

# Communicating with Congress

## How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement



Based on Survey Research by  
**Zogby International**



CONGRESSIONAL  
MANAGEMENT  
FOUNDATION

# Communicating with Congress

## How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement



Based on Survey Research by  
**Zogby International**



CONGRESSIONAL  
MANAGEMENT  
FOUNDATION

**Kathy Goldschmidt and Leslie Ochreiter**

*This report was made possible by grants from  
Capitol Advantage, BlueCross BlueShield Association, and the American Society of Association Executives*

© 2008, Congressional Management Foundation

All rights reserved.

No part of this report may be reproduced in any manner without the written permission of the Congressional Management Foundation, except brief quotations or charts used in critical articles or reviews.

Congressional Management Foundation  
513 Capitol Court, NE  
Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20002  
202-546-0100  
[www.cmfweb.org](http://www.cmfweb.org)

Printed in the United States.

ISBN: 1-930473-95-8

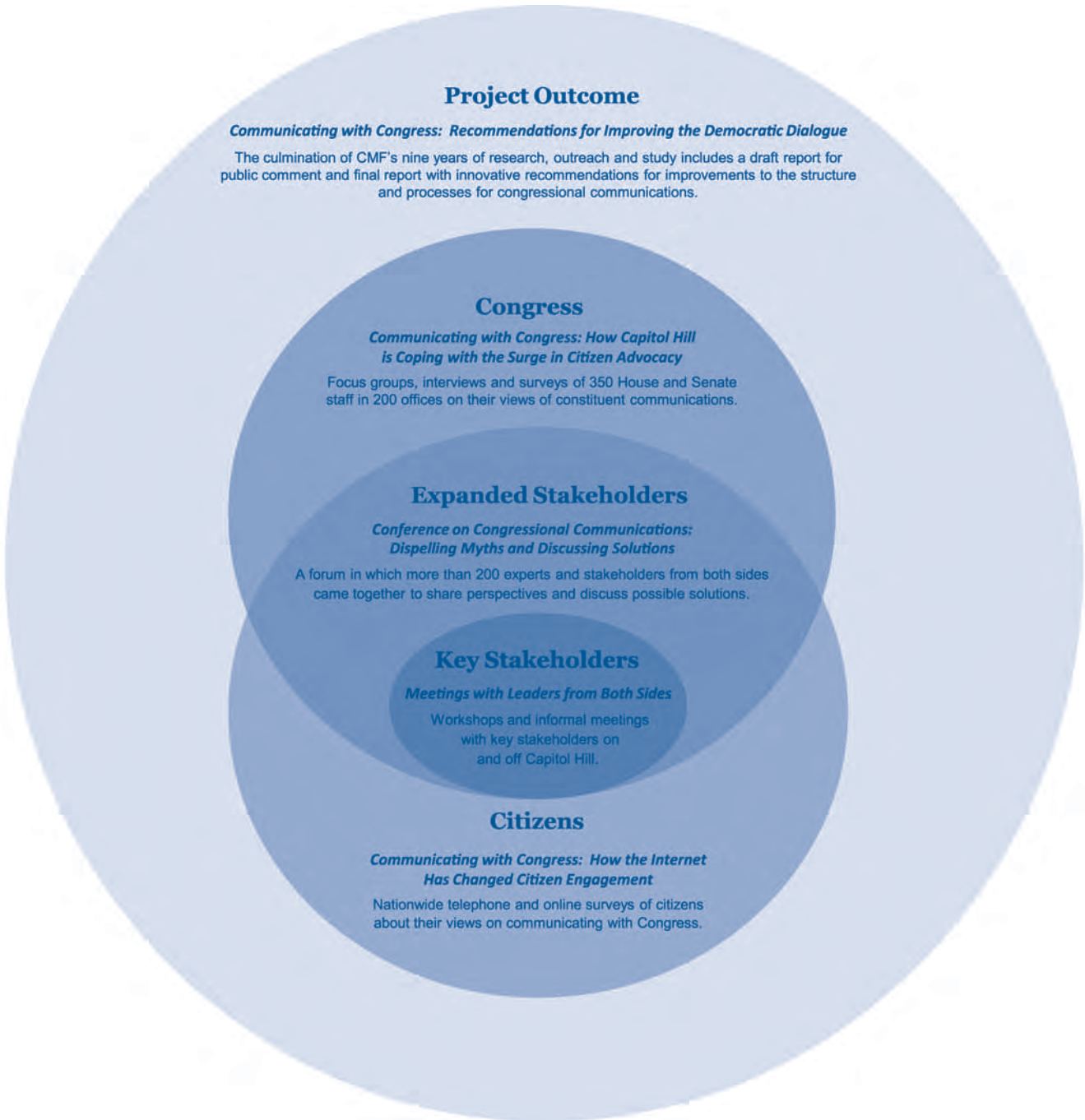
## About the *Communicating with Congress* Project

For nearly a decade the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) has been working to improve communications between citizens and Members of Congress. We have found that the Internet has made it easier and cheaper to contact Congress than ever before. However, technological developments have been so rapid that neither citizens and the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns (the senders) nor congressional offices (the receivers) have learned to use it in ways that facilitate truly effective communications between citizens and Members of Congress. As a result, while more messages are being sent to Congress, it seems that less actual communication is occurring.

To improve the communications, CMF has undertaken a project to: identify the perceptions, expectations, and practices of both sides of congressional communications; provide information to educate and guide congressional offices, citizens, and the grassroots community; promote changes in the attitudes and practices of both sides; and facilitate collaboration and information-sharing that will result in more meaningful and manageable dialogue.

To accomplish these objectives, CMF has been conducting extensive research and engaging an ever-widening circle of stakeholders. We began our research with congressional offices, and our outreach resulted in the 2005 report entitled *Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy*. We then engaged small groups of targeted stakeholders in congressional communications, including thought leaders and technologists both on and off Capitol Hill. These meetings led to the *Communicating with Congress* conference in the fall of 2007, where more than 200 stakeholder participants from both sides engaged in discussions about current processes and problems with communications between citizens and Members of Congress, as well as possible solutions. Through the research for this report and the forthcoming *Communicating with Congress: Recommendations for Improving the Democratic Dialogue* we expand our research and outreach to the public and invite the public to participate in discussion of our concept of and recommendations for improved communications.

We have gained insight through survey research, outreach, and dialogue with as many of the interested parties as possible. This has enabled us to incorporate a broad, inclusive perspective into our work. We hope this collaborative approach will result in a new model for communications between constituents and their elected officials which will have the support and commitment of as many people as possible. It is our goal that the model we propose will, if implemented, reduce or remove the current frustrations and barriers, facilitate increased citizen participation in the public policy process, and promote a meaningful democratic dialogue that benefits our country.



## Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the assistance of many people whose contributions often went above and beyond the call of duty. First, we are grateful to the sponsors who have financially supported this important work. Without the contributions of Capitol Advantage, BlueCross BlueShield Association, and the American Society of Association Executives, neither this report nor our *Communicating with Congress* project would have been possible. We also thank Convio for support of our work and the Public Affairs Council, specifically Doug Pinkham, for kind and helpful assistance with this research.

We also thank Zogby International for its generosity and commitment which allowed us to conduct the surveys on which this report is based. John Zogby saw the importance of this research and dedicated significant organizational effort to ensure it would be a success. We are particularly grateful to the tireless and patient work of the Zogby team to ensure the data was just right.

CMF also had the assistance of numerous political scientists throughout the country. Dr. Tom Holyoke from California State University, Fresno, and Dino Christenson from Ohio State University provided endless help in conducting detailed data analysis, rigorously reviewing the sample and methodology, and generally helping to ensure that the data and our analysis are accurate. We also thank Dr. Michael Neblo from Ohio State University for enabling us to participate in the Cooperative Congressional Election Study in 2006, and Stephen Purpura of Cornell University for helping to analyze the results of that survey. Dr. Neblo, along with Dr. David Lazer from Harvard University and Dr. Kevin Esterling of University of California – Riverside, our research partners on the National Science Foundation funded *Connecting to Congress Project*, also applied their wonderfully analytical minds to the drafts of our survey and to the resulting data, for which we are extremely grateful.

This report also benefited from important contributions from CMF staff who invested time and energy in the analysis and writing of this report and made invaluable suggestions that resulted in a significantly improved final product. We thank Tim Hysom for his leadership on the *Communicating with Congress* project and for his helpful edits and astute comments. We also thank Beverly Bell, Nicole Folk Cooper, and Collin Burden for lending their extensive insight and writing skills.

As this report has been many years in the making, there are also several former CMF staff whom we must credit. We thank Brad Fitch for his unwavering commitment and assistance to the *Communicating with Congress* project, which continues to this day. We also thank Rick Shapiro for the shrewd leadership and strategic guidance he provided to the project while he was Executive Director. We are also grateful to Nicole Griffin and Ellen Fulton, who conducted the initial research and thinking that laid the foundation for this report.

Finally, we would like to thank Cynthia Wokas, whose graphic design skills immeasurably improved the readability and aesthetics of this report.

Kathy Goldschmidt and Leslie Ochreiter

# Table of Contents

<b>Summary of Key Findings</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>A New Outlook on Citizen Engagement</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Findings and Data Analysis</b> .....	<b>9</b>
Methodology .....	9
Findings .....	9
<b>Implications of This Research</b> .....	<b>33</b>
Implications to Congress.....	34
Implications to Organizers of Grassroots Advocacy Campaigns .....	40
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>41</b>

# Table of Figures

<b>1.</b> Poli-influentials Are More Likely to Have Participated in the Following Activities within Last Year.....	6
<b>2.</b> Significant Portions of the Adult American Population Have Contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative and Engaged in Other Civic Activities .....	10
<b>3.</b> American Adults Who Have Contacted Congress Are Also More Likely to Be Engaged in Other Civic Activities Than Those Who Have Not.....	11
<b>4.</b> American Adults Chose Online Methods as the Format for Most Recent Contact of a U.S. Senator or Representative ....	12
<b>5.</b> American Adults Would Choose E-mail to Contact a U.S. Senator or Representative.....	13
<b>6.</b> E-mail Is the Preferred Method for Internet Users to Be Contacted by U.S. Senators and Representatives.....	14
<b>7.</b> Internet Users Who Have Contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative in the Past Five Years Are Likely to Have Visited a Congressional Web Site.....	15
<b>8.</b> Online Sources Are the First Places American Adults Would Turn to Find a U.S. Senator's or Representative's Position on an Issue.....	16
<b>9.</b> By Far the Top Reason Internet Users Contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative Was That They Cared Deeply about the Issue .....	17
<b>10.</b> The Most Common Reasons Internet Users Contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative Related to Conveying Their Opinion.....	18
<b>11.</b> Caring Deeply about the Issue Is the Predominant Reason for Internet Users' Most Recent Contact with a U.S. Senator or Representative as a Result of a Third Party Request .....	19
<b>12.</b> Internet Users Who Had Contacted Congress Find It Easy to Express Their Opinions to Their U.S. Senators and Representatives .....	20
<b>13.</b> American Adults Who Belong to Interest Groups Are More Likely to Contact Congress .....	20
<b>14.</b> Internet Users Who Had Contacted a Member of Congress in the Past Five Years Were Likely to Have Done So in the Past Year as a Result of a Third Party Request.....	21
<b>15.</b> Interest Groups Are the Primary Source of Internet Users' Most Recent Third Party Request(s) to Contact a U.S. Senator or Representative.....	22
<b>16.</b> Internet Users - Particularly Those Who Have Contacted Congress - Are Very Interested in Receiving Information about Congress from the Organizations With Which They Are Affiliated.....	22
<b>17.</b> Internet Users Who Have Contacted Congress Find Information from Organizations They Are Affiliated with to Be More Informative and Trustworthy Than Information from Members .....	23
<b>18.</b> Internet Users Who Have Not Contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative in the Past Five Years Believe Information from Organizations They Are Affiliated with Is More Informative and Trustworthy Than That From Congress.....	24
<b>19.</b> Internet Users' Preferred Sources of U.S. Senators' and Representatives' Views and Activities.....	25
<b>20.</b> Internet Users Would Want Responses to Messages They Send to Congress.....	26
<b>21.</b> Only Two-thirds of Internet Users Recall Receiving Responses to Their Most Recent Communication with U.S. Senators and Representatives .....	27
<b>22.</b> Roughly Half of Internet Users Who Received a Response to Their Most Recent Communication Were Satisfied with the Response .....	27
<b>23.</b> Reasons Internet Users Had for Being Dissatisfied with the Responses to Their Most Recent Congressional Communications.....	28
<b>24.</b> The Most Common Reason Internet Users Did Not Contact Congress Was That They Do Not Think Members Care What They Have to Say.....	29
<b>25.</b> Lack of Access to Information Does Not Appear to Be the Reason Internet Users Feel Dissociated from Their U.S. Senators and Representatives.....	30
<b>26.</b> Internet Users Are Very Interested in Receiving Information from Their U.S. Senators and Representatives .....	31
<b>27.</b> Internet Users - Especially Those Who Have Contacted Congress - Strongly Believe That Advocacy Campaigns Are Good for Democracy .....	32

# Summary of Key Findings

Our findings are based on two surveys of adult Americans – one online and one by telephone – commissioned by the Congressional Management Foundation and conducted in fall 2007 by Zogby International.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

- 1. Almost half of Americans (44%) contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative in the past five years.** This is a much higher contact rate than the most authoritative study found in 2004, which could have significant implications to Congress.
- 2. Americans who contacted Congress tended to be more politically active in other ways than those who did not.** They were more than twice as likely to have volunteered for or given money to a political campaign and to have joined or renewed membership in an advocacy group, professional association, or club. They were also four times as likely to have volunteered for or given money to an advocacy campaign.
- 3. The Internet has become the primary source for learning about and communicating with Congress.** Our research found that 92% of Internet users who had contacted Congress had visited a Member's Web site. Additionally, a plurality (43%) of Americans who had contacted Congress used online methods to do so, more than twice the percentage that had used postal mail or the telephone.
- 4. Internet users who contacted Congress were motivated to do so because they cared deeply about an issue (91%).** Even a majority (88%) of those who contacted Congress as a result of a third party request indicated this was part of their reason for doing so.
- 5. Interest groups played an important role in how Internet users learned about and communicated with Congress.** Our research found that 84% who had contacted Congress, and 44% who had not, had been asked to do so by a third party – with interest groups being the dominant source of the most recent of these requests. Additionally, Internet users, whether they had contacted Congress or not, generally found information from interest groups to be more credible than information from Congress.
- 6. Internet users wanted responses to their communications with Congress, but they tended not to be satisfied with the responses they received.** Our research found that 91% who had contacted Congress, and 82% who had not, would want a response. However, only two-thirds who contacted recall receiving a reply to their most recent communication, and of those who did, almost half (46%) were dissatisfied with it. The most common reasons for dissatisfaction were that the response did not address their concerns (64%) and that it was too politically biased (51%).
- 7. Internet users generally felt disconnected from Congress, but wanted to feel engaged.** Only 39% who had contacted Congress, and 36% who had not, found information from Senators and Representatives to be trustworthy. Of those who had not contacted Congress, 55% said one reason was that they did not think Members of Congress care what they have to say. Furthermore, 62% who had contacted Congress felt their Members were not interested in what they have to say. However, most Internet users want their Senators and Representatives to keep them informed of their views and activities and of the policy issues being debated in Washington.
- 8. Even with a high level of disaffection toward Congress, Internet users placed a high value on the role of advocacy campaigns in our democracy.** Despite a lack of trust in information from Members of Congress and the sense that Members do not care what they have to say, Internet users felt strongly that advocacy campaigns are good for democracy. Fully 73% of those who had contacted Congress agreed – and 34% strongly agreed – that advocacy campaigns are good for democracy. Even 49% who had not contacted Congress agreed with this sentiment.

## IMPLICATIONS TO CONGRESS

- 1. There is an untapped opportunity to communicate more with engaged, politically active, and motivated constituents.** Although there is fence-mending to do, Members of Congress have excellent opportunities to build relationships with some of their most engaged constituents if they choose to do so. By communicating with those who contact them and by communicating with them more often, they can keep constituents informed while enhancing their image.
- 2. Congress needs to improve online communications.** With three-quarters of American adults now using the Internet,<sup>1</sup> it is not surprising that the Internet is the preferred method of learning about and communicating with Congress. Unfortunately, many congressional offices have yet to adapt to online tools and techniques. A significant number still respond to e-mail with postal mail, 42% have substandard or failing Web sites,<sup>2</sup> and few have embraced new media tools for better serving online constituents.
- 3. Congressional offices need to rethink their constituent communications strategies.** Although most congressional offices think very carefully about their communications, there appears to be a disconnect between their idea of what constituents want and what constituents actually want. Offices need to consider how to effectively: transition from old media to new media, let constituents know they are being heard, manage constituents' expectations for action, and respond to constituent communications.
- 4. Congressional offices should reconsider how they handle grassroots advocacy campaigns.** Although most congressional offices do not dispute the role grassroots advocacy campaigns play in the public policy process, some dispute the value of that role. Many doubt advocacy campaigns of identical form messages are "real," and this mistrust has led some offices to block or ignore certain communications. Given the importance citizens appear to place on the organizations they trust, however, offices using these tactics may not only miss opportunities, they may damage relationships with some constituents.
- 5. Congress needs additional resources to effectively manage its 21<sup>st</sup> Century workload.** Whether through budgetary increases, added staff, improved technologies, shared services, assistance in improving systems and processes, or – more likely – a combination of these, congressional offices will need additional resources to effectively manage constituent communications, citizen participation, and the legislative demands of the Internet Age.

