expect retiring and temporary senators to communicate less and to focus more on local issues, while senators seeking higher office should maintain a robust communication operation and engage less with local issues as they turn toward the audience of their next campaign.

Beyond whom senators address, my ongoing work also asks how they present policy issues to those audiences. Drawing on a classification of senators' tweets as problem-oriented or solution-oriented, I test whether ideologically extreme senators are more likely to emphasize problems and whether senators with institutional agenda control, including committee chairs, subcommittee chairs, and senior members of the majority party, are more likely to promote solutions. This work links senators' rhetorical representation to the positions they hold within the institution.

Future Research

Strategic Nods and Meaningful Local Engagement

Much of my Senate research depends on identifying when senators emphasize their states, which raises a further question about what that emphasis means for the constituents receiving it. My current independent project, which is supported by a research grant from American University's Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies on which I am the principal investigator, asks when senators engage meaningfully with their states and when a reference to home is little more than a strategic nod. A senator who adds her state's name to a post about a national controversy and a senator who explains what a federal grant will mean for a hospital back home are both counted as local by existing measures, including the one Russell and I published, because those measures record only whether a state is mentioned. I have extended my Senate Twitter dataset through 2026 and am developing a continuous measure of localness that places senators' communication along a range from national to local and distinguishes passing references from sustained attention to state problems, institutions, and communities. The next stages of the project will identify how the state is invoked in a message, such as whether it appears as a hashtag or as the beneficiary of constituency service and credit claiming, and will validate the measure against survey respondents' perceptions of how local senators' messages are.

A continuous measure allows me to ask questions that a binary classification cannot answer. I will examine whether electoral vulnerability, career stage, institutional position, and ambition for higher office explain when senators turn toward or away from their states, and whether those shifts are temporary or reflect a durable digital home style. I will also test whether deeper local engagement is associated with constituent engagement and with the sources of senators' financial support. More broadly, the project speaks to whether senators in a nationalized political environment continue to represent their states in substantive ways or increasingly invoke them as a symbolic gesture toward voters at home.

The Transformations of Franking in Congress

Just as the localness project deepens my Senate research, a book with Russell extends my franking research across the full history of the privilege. The book, titled *From Letters and Flyers to E-Newsletters and Instagram Ads: The Transformations of Franking in Congress*, builds on the franking data I assembled. First authorized by the Continental Congress in 1775, the franking privilege is the longest-standing mechanism lawmakers have for communicating directly with constituents, yet no book has systematically examined its development or its role in representation. The book traces how the frank evolved from postage-free mail into a multimodal system of paid outreach and explains why members adopt different communication strategies within it, connecting changes in congressional rules and communication technologies to how lawmakers build reputations, maintain constituent relationships, and target their outreach. The contemporary data and the opening chapter are complete, and archival work is extending the record backward.

Conclusion

My research contributes to the study of Congress by showing how the electoral connection operates in a communication environment that Mayhew and Fenno could not have anticipated. Theories of home style rest on the expectation that members present themselves to the voters who elect them, yet digital platforms and paid outreach now allow lawmakers to reach audiences that play no role in their reelection. Across the Senate and the House, and across channels ranging from

printed mail to Twitter and targeted digital advertising, I find that electoral vulnerability continues to anchor lawmakers to their geographic constituencies, while electoral security gives them room to pursue a national digital constituency. Because much of the evidence behind these findings had to be built from raw platform data and scattered administrative records, a second contribution of my work is empirical. The datasets I have built make it possible to observe what members say, whom they target, and how much they spend on outreach at a scale that earlier studies of congressional communication could not reach.

My agenda moves forward on several fronts. The franking book with Russell is nearing completion and is expected in 2027. It will offer the first systematic account of how the frank evolved from postage-free mail into a multimodal system of paid outreach and what that evolution has meant for the representative relationship. As “Paid to Please” and “Don’t @ Me” move forward, they will show how primary threats and departures from the chamber reshape the way lawmakers communicate. The localness project will move from measurement to explanation as I validate the continuous measure against survey respondents’ perceptions and use it to revisit my earlier findings on electoral vulnerability, donor support, and digital home style with a measure that captures the depth of local engagement in addition to its presence.

Beyond these projects, my longer-term goal is to connect how legislators communicate with how they govern. If the constituencies members emphasize in their messages reflect whom they understand themselves to represent, those choices should carry into the issues they prioritize and the legislation they pursue. Linking my communication data to legislative behavior will allow me to test whether the representation lawmakers advertise matches the representation they deliver, a question that matters for democratic accountability at a time when the audiences lawmakers speak to increasingly extend beyond the constituencies that elect them.