Project Proposal

COML 601

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Abstract

The subject of this final project is the creation of a 10-20 page guidebook detailing effective communication techniques for newly elected state and federal representatives and senators. Effectively communicating with constituents and the general public is one of the most important aspects of being an elected official. This guidebook will feature real-world examples of constituent communication techniques rooted in ethical leadership and will also include an analysis of social media posts created by the new members of the 116th Congress during their first 60 days in office. The guidebook will assist newly elected, freshman politicians how to better understand what is involved in effective constituent communication and will help newly elected officials establish a foundation of effective constituent communication. This guidebook will be an important resource for elected officials and will fulfill a currently unmet need.

DISCIPLINARY GROUNDING

My final project topic will be a 10-20 page guidebook entitled "Effective Communication Techniques for the Newly Elected," detailing effective communication techniques for new state or federal representatives or senators. It is designed to be a guide for anyone new to either Congress or a state legislature.

One of the most important aspects of being an elected official is effectively communicating with constituents and the general public. Therefore, this guidebook will have real-world examples and theory-based effective communication techniques based on interviews, data analysis, and gathered research. It will be focused on constituent communication in an official capacity only; no political- or campaign-related content will be included in the guidebook.

Influence of technology

Technology and social media have greatly influenced the two-way communication between members and constituents. Trade associations, grassroots organizers, and influencers can quickly harness their followers to contact their elected representatives, resulting in thousands of letters and emails sent to an individual office in days or even hours (American Medical Association, 2018). The public can also directly communicate with their elected representative by tweeting at them or sending them a message on Facebook. There are many ways to directly engage with elected officials and seek to influence their opinion on matters of public policy (Evans, 2018).

Likewise, members are able to instantly communicate directly with their constituents by posting a message on Facebook or sending out a Tweet (Evans, 2018). In fact, every single Member of Congress and Senator had an official Twitter account in 2018 while 99 percent of Congressmen and all 100 Senators had an official Facebook page (Straus, 2018). Members can

also post a video on Youtube or hold a telephone town hall meeting where they answer questions posed by constituents over the phone (Evans, 2018). Members are able to control their message and communicate in the way they see fit (Straus, 2016). The speed and changing forms of communication between elected officials and their constituents has resulted in increased clarity of Member positions on policy issues (Straus, 2016) and an ability to immediately influence elected officials, both individually and as part of a group (Evans, 2018).

Ethical leadership

The project will be undertaken with the goal of communicating ethically as an elected official. Ethics are central to politics, and every elected official has their own standard of moral beliefs. To some, ethical absolutism is most important and must be followed (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2008). Their opinion is the only correct one and others are simply wrong when deviating from a single standard of ethical behavior. Other elected officials have a standard of ethical relativism and even ethical pluralism (Arnett et al., 2008). The guidebook will follow an ethical pluralism standard, because no one has a monopoly on the truth and toleration is important (Arnett et al., 2008). Some behaviors, such as hatred and racism, are not correct even in their own world.

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Literature Review

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Scholarly articles on communication between elected officials and constituents can be found in academic journals dating back to 1975 (Wood, 1975). In one article, the author described "emergent channels" of member-constituent communication as closed circuit television, cable television, videoconference, and videophone (Wood, 1975). Interestingly, the author envisioned cable television as having a "return digital response" allowing for

congressmen and constituents to "retrieve information on public issues, legislation, research studies, bill status, voting records, and more," much like today's Internet (Wood, 1975).

Information found online, including trade association blog posts and formal research reports, explains how the public and interest groups can use technology and social Media to effectively communicate with elected officials (American Medical Association, 2018; Falcon, 2017; Hysom, 2008). The Congressional Research Service, the research arm of Congress, has also published several reports on ways social media has influenced how elected officials communicate with constituents (Straus, 2018; Straus, 2016).

Academic journals, including the Journal of Political Communication; non-partisan, non-profit public policy institutes, including the Congressional Management Foundation and the Congressional Institute; and a few for-profit companies have published information on Congressional use of social media and ways that elected officials communicate with constituents. There is also information, including doctoral dissertations and opinion articles based on scientific research, on whether Congressional actions align with constituent opinion (Abernathy, 2015; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger, & Stokes, 2018). The OpenGov Foundation recently published a major study examining and detailing the systems Congressional offices use to process and respond to constituent communication (Ogle, 2017).

Several books have been published on how those in Congress perceive their own constituents and how they interact with constituents while they are out of Washington and back in their district. The goal of these books is to determine how elected officials gauge the opinions of their constituency as a whole and how they represent constituent interests in the policy-making process (Enns, 2011; Miller, 2013).

DISCIPLINARY GROUNDING

Another topic examined by academic authors is whether public opinion, organized interest groups, or both, affect Congress, and in which ways, as it decides which policy proposals to reject and which to enact into law (Burstein, 2014). Political scientists have for decades been examining the policymaking process how and why specific legislation becomes law, and a subset of that examination is the influence of public opinion on policymaking (Burstein, 2014). This type of academic inquiry falls under the traditional definition of political science, a source of countless academic books and articles (Political Science, n.d.).