## IMPLICATIONS TO ORGANIZERS OF GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY CAMPAIGNS

- 1. The organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns can help facilitate more positive communications between Members and citizens.** Few survey respondents said the reason they contacted Congress at the request of a third party was to thank a Member. They were far more likely to say the information in the request worried them or made them angry. Rather than perpetuating an "us" versus "them" mentality, the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns should identify opportunities for positive communications and relationship-building both to accomplish their goals and to help strengthen democracy.
- 2. The organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns have a greater role in – and responsibility for – democratic dialogue than merely winning legislative battles.** The organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns, and the groups and causes for whom they work, play the role of trusted educators and facilitators of communications between citizens and Members of Congress. They are part of something bigger than a one-time advocacy campaign, and they should understand and respect their role in the democratic dialogue.

<sup>1</sup> Pew Internet and American Life Project, October 24 – December 2, 2007 Tracking Survey. [http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/User\\_Demo\\_2.15.08.htm](http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/User_Demo_2.15.08.htm)

<sup>2</sup> 2007 Gold Mouse Report: *Lessons from the Best Web Sites on Capitol Hill*. Collin Burden et al., Congressional Management Foundation, 2007. [http://www.cmfweb.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=235](http://www.cmfweb.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=235)



## Introduction

The right to petition government for a redress of grievances is a cornerstone of democracy in the United States, and it – along with the right to vote – is the foundation on which civic participation is built and practiced. Since the founding of our country it has been a strongly held conviction that an active and engaged citizenry is imperative for a healthy democracy. However, when the Founders included this right in the First Amendment they never imagined something like the Internet, which has fundamentally transformed citizen participation.

The Internet has provided promising new opportunities for citizens to access and share information, organize around issues, and communicate their views to their Members of Congress. Citizens are taking advantage of these opportunities in greater numbers than ever before. The demographics of the Internet increasingly mirror those of the country, though Internet users are still more likely than the general public to vote.<sup>3</sup> These people are flexing their political muscle in entirely new ways which have created both challenges and opportunities for Congress. Legislators have the opportunity to assess public opinion in ways not available just five years ago. Although the Internet offers Members of Congress new avenues to interact with their constituents and invite citizens to participate in the public policy process, the promise of the Internet for democratic dialogue has yet to be fully realized. In fact, congressional offices are still stymied by outdated technologies, frustrated by online grassroots advocacy tactics, and mired in paper-based communications practices.

As the Internet has taken hold, many studies have identified how people are using it for campaign and election politics, organizing, and advocacy. However, little research has explored how the Internet is being used in the day-to-day interactions between citizens and their Members of Congress. What do people now want from these interactions with legislators? What and who motivates them to contact a Senator or Representative? What are effective means of communicating about what is happening in Congress? What do people want in response to their messages to Congress? The answers to these questions all have significant implications to Senators' and Representatives' communications practices, but there is minimal research to answer them.

To fill the void and help congressional offices better understand the new communications environment, the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) commissioned Zogby International to conduct two surveys. The first was an extensive online survey to learn how Internet users who have and have not contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative access and perceive information from and about Congress. The second was a telephone survey which asked a shorter subset of the online questions. Through the two surveys, we gained valuable insight from more than 10,000 adult Americans about their interactions with Congress and their expectations and perceptions of those interactions.

What we found is both encouraging and disheartening. It is encouraging because there seem to be significant opportunities for congressional offices to expand their online interactions with their constituents which will

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Internet and Politics 2007*. Lee Rainie, Pew Internet and American Life Project. May 2007. <http://www.pewinternet.org/ppt/Lee%20Rainie%20-%20PDF%20material%20-%20for%20posting.pdf>

enhance Members' images, the image of Congress, and citizens' understanding of the democratic process. Our research shows that people want to hear from their Members of Congress, and their preferred means to do so is online. They are also seeking out information about Congress online, and they are looking both online and offline to the organizations they trust to help them navigate their understanding of, and opportunities to interact with, Congress. This is great news for congressional offices, but it has significant implications for offices that are still mired in the communications practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. To seize these opportunities, congressional offices need not only to adapt to the technologies, but also to adopt the techniques of the Internet Age.

---

*To seize these opportunities, congressional offices need not only to adapt to the technologies, but also to adopt the techniques of the Internet Age.*

The findings are also encouraging as they seem to show evidence of a resurgence in citizen engagement with Congress. The National Conference on Citizenship reported in the 2006 Civic Health Index that there has been an increase in citizens' expressing their political views since 1996.<sup>4</sup> This seems to be borne out by the rapid increase in the volume of messages to Congress over the past decade. Our research found that 44% of voting-age Americans had communicated in some way with a Senator or Representative in the past five years. While it has not yet been verified by other surveys, our data could have significant and exciting implications to democracy, not the least of which relate to the roles of the Internet and online grassroots advocacy campaigns in communications with Congress.

What is disheartening is that people appear to feel disconnected from their Senators and Representatives. They do not think their Members of Congress are interested in what they have to say, nor do they think their Members try to keep them abreast of what they are doing in Congress. They also appear to doubt the trustworthiness of information from their Senators and Representatives, and they do not consider it all that informative. Perhaps partly as a result, people are relying on the organizations they trust to keep them apprised of what is happening in Congress and to help them communicate with Members. In fact, our research indicates that interest groups are playing a significant role between Members of Congress and the people they represent by providing citizens with information about Congress and facilitating communications with Members.

Mistrust does not only exist on the citizens' side of the dialogue. Our research with congressional staff found a lack of trust in some communications from citizens. Congressional staff are particularly skeptical of identical form advocacy campaigns, which they doubt have been generated with the knowledge and approval of the citizens whose names are on them. In fact, it was this mistrust, and the sense of pervasive frustration among congressional staffers about the sheer volume and quality of the messages they were receiving, that originally led CMF to initiate our *Communicating with Congress* project.

The goal of the *Communicating with Congress* project is to improve interactions between Congress and the citizens it represents. To do this, CMF realized it was necessary to foster a better understanding on both sides of the communications equation and to facilitate collaboration among the stakeholders to develop a mutually-agreeable solution. To this end, CMF has been working with Congress, the public affairs community, technology vendors, good government organizations, and others. We have been studying the problems that exist, facilitating joint problem-solving, and devising recommendations for public participation in ways both Congress and citizens can trust and value.

Through the research for this report and for *Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy*, we now have identified the perspectives both citizens and congressional staff have of congressional communications. We have also gained significant insight into the perspectives of the public affairs community through meetings to discuss the problems and possible solutions, participation in conferences on grassroots advocacy, and a review of online grassroots advocacy practices related to the 2005 U.S. Supreme Court nominations. Our fall 2007 *Communicating with Congress* conference brought together more than two

---

<sup>4</sup> *America's Civic Health Index: Broken Engagement*. A report by the National Conference on Citizenship with CIRCLE and the Saguaro Seminar. September 18, 2006. <http://www.nccoc.net/conferences/2006civichealth.pdf>.

hundred representatives from both sides of the equation to discuss the processes, problems, and possible solutions to the current state of communications between Members of Congress and those they represent. Since then, we have been devising and vetting a concept and recommendations for a new model for citizen communications, which is being released for public comment concurrently with this report.

It is our hope that this report, with the other research products of the *Communicating with Congress* project, will help congressional offices better understand citizens in the Internet Age. Although the news is not all good, our findings provide abundant opportunities for congressional offices to target their resources and communications strategies more effectively – both online and offline – to improve their interactions, relationships, and reputations with those they represent. By providing this data, CMF is giving Congress the necessary information to better adapt to the new communications environment rather than basing its practices on inefficient techniques, anecdotal evidence, and antiquated strategies.

We also hope this report will provide the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns with a new perspective on their role in the democratic dialogue. Citizens rely on the organizations they trust to provide them with information and motivation which helps them become engaged in public policy. Those who mobilize citizens and generate messages to Capitol Hill should consider opportunities to foster improved relationships between Members of Congress and those they represent. Citizens depend on them for more than simply winning legislative victories. We hope the information in this report will help organizations implement their advocacy campaigns with a better understanding of the larger context in which they operate.

The Internet has had a profoundly positive effect on the democratic dialogue between citizens and Congress, offering millions of Americans new opportunities to learn about and interact with their elected officials. However the full potential has yet to be realized. The breadth, fluidity, and affordability of online communications offer both sides in this dialogue the chance for a greater understanding of the other's motives and values. This greater understanding could not only lead to a more efficient government, but a more effective and more responsive government. It also could result in a better public understanding of Congress, chipping away at the cynicism about government that seems to permeate our society.



## A New Outlook on Citizen Engagement

By traditional measures, American civic engagement has been in decline for more than thirty years. People have voted less, volunteered less, protested less, and exhibited less trust in others and the government, which has caused concern for the well-being of our democracy.

While these declines all have serious implications for democracy, the picture may not be as bleak as it seems. As Robert D. Putnam said in *Bowling Alone*, “American history carefully examined is a story of ups and downs in civic engagement, not just downs – a story of collapse and renewal.”<sup>5</sup> There may be evidence that we are beginning a period of renewal. After all, standard research on civic engagement does not yet seem to understand the full impact of the Internet. Old ways of civic participation are being enhanced – possibly even replaced – by new, Internet-facilitated ways of engaging in communities, learning about public policy, organizing around issues, and communicating with elected officials. The Internet offers great potential for the future of democracy, but to realize the potential will require significant shifts in both thought and practice on Capitol Hill. Most congressional offices are still accustomed to thinking in terms of traditional mass media – television, radio, newspapers, and other non-Internet information sources – and direct constituent communications such as letters, newsletters, and direct mailings. Increasingly, however, citizens are relying on the Internet for information on politics and public policy, and they have become accustomed to processing information in the interactive, digestible, and linked ways the Internet provides. Traditional media techniques and practices do not work well online. To keep up with those they represent, congressional offices will need to adapt to new media technologies, especially since Internet users are increasingly reflective of the public at large.

---

*“American history carefully examined is a story of ups and downs in civic engagement, not just downs – a story of collapse and renewal.”*

No longer dominated by wealthy, highly-educated, white males, the population of Internet users has come much closer to being representative of the population. The average Internet user now looks more like the average American. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 75% of all American adults are Internet users.<sup>6</sup> More Americans now have access to greater amounts of information than ever before, and their increasing familiarity with the Internet is enabling them to use it for activities that were typically conducted offline, such as paying taxes, shopping, and researching and discussing politics. Not only do they desire to participate in these activities online, but they expect to be able to do so. Additionally, 47% of Internet users have high-speed broadband connections.<sup>7</sup> This is significant because broadband users tend to participate in a wider range of online activities more frequently than dial-up users, and they tend to be more “participatory users” of the Internet, sharing and accessing blogs, music, video, and other interactive online media that are difficult for dial-up users to employ.<sup>8</sup> These people use the Internet in many aspects of their lives, and they do things on the Internet that are not possible in any other way. The rise in Internet access, and specifically the growth in broadband usage, has

<sup>5</sup> *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Robert D. Putnam. 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Pew Internet and American Life Project, October 24 – December 2, 2007 Tracking Survey. [http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/User\\_Demo\\_2.15.08.htm](http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/User_Demo_2.15.08.htm)

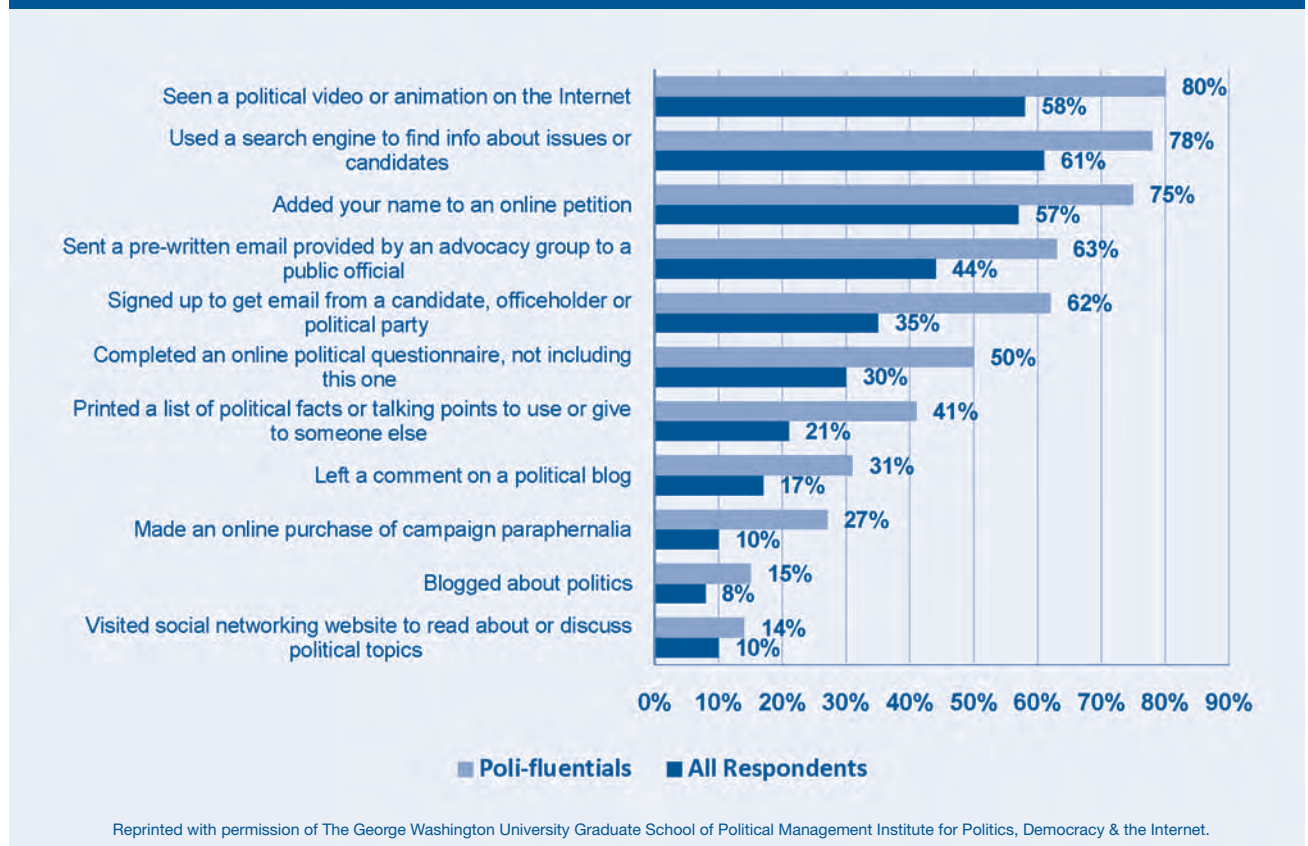
<sup>7</sup> *Home Broadband Adoption 2007*. John B. Horrigan et al., Pew Internet and American Life Project. June 2007. [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Broadband%202007.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Broadband%202007.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> *Broadband: What's all the Fuss About?* John B. Horrigan, Pew Internet and American Life Project. October 2007. <http://pewinternet.org/pdfs/BroadBand%20Fuss.pdf>

affected people’s perceptions of what should be available online: on-demand access to information whenever and wherever they want it, including information about Congress and their elected representatives.

The Internet has had significant impact on the political realm where a new group of politically-engaged, online citizens has found its preferred method for civic participation. E-mail, blogs, online news content, and social networking sites have made it easier for those online to get information, to get organized, to contact public officials, and to make a difference. Americans are depending less on traditional news sources, such as local television news, network news, and newspapers, for information about politics and instead turn to the Internet.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Poli-fluentials – a term coined by the Institute for Democracy, Politics & the Internet (IPDI) to refer to those who participate in political activities online – are nearly seven times more likely than the general public to be “Influentials.” They let others know of their opinions on everything from where to go on vacation to for whom to vote, and people listen to them. Poli-fluentials are technologically savvy online consumers of news and political information who serve as opinion leaders in their communities – both on and offline. “When consuming their news online, Poli-fluentials have a propensity to rely on user-generated content, specifically blogs. They’re also more likely to take political action online, engaging in activities ranging from signing petitions to making online contributions.”<sup>10</sup> They are not content to consume one source of news, but are likely to visit online news Web sites, read several blogs, download podcasts, subscribe to RSS feeds, post original content, and share information with their family and friends, whom they will also encourage to voice opinions or take action on the issues of the day.

**Figure 1. Poli-fluentials Are More Likely to Have Participated in the Following Activities within Last Year**



<sup>9</sup> *Social Networking and Online Videos Take Off: Internet’s Broader Role in Campaign 2008*. Andrew Kohut et al., Pew Internet and American Life Project. January 2008. [http://pewinternet.org/pdfs/Pew\\_MediaSources\\_jan08.pdf](http://pewinternet.org/pdfs/Pew_MediaSources_jan08.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> *Poli-fluentials: The New Political Kingmakers*. Carol Darr et al., The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet. October 2007. <http://www.ipdi.org/UploadedFiles/Polifluentials%20Report%20-%20Final.pdf>

How influential are Internet users? According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, “the online population and the voting population largely overlap each other.”<sup>11</sup> Their research indicates that 69% of registered voters are Internet users, and that 63% of those who voted in the last election are Internet users.<sup>12</sup> People are using the wealth of information online to learn more about issues, candidates, voting records, positions on issues, and candidate endorsements. They are also signing petitions, organizing like-minded citizens, and donating to both candidates and causes online – transforming the role of the Internet to an arena of citizen engagement and political participation. This has been especially true for the 2008 election. “Nearly a quarter of Americans (24%) say they regularly learn something about the campaign from the Internet, almost double the percentage from a comparable point in the 2004 campaign (13%).”<sup>13</sup> Additionally, as of May 2008, the Obama for President campaign claimed 1.5 million donors, many of whom were first-time contributors who used the Internet to make their contributions.

There has also been an explosion in the use of social networking sites and online video content to spread information about candidates, debates and commercials. Still, e-mail continues to play a significant role in campaign politics: 16% of Americans have sent or received e-mails about the candidates and the campaign, and 14% have received e-mails from political groups or organizations.<sup>14</sup> Online citizens are engaging in political activities that can have a transformative effect on campaigns and politics. To see cases of this occurring, one need only reference the use of Meetup.com by the Dean for America campaign in 2004 or the damage to Senator George Allen’s 2006 re-election campaign when an unguarded comment at a campaign event was caught on film and shared widely via YouTube.

Online citizens are not only using the Internet to learn about politics, they are using it to mobilize and take action in other arenas. One example of the use of multiple tools provided by the Internet is the response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Blogs, text messages and Web sites were set up and being used within hours to report on the aftermath, to enable people to make online donations, and to support relief organizations in their efforts.<sup>15</sup> By employing many of the same online tools and tactics used in the aftermath of the tsunami, groups of individuals are finding new ways to have a collective impact on public policy, both informally and as part of organized grassroots advocacy campaigns.

Politically active online citizens are leading the charge and the political organizers are harnessing their skills and creativity in ways never before possible. In much the same way organizers used the Internet to inform and mobilize people in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the organizers of political and advocacy campaigns have been taking advantage of the potential of these tools for political ends. By using Web sites, blogs, e-mail, text messaging, and online databases, groups can target and mobilize politically engaged citizens to take action faster, cheaper, more easily and more frequently than ever before. One example is a National Public Radio (NPR) campaign that combined a Web site, online advertising and the delivery of hundreds of thousands of e-mails and postal letters to urge Congress to preserve funding for public broadcasting. The 2008 presidential candidates have also turned to the Internet and new media to generate grassroots support for their campaigns, using various tools such as blogs, text messaging, social networking sites like Facebook, and online videos. And every congressional office has been the subject

---

*By using Web sites, blogs, e-mail, text messaging, and online databases, groups can target and mobilize politically engaged citizens to take action faster, cheaper, more easily and more frequently than ever before.*

<sup>11</sup> *The Internet and Politics 2007*. Lee Rainie, Pew Internet and American Life Project. May 2007. <http://www.pewinternet.org/ppt/Lee%20Rainie%20-%20PDF%20material%20-%20for%20posting.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Social Networking and Online Videos Take Off: Internet’s Broader Role in Campaign 2008*. Andrew Kohut et al., Pew Internet and American Life Project. January 2008. [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/Pew\\_MediaSources\\_jan08.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/Pew_MediaSources_jan08.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> *Poli-fluentials: The New Political Kingmakers*. Carol Darr et al., The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet. October 2007. <http://www.ipdi.org/UploadedFiles/PoliFluentials%20Report%20-%20Final.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> *Power to the Edges: Trends and Opportunities in Online Civic Engagement*. Jillaine Smith et al. The E-Volve Foundation and PACE-Philanthropy for Active Citizen Engagement. May 2005. <http://www.pacefunders.org/pdf/05.06.05%20Final%20Version%201.0.pdf>

of Internet-facilitated grassroots advocacy campaigns. Though these examples of mobilization are in response to very different events, they all used the tools of the Internet to enable citizens to come together and act on issues about which they cared. And these tools are being utilized every day by interest groups to build a base of support for issues and policies and to mobilize activists to contact their elected representatives.

A common factor in these examples is that they capitalize on the creativity and skill sets of Internet users. As citizens have moved away from participating in traditional, social organizations and clubs over the past thirty years, they are also moving away from membership in professional associations and interest groups. “Instead of forcing participants into a form of ‘membership’ or some carefully defined role, it is widely anticipated that the next generation of volunteers and activists will expect to be voluntary ‘free agents’, able to engage where and when their passions lead them.”<sup>16</sup> To adapt to the changing preferences of politically engaged citizens, interest groups have had to loosen their control and equip citizens with the skills and information to manage their advocacy efforts for themselves. Citizens desire authentic engagement and enabling them to contribute their skills and creativity in support of a campaign has created loyal activists. Citizens who feel like little more than a checkbook or a name on a list are less likely to feel beholden to an organization, but once they are personally invested, they become activists.

As more and more citizens go online and become politically engaged, Members of Congress can expect to receive increasing numbers of messages from constituents. It is now easier than ever before for constituents to contact their representatives as individuals, as members of interest groups, and as “free agents” mobilized for a cause. Members of Congress neglect these people at their own risk. These citizens appear to be highly influential, and developing relationships with them should be important to congressional offices wishing to have the greatest possible impact. By encouraging these citizens to communicate their views on policies and by actively engaging them, Members of Congress can tap into the pulse of their district or state and utilize these citizens as ambassadors of the Member’s policies. Although there are already significant challenges Members of Congress face with the deluge of postal mail and e-mail to their offices, it is becoming increasingly important for congressional offices to shift their thinking and resources away from traditional media and focus more of their attention on the Internet.



---

<sup>16</sup> *Power to the Edges: Trends and Opportunities in Online Civic Engagement*. Jillaine Smith et. al. The E-Volve Foundation and PACE-Philanthropy for Active Citizen Engagement. May 2005. <http://www.pacefunders.org/pdf/05.06.05%20Final%20Version%201.0.pdf>

# Findings and Data Analysis

## METHODOLOGY

In fall 2007, CMF commissioned the polling firm Zogby International to conduct two surveys, one online and one by telephone. The online survey invited a sampling of Zogby's online panel to participate. It polled adult Americans on whether or not they had contacted a Member of Congress, their preferences for information from and about Congress, and their participation in advocacy campaigns. A total of 9,536 responded, with 7,707 who had contacted a Senator or Representative in the past five years and 1,829 who had not. This sample was split by whether or not respondents had contacted Congress and weighted to arrive at two equivalent sample sizes which enabled easier comparison of the two populations. The telephone survey was a subset of the online questions asked of 1,071 adult Americans. Samples for this survey were randomly drawn from telephone directories of national listed samples. Zogby International telephone surveys employ sampling strategies in which selection probabilities are proportional to population size within area codes and exchanges, and multiple efforts are made to reach a sampled telephone number. Both surveys were weighted by region, party, age, race, religion, and gender to more accurately reflect the population or to deal with non-response.

In order to differentiate between the findings from the two surveys, we have included icons in each of the figures in this section. The phone graphic () indicates findings from our telephone survey of adult Americans and the computer mouse graphic () indicates findings from our online survey of Internet users.

## FINDINGS

Through our research we have learned much about the motivations, expectations and practices of people who communicated with Congress and those who did not. Through analysis of our data, we identified eight key findings.

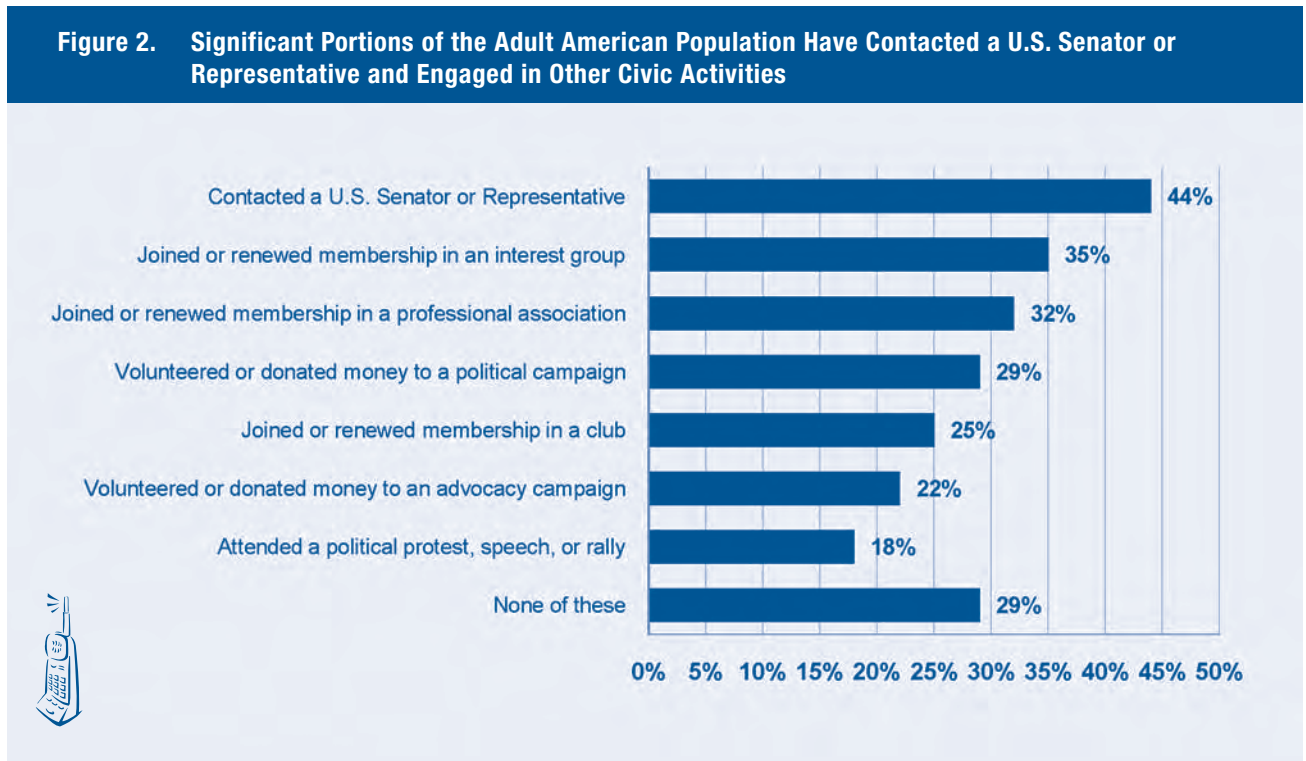
1. Almost half of Americans contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative in the past five years.
2. Americans who contacted Congress tended to be more politically active in other ways than those who did not.
3. The Internet has become the primary source for learning about and communicating with Congress.
4. Internet users who contacted Congress were motivated to do so because they cared deeply about an issue.
5. Interest groups played an important role in how Internet users learned about and communicated with Congress.
6. Internet users wanted responses to their communications with Congress, but they tended not to be satisfied with the responses they received.

7. Internet users generally felt disconnected from Congress, but wanted to feel engaged.
8. Even with a high level of disaffection toward Congress, Internet users placed a high value on the role of advocacy campaigns in our democracy.

**1. Almost half of Americans contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative in the past five years.**

In our previous report, *Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy*, we discussed the significant increase in the volume of messages to Congress over the past decade, particularly of e-mail messages. Our surveys indicate that more people may be contacting Congress than ever before; fully 44% of American adults indicated that they had done so in the past five years. Additionally, 61% of Internet users who had contacted Congress within the past five years indicated that they had contacted a Senator or Representative other than their own.

As Figure 2 shows, more people had contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative in the past five years than had joined or renewed membership in an interest group; volunteered for or given money to a political or advocacy campaign; or participated in a political rally, speech, or protest.



This finding is potentially significant because it represents a considerable increase in contact rates from the most recent and authoritative studies about contacting public officials. The most recent definitive study was published in the American National Election Studies in 2004, and it found that 18% of the population had contacted Congress. However, according to the National Conference on Citizenship’s 2006 Civic Health Index, Americans have increasingly been expressing their views about politics. “Writing letters to magazines, giving speeches, persuading other people how to vote, and wearing a political button or displaying a political sticker or sign all became more common after 1996.”<sup>17</sup> This growth in political activity may help explain the dramatic difference

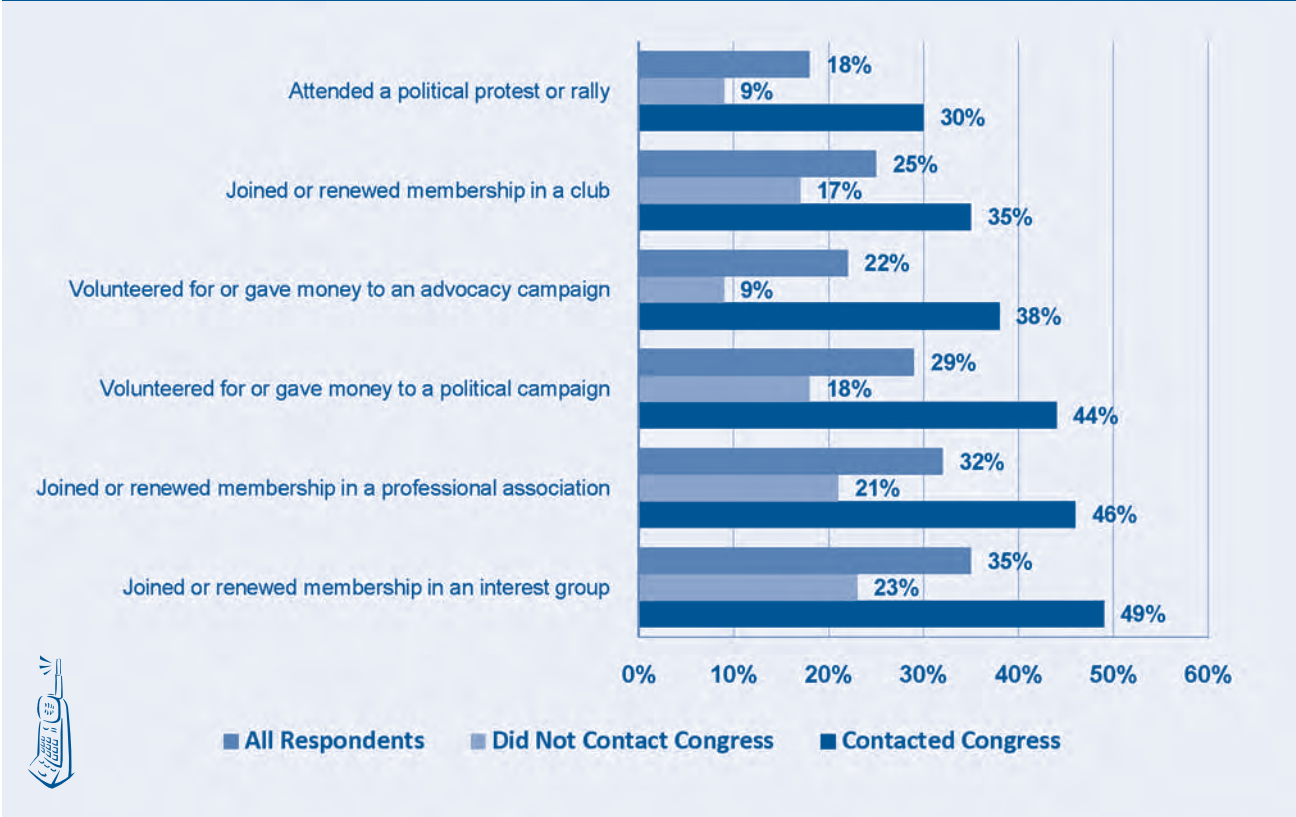
<sup>17</sup> America’s Civic Health Index: Broken Engagement. National Conference on Citizenship, et al. September 2006. <http://www.civicenterprises.net/pdfs/2006civichealth.pdf>

between our study and the American National Election Studies, as might the growing use of the Internet by the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns. Our findings have not been verified by other surveys, to date, but such a shift would have significant and exciting implications for our democracy. It may reveal a change in the downward trend of civic engagement. That roughly 70% of citizens have engaged in some type of political activity is a hopeful sign that civic engagement is on the rise, particularly when even the activity that registered the lowest response – 18% attended a political protest, speech, or rally – represents a significant number of the population when translated into real terms.

**2. Americans who contacted Congress tended to be more politically active in other ways than those who did not.**

Figure 3 shows that people who contacted Congress were far more likely to volunteer, protest, donate money, and join or renew membership in an interest group or professional association than those who did not contact Congress. This group represents the best hope for a revival in civic engagement. They are members of interest groups, associations and clubs that potentially influence them to act collectively. Congress should utilize its resources to engage these active citizens.