Articles published in academic journals detail and evaluate the use of Twitter among United States Senators (Glassman, Shogan, Straus, & Williams, 2016) and explore whether legislators tailor explanations to compensate for policy choices that are incongruent with constituent opinion (Grose, Malhotra, & Van Houweling, 2015). Scholarly books have also been written on congressional communications with constituents. (Lipinski, 2004; Evans, 2018). The Lipinski book examines specific communications, including constituent mail, sent by Members of Congress to their constituents, and was the subject of several peer-reviewed book reviews that appeared in scholarly journals.

All electronic and mail communications sent to constituents by members of Congress is paid for by the taxpayer under the "franking" privilege. The franking privilege has been the source of some debate, and journal articles have been written about whether Members abuse the privilege of communicating with their constituents in order to campaign for re-election (Sellers, 2010). In fact, some argue that all constituent communication is campaign speech, which is a prohibited use of taxpayer funds (Sellers, 2010).

Specific Purpose

Elected officials must prioritize explaining to constituents why and how policy decisions are made. Constituents and other third parties may not agree, but they should be able to easily understand why an elected official made the policy decision he or she made. Obfuscation is the enemy of effective stakeholder communication.

The guidebook will include both scientific and interpretative standards for evaluating theory based on relevant texts (Griffin, 2014). The scientific standards will include relative simplicity, practical utility, and quantitative research (Griffin, 2014). The interpretative standards will include an understanding of people, aesthetic appeal, and qualitative research (Griffin, 2014). It will also include all three types of communication models: linear/transmission, interactive, and transactional (Griffin, 2014). Existing research will be examined and guide construction of the guidebook. The project will be as politically neutral as possible and will not be ideologically driven. It is designed to be used by an elected official of any political affiliation.

Significance

The project is designed to assist newly elected, freshman politicians how to better understand what is involved in effective constituent communication. It will include ethnographic, quantitative, and qualitative research, both original and gathered from academic sources. The project will be successful by including real-time, real-world examples of successful and unsuccessful stakeholder communication along with content rooted in ethical leadership and constructed using research and theory-based models. This guidebook will be an important resource for elected officials and will fulfill a currently unmet need.

Data collection

The project will answer several research questions, including the forms of communication new members use to engage with their constituents and the prevalence of social media in communication (Tweets, Facebook posts) as opposed to traditional methods of constituent communication (press releases, press conferences, constituent letters). Since there are about 100 new Members of Congress (Edmondson, 2018), it is not feasible to track the communications activities of all of them, so a selection of the new members, such as one per state, will be used as a representative example.

The research process will include quantitative data collection. Several data points will be tracked for the members' first 60 days in office using an Excel spreadsheet, including the number of press releases each new member publishes, how many times they are featured in local media, the number of social media posts each member publishes per week, including Facebook, Instragram, and Twitter posts, and other communication efforts they engage in.

Data collection will be broken down by political party to examine whether different social media platforms are preferred by one party over another. The question of whether certain information is posted by individual members on one social media platform but not other platforms will be examined in an attempt to answer which platform has the highest rate of usage among elected officials. The list of data points tracked will be adjusted as more is learned about existing research tracking elected officials' communication activities.

The overall research will be both qualitative and quantitative because raw numbers will be collected (number of press releases or Tweets per week/month, etc.) along with specific subjects discussed by new members. A nonlinear path is expected because every new member will have a different approach to their communication outreach (some will post a lot of content

online, some will post very little). There will also be several variables since each member has different priorities and ways of communicating with their constituents and the general public. However, patterns are expected to emerge, such as most members posting content related to hot-button topics like taxes and health care.

A nonreactive data approach will be used during the project because the elected officials will not know that their data is being gathered and analyzed (Neuman, 2011). All information gathered will be in the public domain. Field research will also be included as a data gathering approach (Neuman, 2011) by observing communications at the Washington state capitol campus in Olympia, Washington and possibly attending public events put on by elected officials in the Seattle, WA area. Interviews with authors and individual legislators may be conducted, but formal surveys and focus groups will not be necessary as part of the project.

Hypothesis

Americans' understanding of how and why their elected representatives vote the way they do is important, and it is the duty of our elected officials to effectively and honestly communicate why they acted and voted the way they did. This does not mean that elected officials should or must vote the way a majority of their constituents believe they should; in a representative democracy, we elect officials to make decisions on our behalf (Representative Democracy, n.d.).

The working hypothesis guiding this project is that a majority of elected officials do not consistently publicly justify and explain the reasoning behind the votes they take. The decision to vote for or against legislation is theirs to make, but the communication must be two-way. The guidebook will help newly elected officials establish a foundation of effective constituent

communication. Elected officials must listen to their constituents and also explain and justify the

decisions they make in order to maintain an informed electorate.

DISCIPLINARY GROUNDING

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