**Figure 3. American Adults Who Have Contacted Congress Are Also More Likely to Be Engaged in Other Civic Activities Than Those Who Have Not**

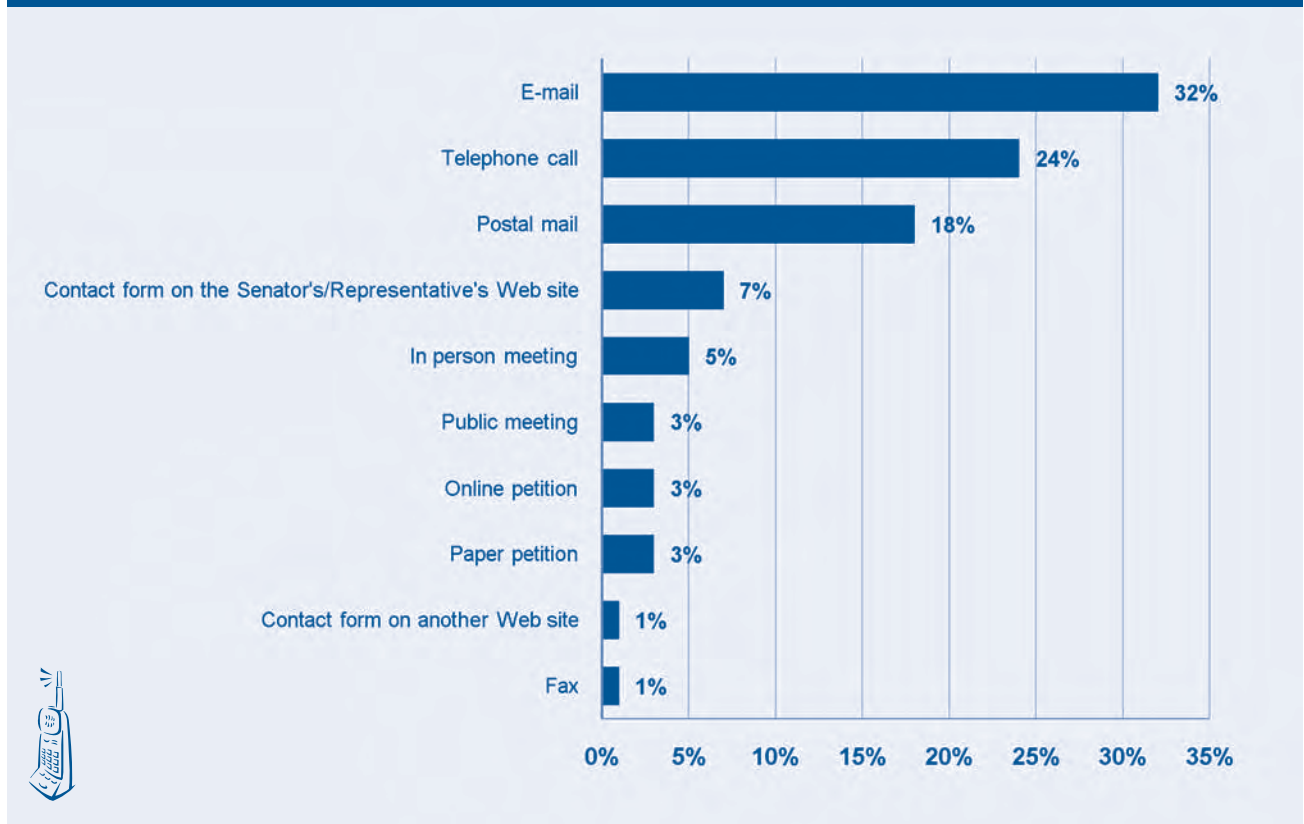


### 3. The Internet has become the primary source for learning about and communicating with Congress.

In our previous research, we learned that the Internet is having a powerful impact on the operations of congressional offices, and that the growth in e-mail was the cause of the rapidly and dramatically increasing communications volumes to Congress. Because of the ease with which one can sign an online petition or send an e-mail, more constituents are choosing these methods to express their views to Congress and become involved in the public policy process. The preference for online communications, especially e-mail, continues to grow in importance as citizens increasingly choose online methods to engage congressional offices and interest groups use them to urge citizens to contact their elected representatives. This substantiates our 2005 report, in which a strong majority of congressional staff surveyed (79%) believed that the Internet and e-mail have made it easier for citizens to become involved in the public policy process.<sup>18</sup>

As Figure 4 indicates, of the adult Americans who had contacted Congress, 43% used online methods for their most recent contact: e-mail, an online petition, a contact form on the Senator or Representative's Web site, or a contact form on another site. Another 24% used the telephone, a method that, like online methods, is appealing for its ease and timeliness, while only 18% opted for postal mail.

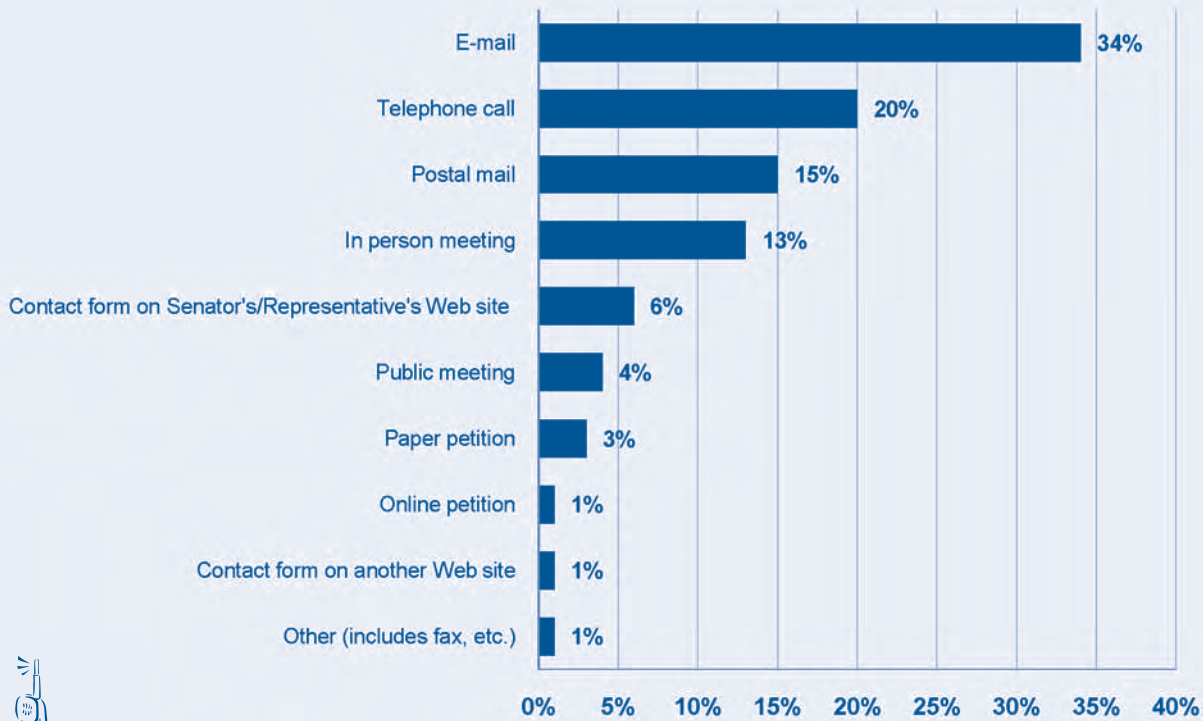
**Figure 4. American Adults Chose Online Methods as the Format for Most Recent Contact of a U.S. Senator or Representative**



<sup>18</sup> *Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy*. Brad Fitch, et al., Congressional Management Foundation. 2005. [http://www.cmfweb.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=63&Itemid=55](http://www.cmfweb.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=63&Itemid=55)

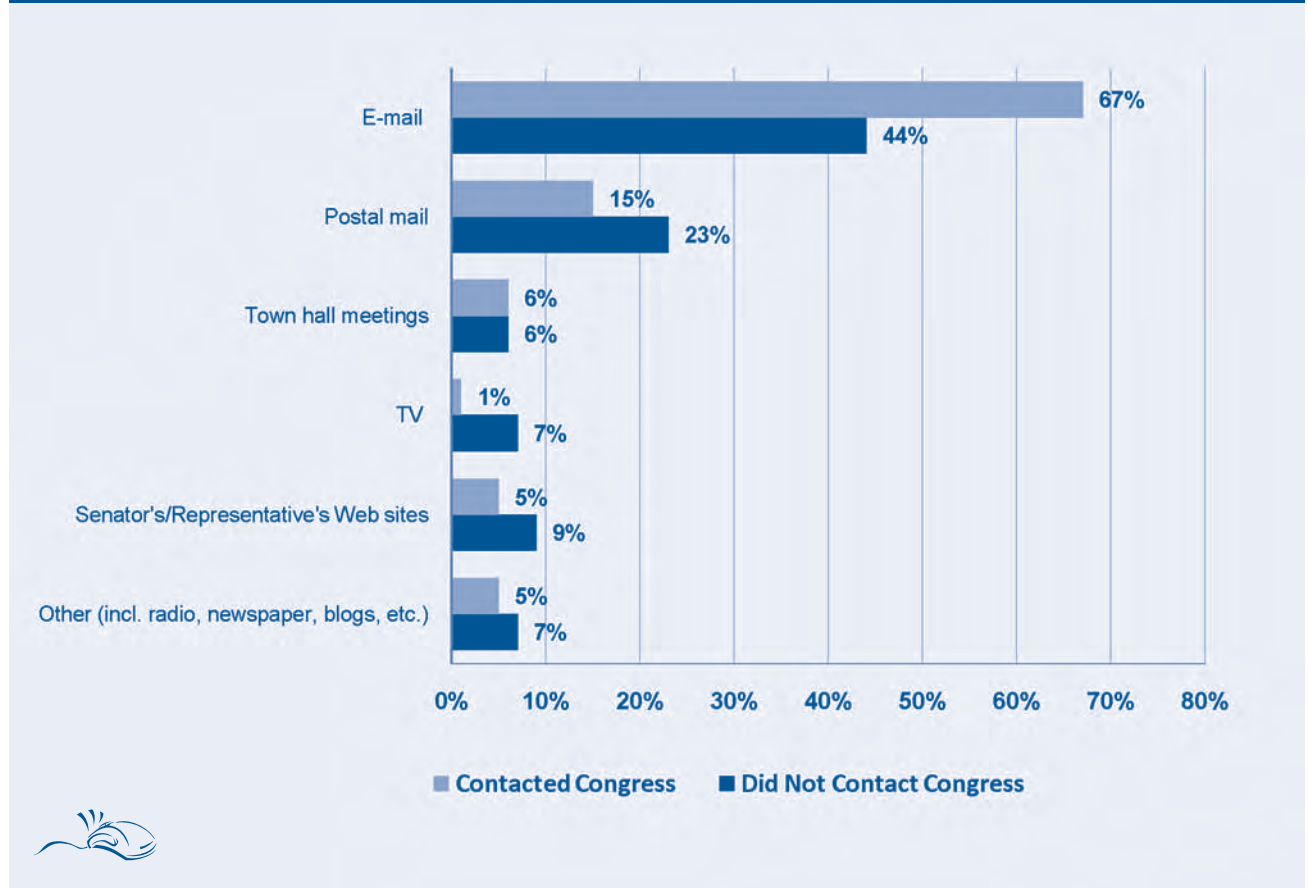
Additionally, adult Americans indicated they would prefer online methods for contacting a Senator or Representative, with 42% indicating they would choose an online method, with the plurality (34%) choosing e-mail.

**Figure 5. American Adults Would Choose E-mail to Contact a U.S. Senator or Representative**



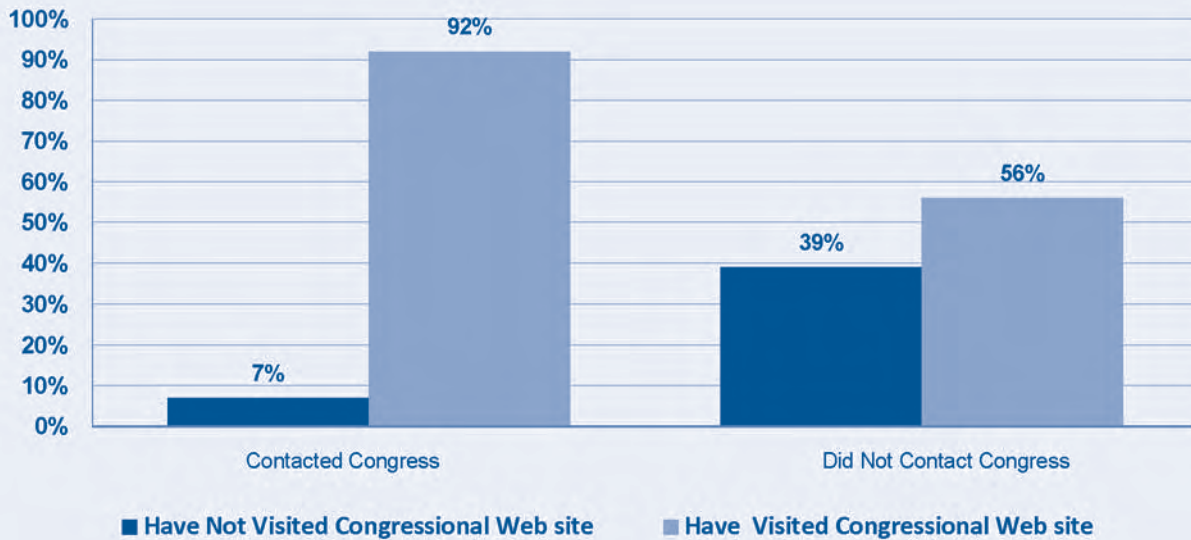
Not surprisingly, Internet users also have a strong preference to be contacted by their Senators and Representative via e-mail. As Figure 6 shows, 67% who contacted Congress, and 44% of those who did not, indicated a preference to be contacted by their Members of Congress by e-mail. The rates for postal mail, the next most common preference, were only 15% and 23% respectively.

**Figure 6. E-mail Is the Preferred Method for Internet Users to Be Contacted by U.S. Senators and Representatives**



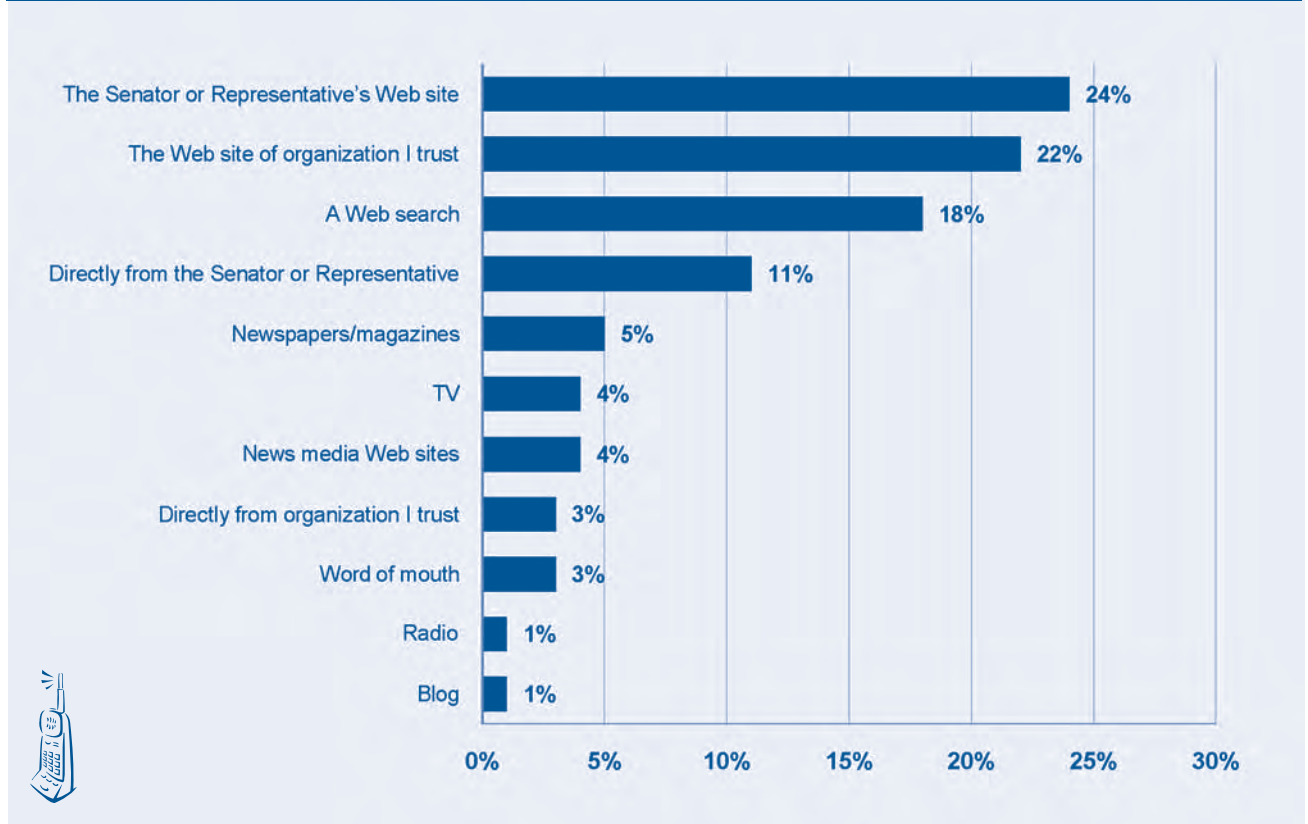
Web sites also appear to be playing a pivotal role in Internet users' political information-gathering, regardless of whether or not they had contacted Congress. Most of our respondents who had contacted a Member of Congress, and more than half of those who had not, indicated that they had visited a Member's Web site.

**Figure 7. Internet Users Who Have Contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative in the Past Five Years Are Likely to Have Visited a Congressional Web Site**



Additionally, our research found that 24% of American adults would first check the Member's Web site to find out where a Senator or Representative stands on an issue. Almost as many would turn to the Web site of an organization they trust (22%), and slightly fewer (18%) would conduct a Web search. It is also telling that 31% of American adults who contacted Congress were motivated to do so by compelling information they saw on a third-party Web site. Citizens are becoming Internet-savvy and are using the Web to learn about their Senators' and Representatives' views, activities and positions and to make their own opinions known.

**Figure 8. Online Sources Are the First Places American Adults Would Turn to Find a U.S. Senator's or Representative's Position on an Issue**

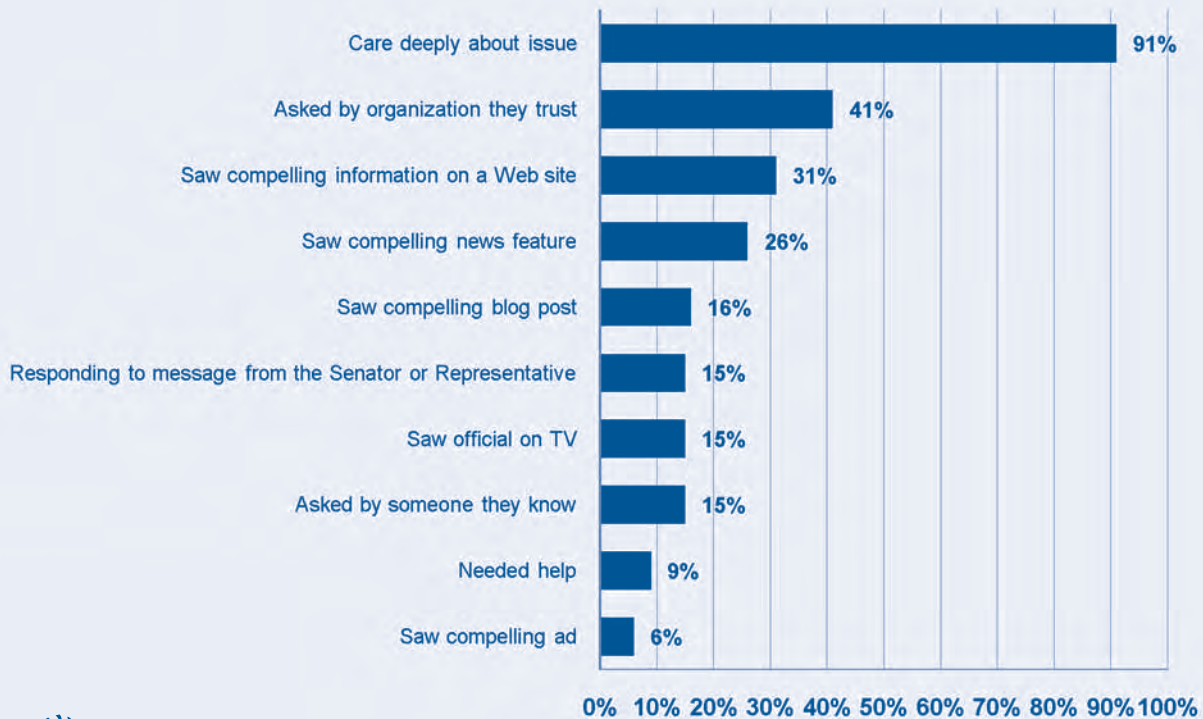


It is evident, then, that the Internet is becoming the preferred method for learning about and interacting with Senators and Representatives for both Internet users as well as for the general public. Members of Congress can, and should, capitalize on this opportunity by using their Web sites to communicate with their constituents. They should create virtual offices where constituents can find information about Congress, legislation, the Member's views and activities, and access a range of constituent services. CMF has recommended this for many years, most recently in the *2007 Gold Mouse Report: Lessons from the Best Web Sites on Capitol Hill*. In that report, however, we also found that 42% of Member offices have substandard or failing Web sites. Many offices also respond to e-mail with postal mail, and fail to embrace new capabilities for serving online constituents, which indicates that offices have yet to fully adopt online tools or technologies. When this is the case, citizens who use the Internet to obtain information may turn to other sources for information about Congress, which is a lost opportunity for Member offices to engage with those who visit the Web site. As our research found, Internet users get information about Congress from other online sources, as well, including the Web sites of organizations they trust and through Web searches, as Figure 8 shows. This is not surprising, given that Internet users have been shown to prefer online sources of information.

#### 4. Internet users who contacted Congress were motivated to do so because they cared deeply about an issue.

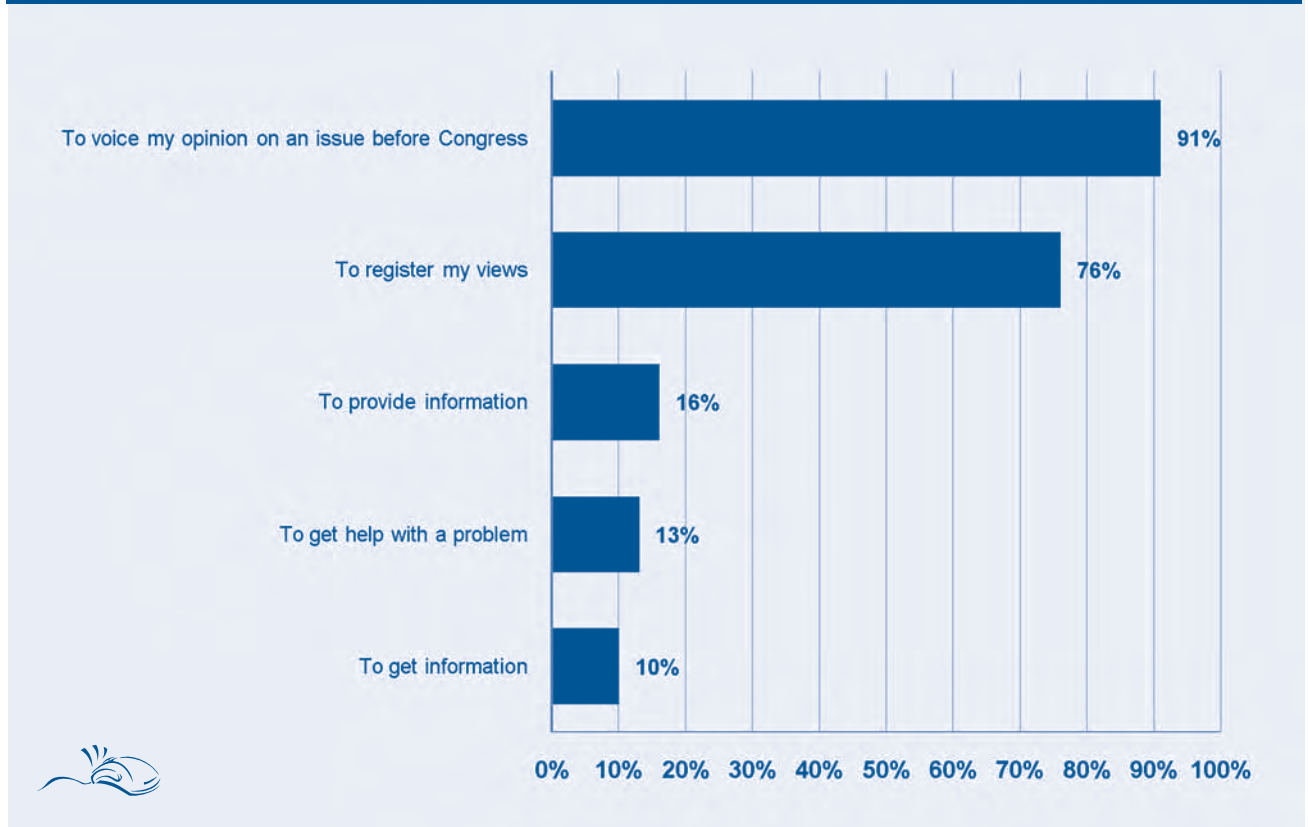
The primary motivation for contacting a U.S. Senator or Representative, chosen by 91% of Internet users, was that they cared deeply about the issue. The next most common response, at 41%, was that they had been asked to by an organization they trust, followed by having seen compelling information on a Web site at 31%.

**Figure 9. By Far the Top Reason Internet Users Contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative Was That They Cared Deeply about the Issue**



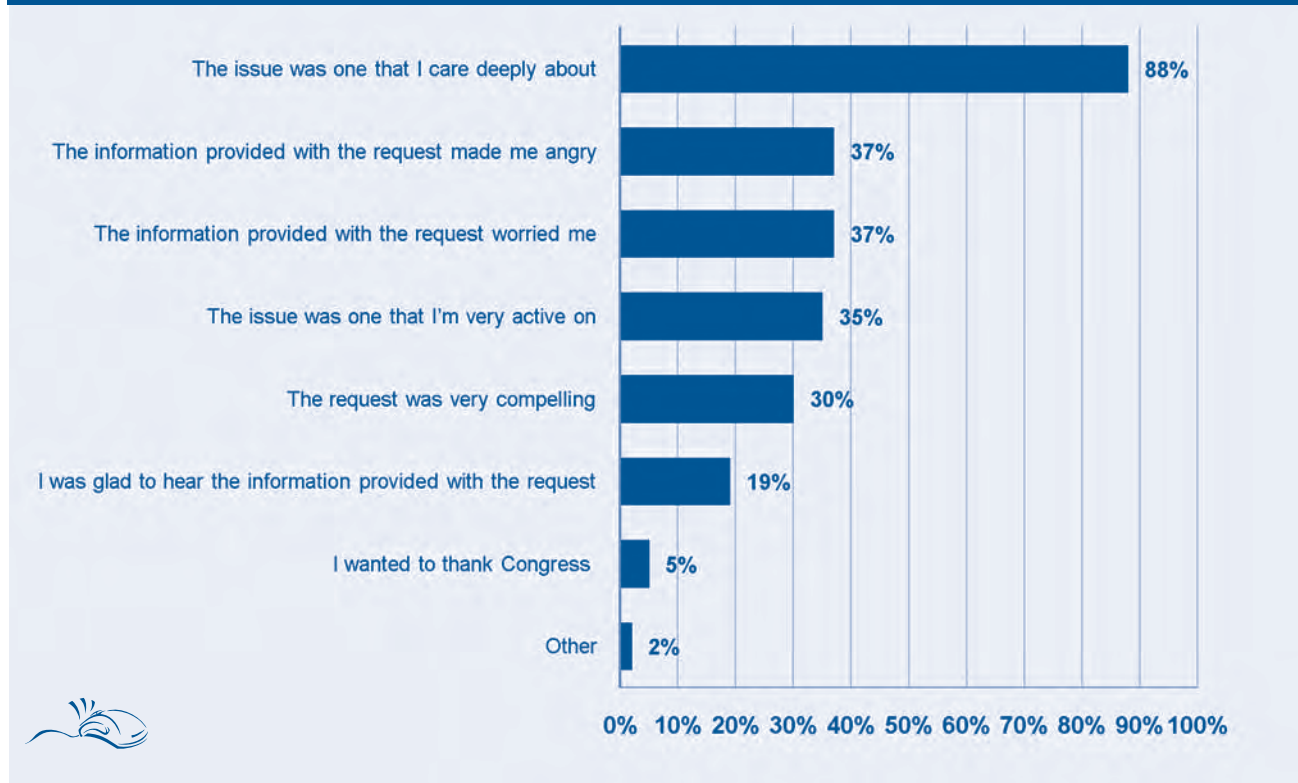
Additionally, 91% of Internet users indicated that one of the reasons they contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative was to voice their opinion on an issue before Congress, and 76% did so to register their views. The remaining reasons were fairly evenly split amongst respondents: to provide information (16%); to get help with a problem (13%); and to get information (10%).

**Figure 10. The Most Common Reasons Internet Users Contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative Related to Conveying Their Opinion**



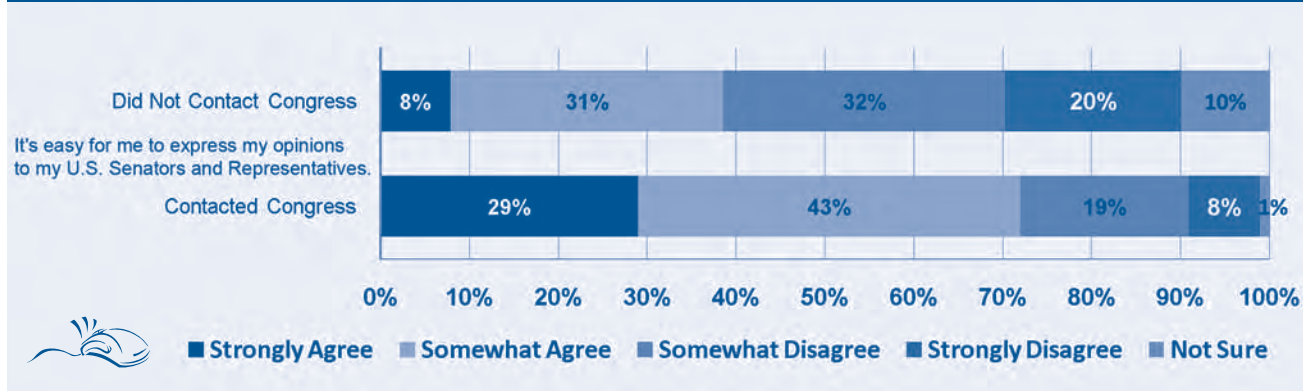
Furthermore, 88% of Internet users who were motivated by a third party to contact a Senator or Representative indicated that they did so because of their concerns for an issue (see Figure 11), whereas the next two commonly cited reasons for contact were that information provided in the request made the sender angry (37%) or worried (37%). Interestingly, only 5% of people who contacted as a result of a third party request did so to thank Congress.

**Figure 11. Caring Deeply about the Issue Is the Predominant Reason for Internet Users' Most Recent Contact with a U.S. Senator or Representative as a Result of a Third Party Request**



Nearly three-quarters of Internet users who had contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative said that they find it easy to express their opinions, while only 39% of those who had not contacted found it so.

**Figure 12. Internet Users Who Had Contacted Congress Find It Easy to Express Their Opinions to Their U.S. Senators and Representatives**

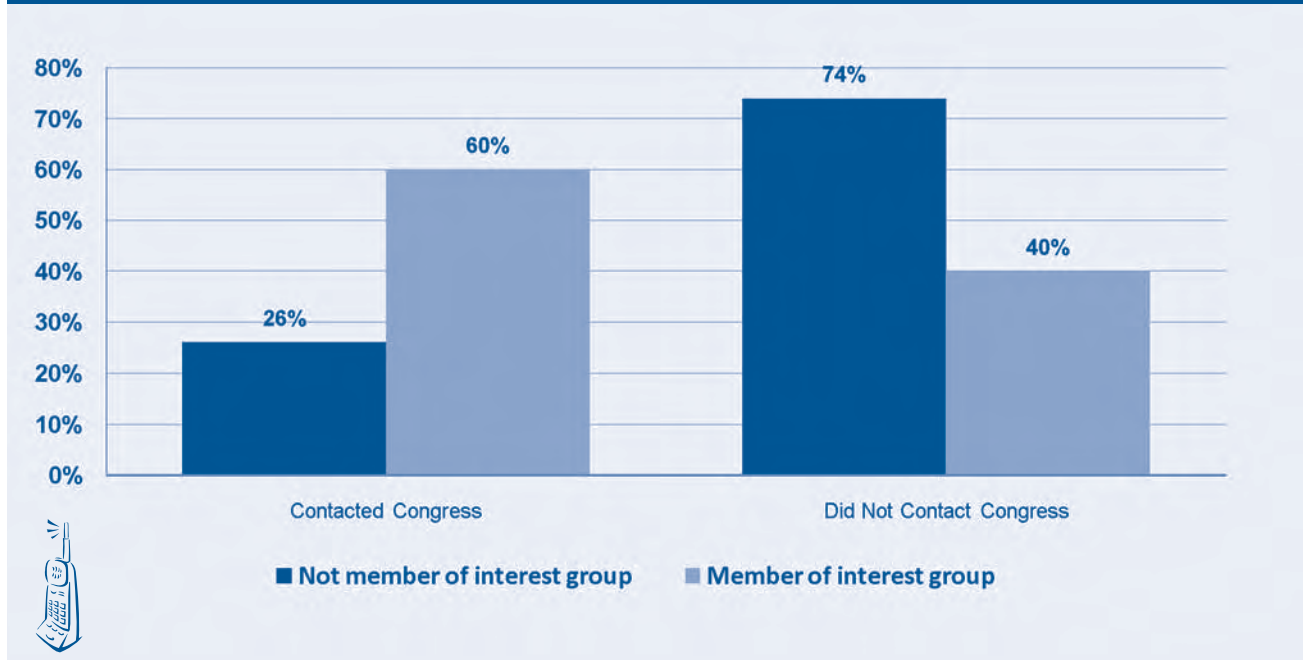


This data helps us get a clearer picture of the motivations and reasons citizens communicate with Congress: they want to express their views and opinions on issues about which they are passionate. The citizens who contact Congress take part in a variety of political activities, and these highly politically active citizens, IPDI's Poli-fluentials, want to be heard and want their views and opinions acknowledged.

**5. Interest groups played an important role in how Internet users learned about and communicated with Congress.**

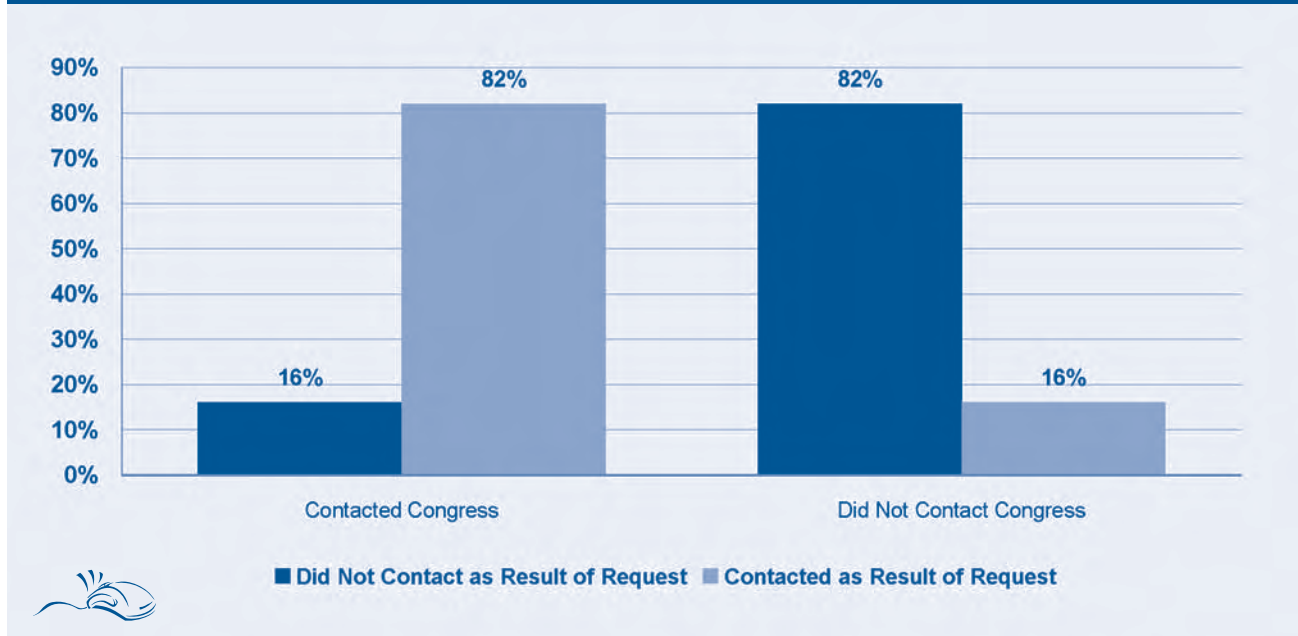
Third parties, including interest groups and professional associations, figure prominently in our analysis. Sixty percent of those who had joined or renewed membership in a professional association or interest group in the past five years had contacted Congress, compared with only 26% of non-members who had contacted Congress.

**Figure 13. American Adults Who Belong to Interest Groups Are More Likely to Contact Congress**



Eighty-two percent of Internet users who had contacted a Senator or Representative indicated they had done so in the past year as a result of a third party request.

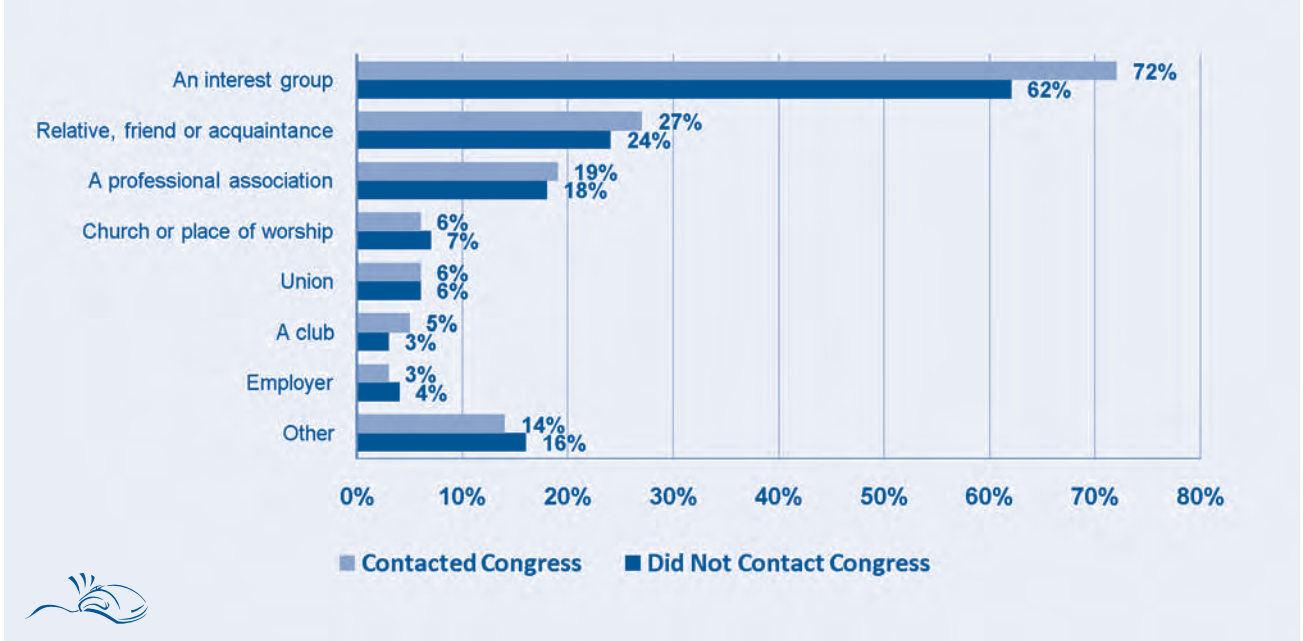
**Figure 14. Internet Users Who Had Contacted a Member of Congress in the Past Five Years Were Likely to Have Done So in the Past Year as a Result of a Third Party Request**



Interestingly, as Figure 14 shows, fully 16% of Internet users who initially said of our survey that they had not contacted a Member in the past five years later indicated that they had. It appears that, having been prompted by the questions about third parties, a fairly substantial percentage of Internet users were reminded that they had, in fact, contacted a Senator or Representative in the past year as a result of a third party request. We can only surmise why this is so, but it could be that participation in online advocacy campaigns does not always feel the same to Internet users as other forms of communication, which usually require greater effort because less of the participant’s action can be automated. For example, handwriting a letter or e-mail or making a telephone call requires greater – and therefore more memorable – effort than simply clicking “submit” on a form message or online petition.

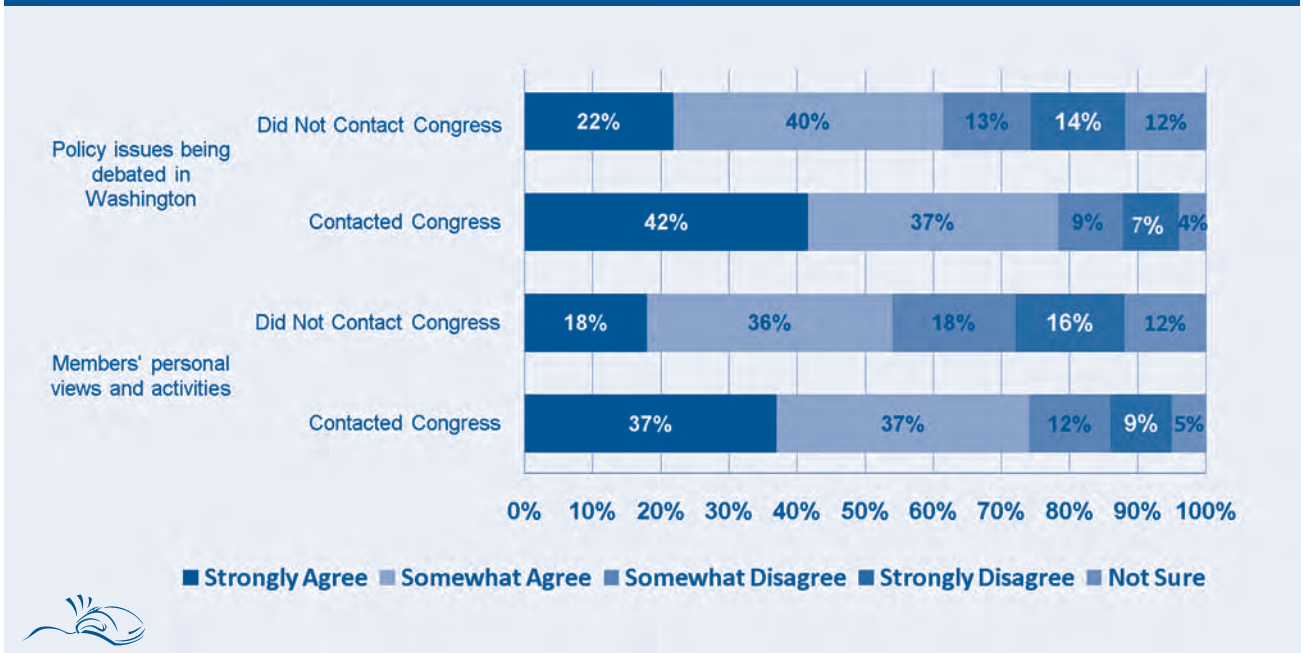
Not surprisingly, as Figure 15 shows, interest groups were by far the most common source of Internet users’ most recent third party request to contact a Senator or Representative. Nearly three-fourths of those who had contacted a Member of Congress, and nearly two-thirds of those who had not, indicated that interest groups were the source of the most recent request. Citizens join interest groups and visit their Web sites to learn about the issues they care about and to take collective action on the issue, be it making a donation, signing an online petition, or contacting their elected representatives. Interestingly, the second most common source of a request to contact Congress was a relative, friend or acquaintance, with about a quarter of all online respondents choosing this option. This might be an indicator of the power of “viral marketing,” where calls to action spread by being forwarded from person to person, thereby expanding the reach and enhancing the credibility of a campaign because it comes from people an individual knows.

**Figure 15. Interest Groups Are the Primary Source of Internet Users' Most Recent Third Party Request(s) to Contact a U.S. Senator or Representative**



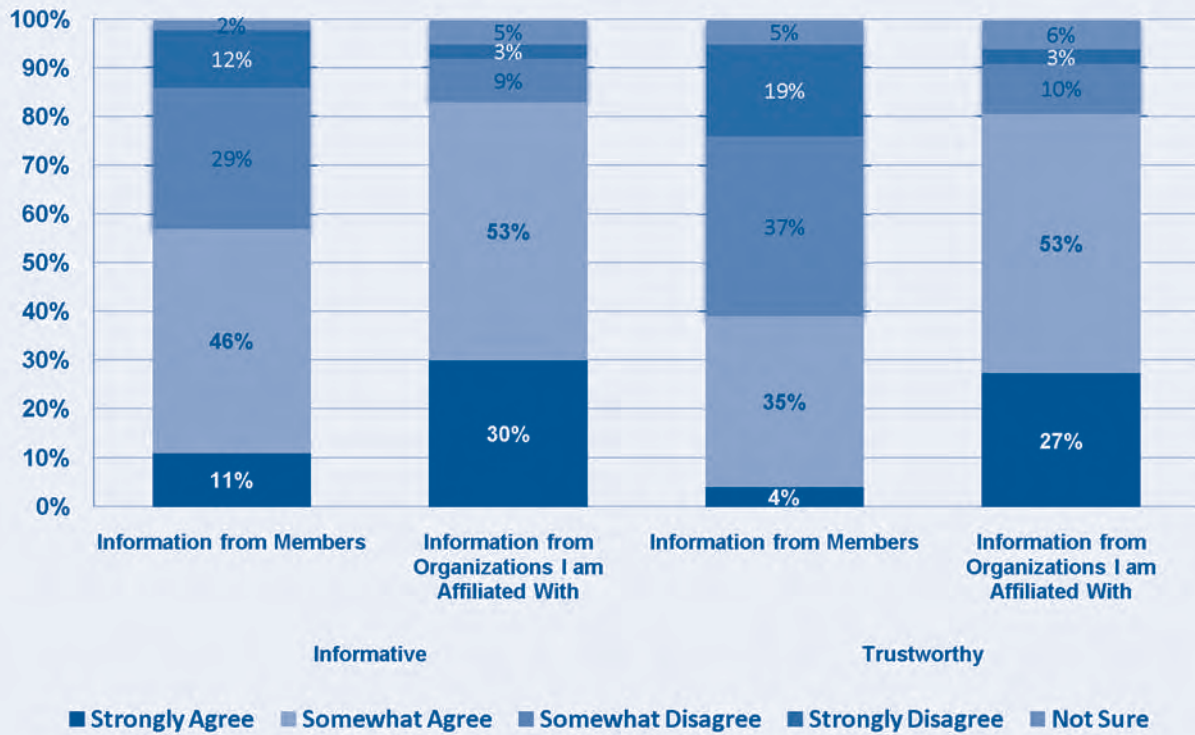
The influence of organizations people trust does not end with sending messages to Congress. In fact, 79% of Internet users who had contacted Congress, and 62% of those who had not, agreed that they want information about policy issues being debated in Washington from the organizations with which they are affiliated. Likewise, 74% of those who contacted Members of Congress, and 54% of those who did not, agreed that they want information about Members' personal views and activities from the organizations with which they are affiliated.

**Figure 16. Internet Users – Particularly Those Who Have Contacted Congress – Are Very Interested in Receiving Information about Congress from the Organizations With Which They Are Affiliated**



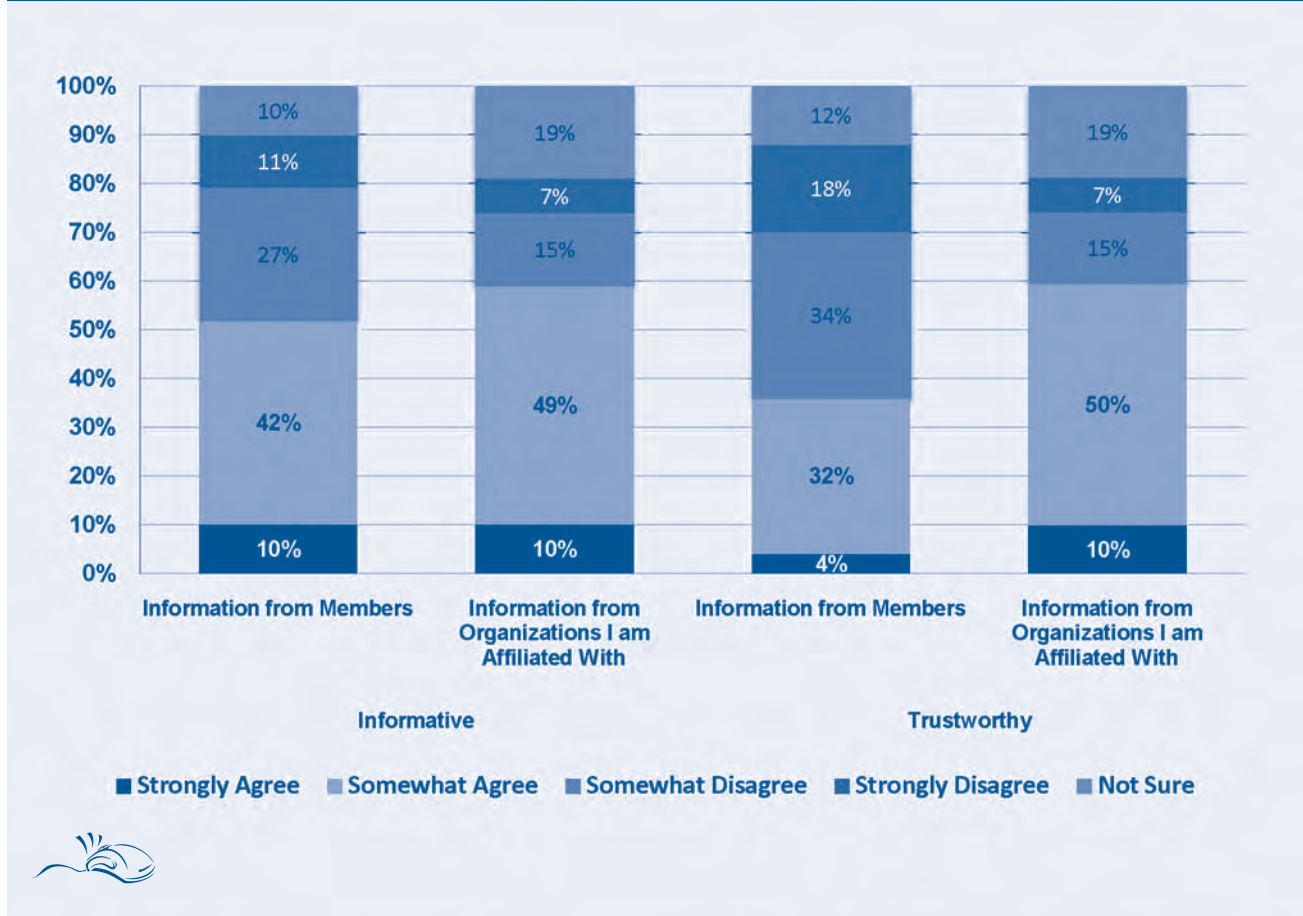
Internet users also tended to view information from organizations they trust as more informative and trustworthy than that from Members. Fully 83% of those who contacted Congress found the materials from organizations they are affiliated with informative and 80% found it trustworthy. Only 57% found materials from Senators and Representatives informative and only 39% found it trustworthy.

**Figure 17. Internet Users Who Have Contacted Congress Find Information From Organizations They Are Affiliated with to Be More Informative and Trustworthy Than Information From Members**



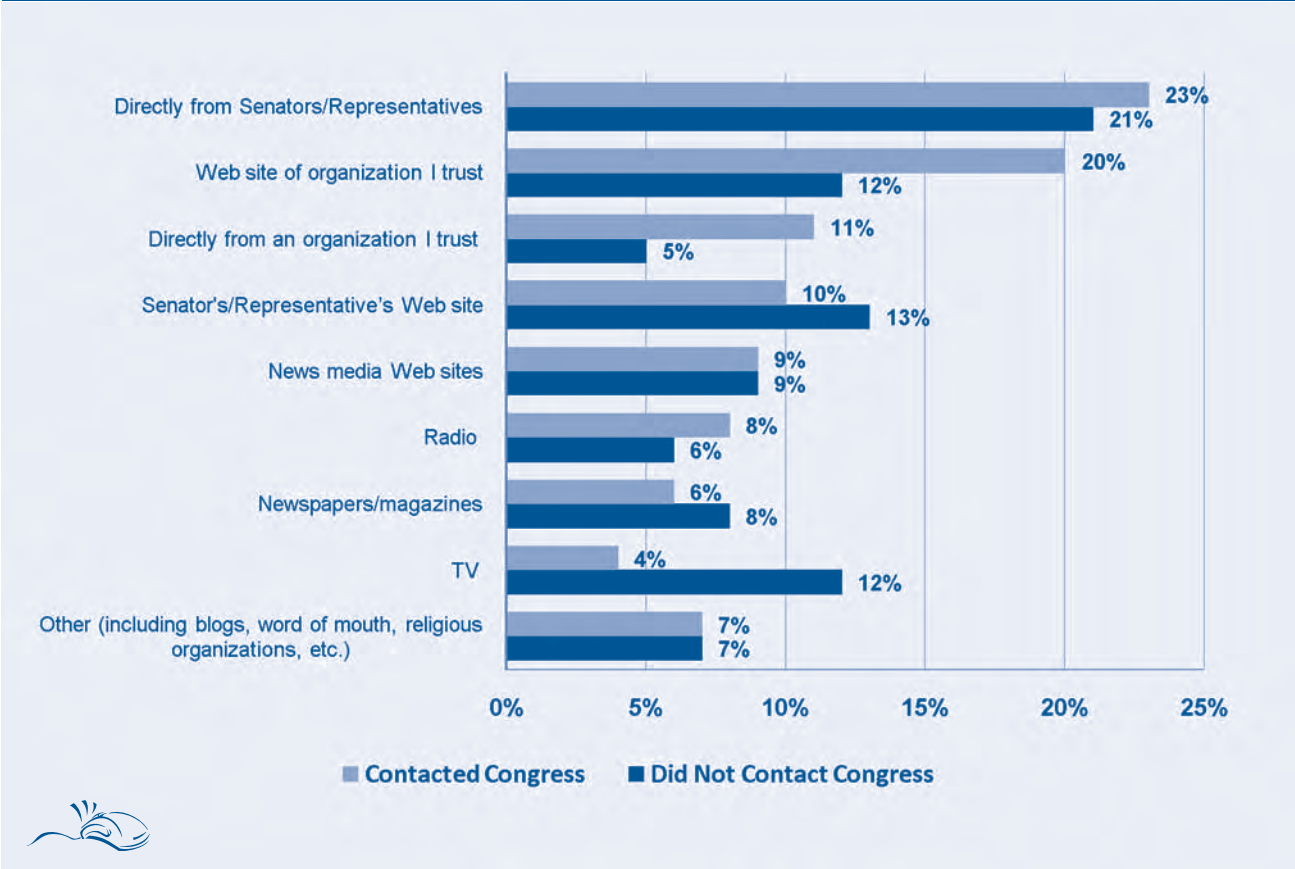
Similarly, those who did not contact Congress found information from interest groups more trustworthy and informative than material from Members, but the differences were not as dramatic as with those who had contacted Congress.

**Figure 18. Internet Users Who Have Not Contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative in the Past Five Years Believe Information from Organizations They Are Affiliated with Is More Informative and Trustworthy Than That From Congress**



Finally, as Figure 19 shows, Internet users who had contacted Congress preferred – by a significant margin – to get information about the policy issues being debated in Washington from the Web sites of organizations they trust. The “Web site of an organization I trust” and “directly from the Senator or Representative” were their first and second most preferred sources of information about policy issues being debated in Washington – 21% and 14%, respectively. Those who had not contacted slightly preferred to get information about policy issues directly from their Senators and Representatives. However, when it came to learning about the views and activities of their Senators and Representatives, those who had contacted a Member of Congress preferred to obtain the information directly from the Member of Congress by a slight margin – only 3% – over a trusted organization’s Web site. Congress needs to recognize that citizens are being informed by, and motivated to contact by, various organizations which they highly value.

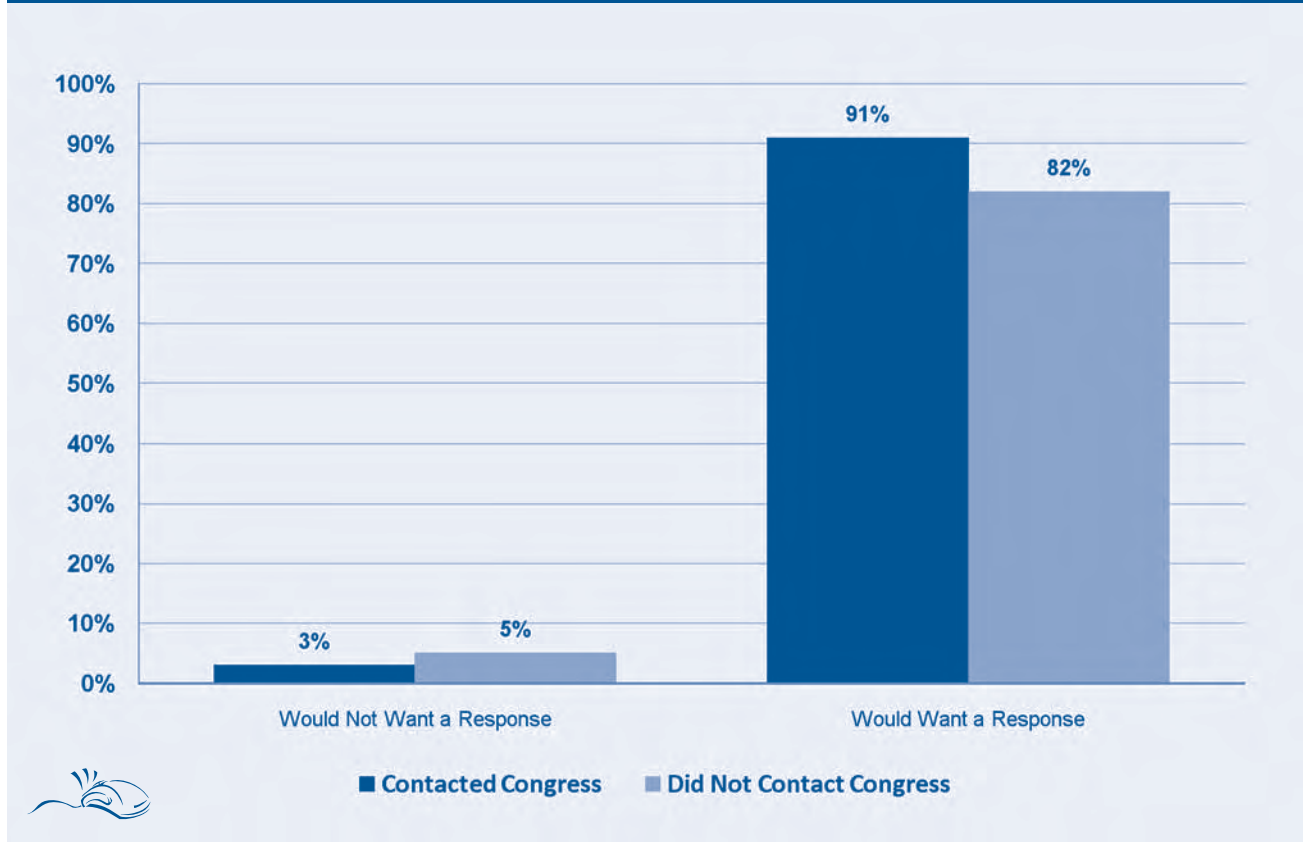
**Figure 19. Internet Users’ Preferred Sources of U.S. Senators’ and Representatives’ Views and Activities**



**6. Internet users wanted responses to their communications with Congress, but they tended not to be satisfied with the responses they received.**

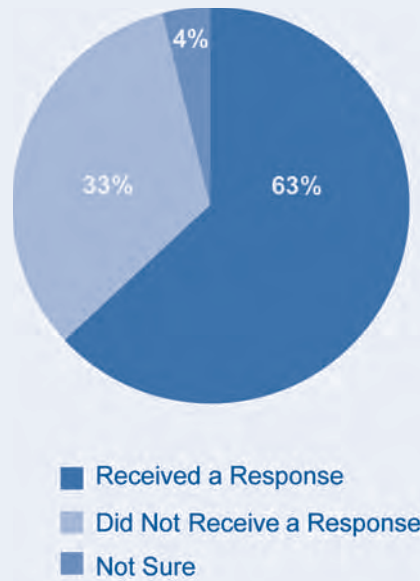
Our survey found that 91% of Internet users who had contacted Congress, and 82% of those who had not, indicated that they would want to receive a response to any messages they sent.

**Figure 20. Internet Users Would Want Responses to Messages They Send to Congress**

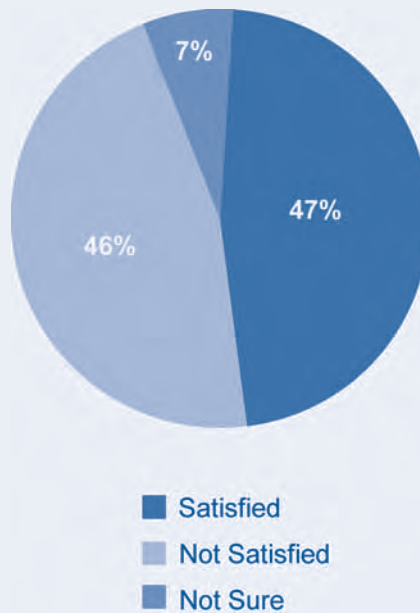


The data also show that nearly two-thirds of those who contacted a congressional office remembered receiving a response to that communication, but only 47% of those who received a response were satisfied with it.

**Figure 21. Only Two-thirds of Internet Users Recall Receiving Responses to Their Most Recent Communication with U.S. Senators and Representatives**

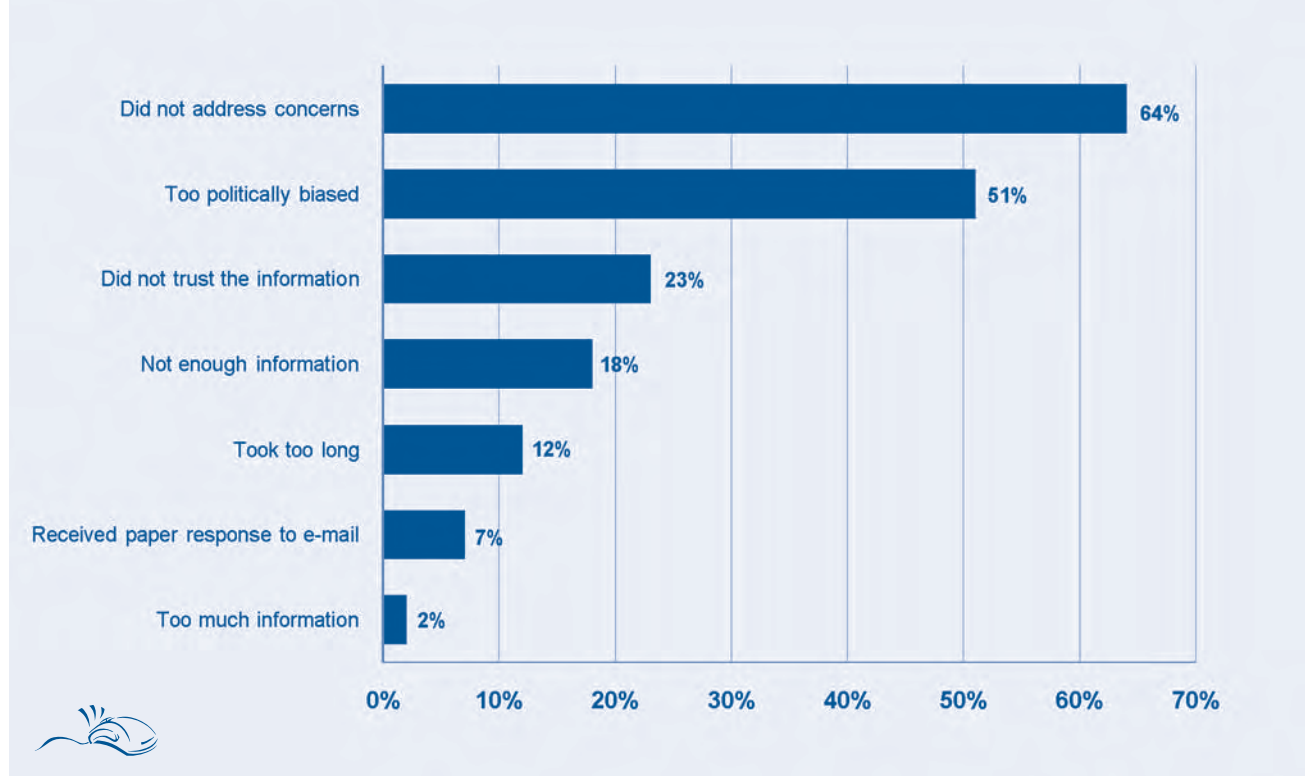


**Figure 22. Roughly Half of Internet Users Who Received a Response to Their Most Recent Communication Were Satisfied with the Response**



The top two reasons for dissatisfaction with responses from congressional offices were that they did not address their concerns and that the information was too politically biased.

**Figure 23. Reasons Internet Users Had for Being Dissatisfied with the Responses to Their Most Recent Congressional Communications**



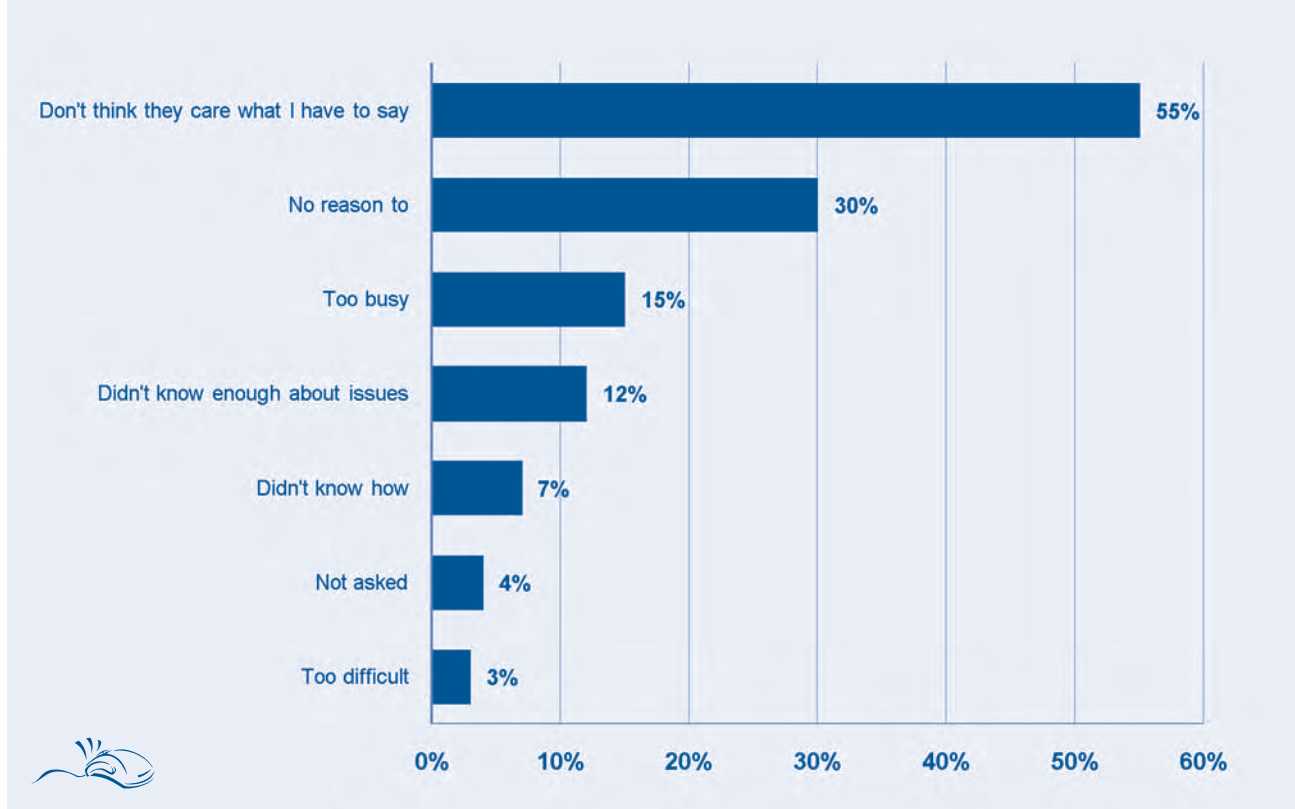
Interestingly, constituents who contacted a Member of Congress to get information or get help with a problem were more likely to be satisfied with the reply. Getting help with a problem from a congressional office often involves casework, which can be difficult and time-consuming for congressional offices to address. However, because this is a direct service to constituents who are often contacting the office as a last resort, it is likely that these respondents were satisfied because their requests were directly addressed. Their needs are more tangible, and the responses to them are more hands-on than are those of people who contact a Member of Congress to express their opinions or register their views.

## 7. Internet users generally felt disconnected from Congress, but wanted to feel engaged.

Research has found that citizen opinions of Congress have become increasingly worse, and our research is in line with this trend.<sup>19</sup> In fact, as Figures 17 and 18 show, just over half of those who contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative in the past five years, and about half of those who did not, view information from Members as informative. However, lower numbers, 39% and 36% respectively, feel that information coming from Members is trustworthy. Neither of these findings bodes well for Congress, which needs to address these trends if it wants to reverse them.

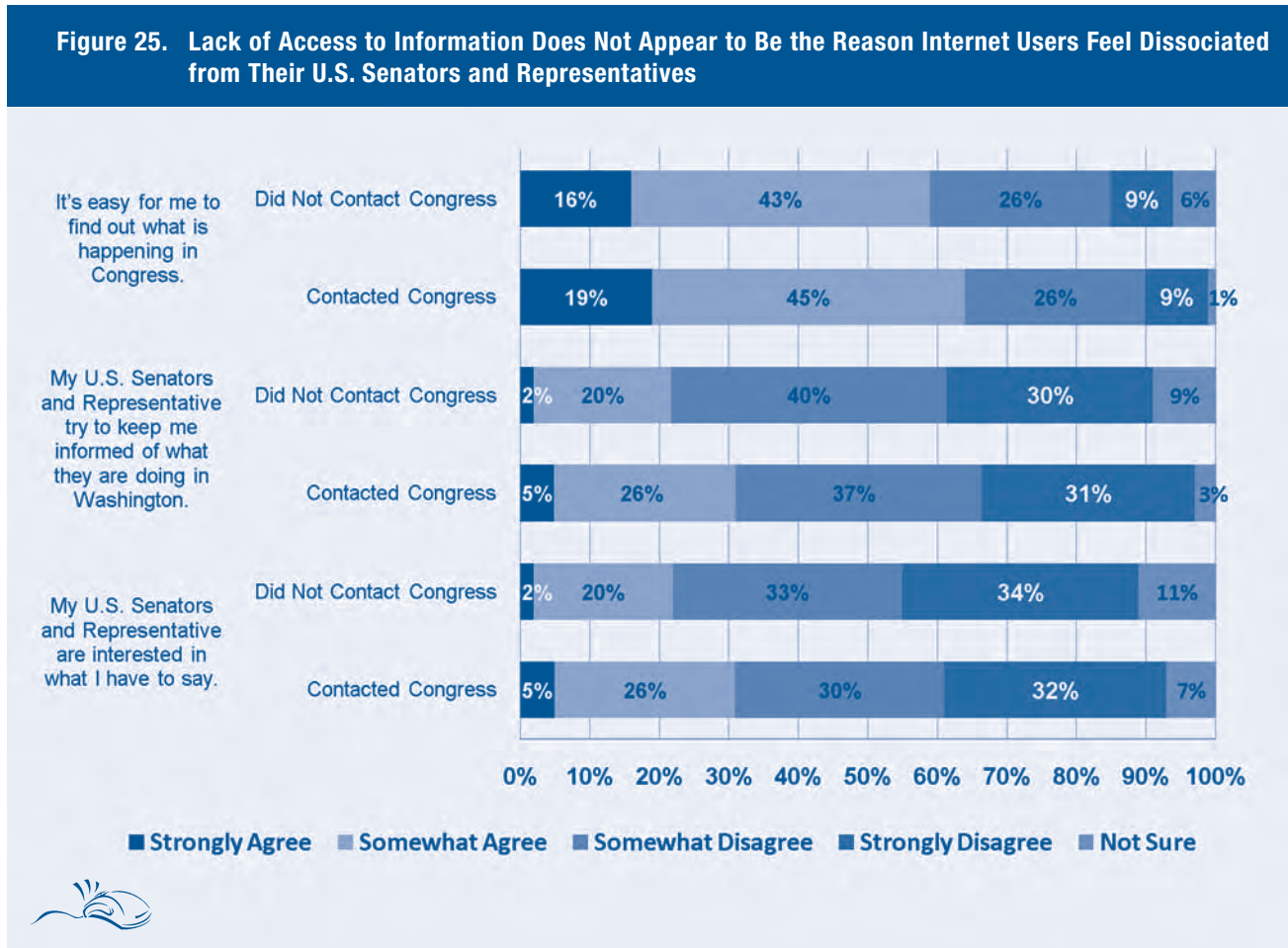
What is even more disconcerting is that nearly 55% of Internet users who did not contact Congress said the reason they did not was that they felt that their U.S. Senators and Representative do not care what they have to say.

**Figure 24. The Most Common Reason Internet Users Did Not Contact Congress Was That They Do Not Think Members Care What They Have to Say**



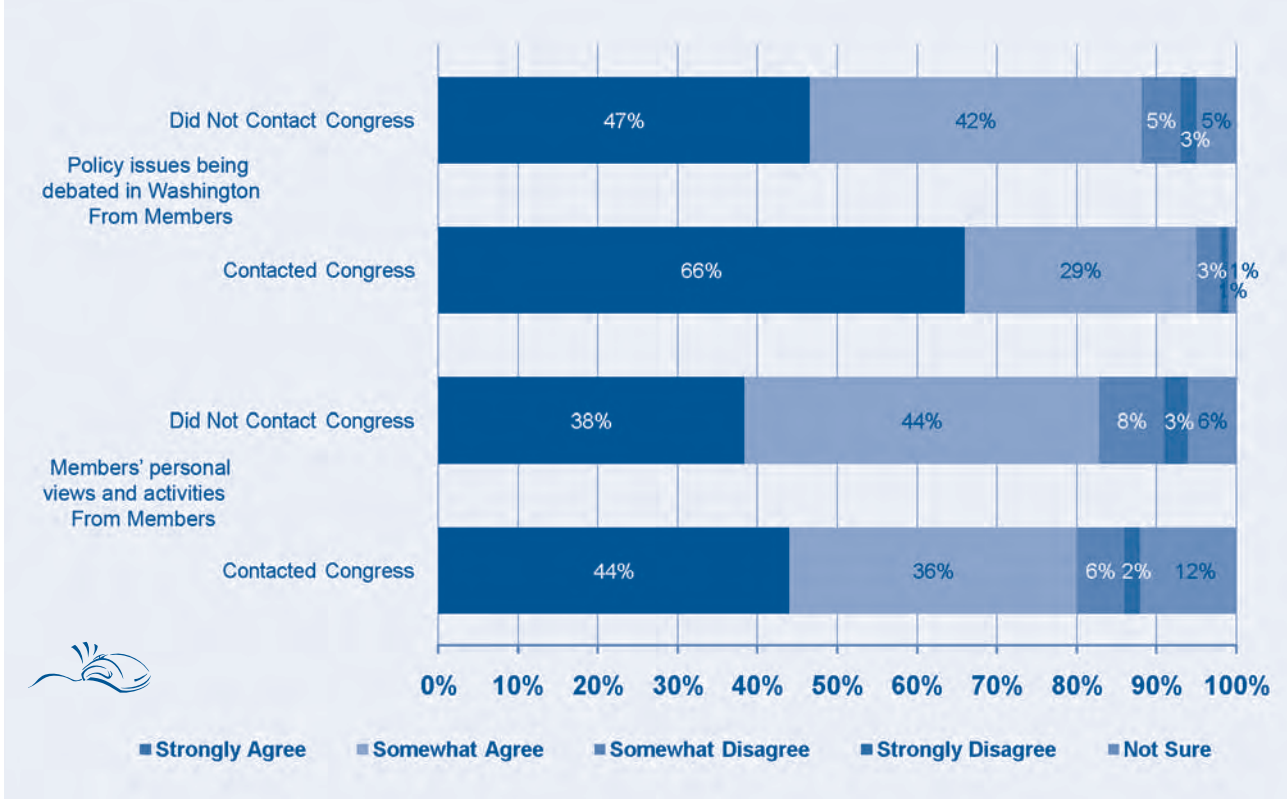
<sup>19</sup> Congress' Approval Rating Ties Lowest in Gallup Records. Lydia Saad. Gallup. May 14, 2008. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/107242/Congress-Approval-Rating-Ties-Lowest-Gallup-Records.aspx>

This is even more troubling when we see, as Figure 25 shows, that only one-third of those who did contact a U.S. Senator or Representative think their Members of Congress are interested in hearing from them. In fact, almost one-third strongly disagreed with the statement “My U.S. Senators and Representative are interested in what I have to say.” That so many of those who contacted Congress feel this way after having communicated with a U.S. Senator or Representative, seems indicative of a disconnect in the communications process about which Congress should be concerned.



Only 31% of those who contacted Congress, and 22% of those who did not, felt their Senators and Representatives try to keep them informed of what is going on in Washington, but a majority of respondents in both groups felt it is easy to find out what is happening in Congress. Citizens do not feel as though their Senators and Representatives are trying to keep them informed or that they care what they have to say, which is likely contributing to the high levels of mistrust of Congress. Yet citizens do not think it is difficult to find out what is happening in Congress, which likely indicates that they are pursuing this information on their own. They do not trust information coming from Congress, so they pursue alternative sources for news and information.

**Figure 26. Internet Users Are Very Interested in Receiving Information from their U.S. Senators and Representatives**



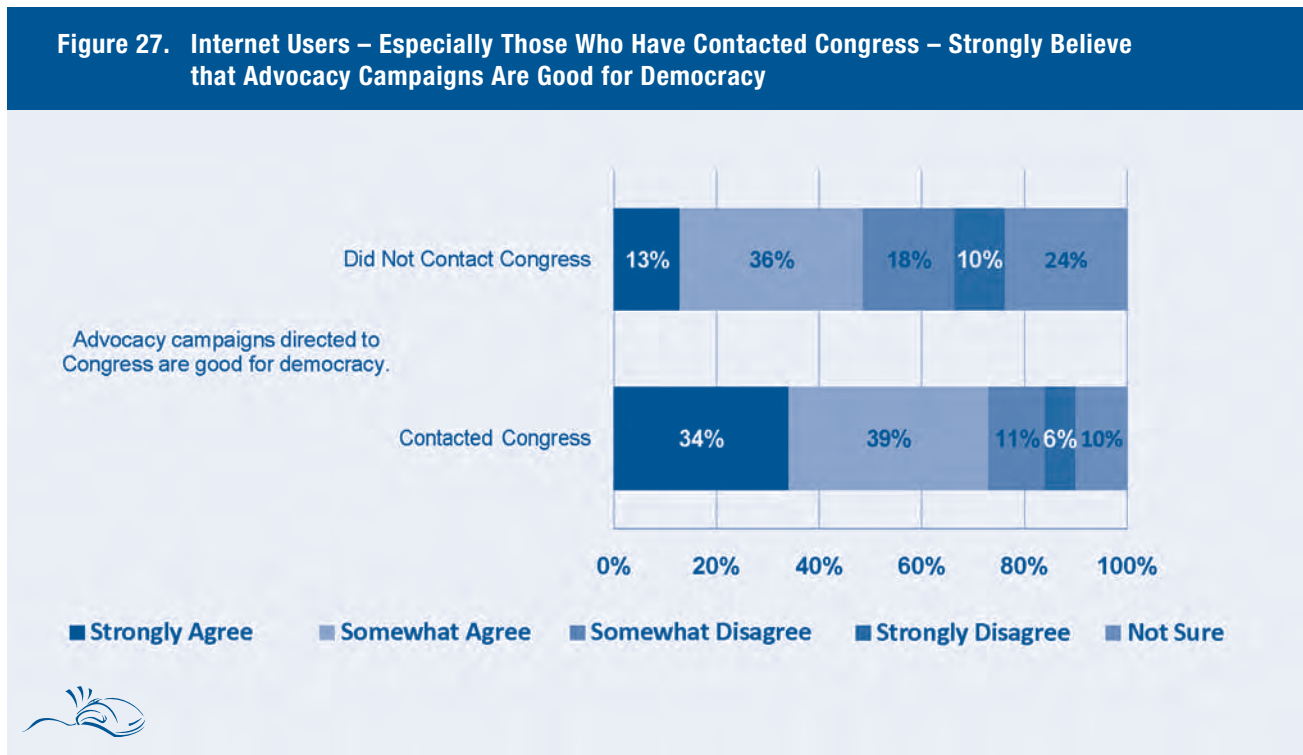
This finding presents a challenge for determining what is really going on with political engagement. Citizens exhibit little trust of information coming from Congress and do not necessarily agree that Members try to keep them informed. Yet many of our survey respondents reported wanting to hear directly from Members of Congress. According to our research, 95% of those who contacted, and 89% of those who did not, agree that they want updates about policy issues being debated in Washington directly from Members. Similarly, 80% of those who contacted, and 82% of those who did not, agree that they want to hear about Members' personal views and activities directly from Members.

This apparent paradox of Internet users not trusting information from Congress while simultaneously wanting to hear from U.S. Senators and Representatives seems to demonstrate that there are opportunities for Members of Congress to change people's perceptions and improve their images by communicating differently. In essence, the data suggest that Americans are dissatisfied with the content of what Congress is communicating to them. Therefore, Congress may want to employ different tone, language or information in their messages to their constituents. For example, CMF found in focus groups with citizens that the participants strongly favored information on congressional Web sites that fostered greater transparency in government. Focus group participants reacted positively to congressional Web sites that posted a clear voting record, explanations of votes, public schedules in the district or state, and in-depth descriptions of issues (explained in plain English).<sup>20</sup> This may help explain why Internet users simultaneously distrust and welcome information from Senators and Representatives. They feel disconnected, but they want to feel engaged. Congress can harness the willingness and enthusiasm of these active citizens to promote effective democracy and improve the reputation of the institution. To do so, however, requires that Members of Congress change the perception that they are not interested in what citizens have to say.

<sup>20</sup> *Constituents and Your Web Site: What Citizens Want to See on Congressional Web Sites*. Dennis Johnson, Congress Online Project. 2001. [http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF\\_Pubs/constituentsandwebsites.pdf](http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF_Pubs/constituentsandwebsites.pdf).

**8. Even with a high level of disaffection toward Congress, Internet users placed a high value on the role of advocacy campaigns in our democracy.**

This finding was not something we anticipated given the high levels of mistrust of Congress and a lack of faith in the information coming from Members. However, 73% of Internet users who had contacted Congress agree that advocacy campaigns are good for democracy, as did almost half of those who had not contacted. This may be related to the high levels of trust in advocacy groups, particularly by those who contacted Congress. These people were more likely to have received encouragement from interest groups, to have visited their Web sites, or to have signed an online petition. Yet, even respondents who did not contact a U.S. Senator or Representative in the last five years found value in the information from the organizations they trust. They turn to them for information, online and off, on where Members stand on issues, on Members' views and activities, and on the policy issues of the day, even if they prefer traditional offline news and information sources over online ones. Internet users felt that interest groups have a place in our democracy and that their right to petition government through a third party is valuable and meaningful. Even 53% of House and Senate staff surveyed for our 2005 report agreed with the statement "Advocacy campaigns directed to Congress are good for democracy."<sup>21</sup>



<sup>21</sup> *Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy*. Brad Fitch, et al. Congressional Management Foundation. 2005. [http://www.cmfweb.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=63&Itemid=55](http://www.cmfweb.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=63&Itemid=55)

## Implications of This Research

Although the communication between citizens and Members of Congress is really just that – two-party communication – it is clear that interest groups and the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns are playing a significant role in the process. In our research with congressional offices, we learned about the mistrust and frustration congressional staff feel toward advocacy campaigns of identical form messages, especially given the incredible volumes of messages they generate. In our surveys with citizens, we identified the importance Americans place on the organizations they trust for helping them learn about what is happening on Capitol Hill and contacting Congress. Although interest groups have always played a role in the public policy process, it seems that the Internet has reinforced, and possibly expanded, their position. For this reason, we must address the implications of our studies not only to congressional offices, but also to the individuals and organizations that design and implement grassroots advocacy campaigns.

### Implications to Congress

1. There is an untapped opportunity to communicate more with engaged, politically active, and motivated constituents.
2. Congress needs to improve online communications.
3. Congressional offices need to rethink their constituent communications strategies.
4. Congressional offices should reconsider how they handle grassroots advocacy campaigns.
5. Congress needs additional resources to effectively manage its 21<sup>st</sup> Century workload.

### Implications to Organizers of Grassroots Advocacy Campaigns

1. The organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns can help facilitate more positive communications between Members and citizens.
2. The organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns have a greater role in – and responsibility for – democratic dialogue than merely winning legislative battles.

## IMPLICATIONS TO CONGRESS

### 1. There is an untapped opportunity to communicate more with engaged, politically active, and motivated constituents.

Congressional offices that are not embracing all constituents who communicate with them are missing opportunities. These people are more politically active than those who do not contact Congress, which means they are the very people offices try hard to reach in so many other ways. By their actions, they are not only initiating their relationships with congressional offices, they are also inviting Members of Congress to communicate with them. In addition to responding to their communications, offices can connect to these people by:

- **Inviting them to take action.** Whether it is to subscribe to an e-newsletter, fill out a survey, attend a town hall meeting back home, participate in a tele-town hall, forward an e-mail to friends, or visit the Web site, offices should consider how to incorporate an invitation to do something in every response they send. This not only demonstrates that the Member cares about what they have to say, it invites citizens to participate in the public policy process, which helps develop connections that can have a lasting impact. One caveat: offices need to be sure they can handle the results. The responses should be managed in a way that makes people feel as though their actions were valuable without creating an unmanageable workload for the office.
- **Building your e-newsletter list in as many ways as possible.** By now most offices have an e-newsletter that they periodically send to subscribers. It is both a House rule and a best practice to ensure e-newsletters are only sent to people who actively request them, but a check box on a Web form is not the only way to invite people to subscribe. Anyone who contacts the office – whether through an in-person meeting, telephone, fax, e-mail or postal mail – should be given the opportunity to subscribe to the e-newsletter. It can be as simple as including language in every reply or providing a paper sign-up sheet at town hall meetings. Naturally, offices that are aggressive about generating subscribers should also ensure the recipients find value in the content they receive. For example, rather than sending out the most recent press releases, offices should consider sending multiple e-newsletters to targeted constituent lists, ensuring that the content matches each person's interest. Offices must also be aware that the House and Senate have mass mailing restrictions prior to primary and general elections.
- **Reach out to some of the organizations that generate advocacy campaigns.** People who got in touch with Congress cared deeply about the issues, whether or not the contact was made at the request of a third party. As a result, offices can be well served by reaching out to some of the organizations that generate campaigns and seeking opportunities to interact in other ways with the people who communicate through them. This can be as easy as including a guest column in a newsletter or participating in an event the group is planning back home.
- **Keeping them informed of the issues they care about.** Those who interact with Congress want to hear from the Senators and Representatives about policy issues being debated in Washington and about the Members' views and activities. By initiating contact, they provide offices with guidance on which issues they would most like to hear about. Though communications must always follow House and Senate franking rules, offices can develop mailings, forums, e-mail lists, and other targeted messages to inform and engage those who contact them.

However offices decide to do it, there appears to be untapped opportunities to reach out more to the people who communicate with them and invite them to remain engaged with the Member.

## 2. Congress needs to improve online communications.

For many congressional offices, there are operational challenges, resource limitations, and even House and Senate rules that hinder their abilities to maximize their use of the Internet. The fact remains, however, that the Internet is here to stay, so Congress – not just individual Member offices – needs to adapt to it. The Internet is the preferred method for citizens to access information about, send messages to, and receive information from Congress. With three-quarters of American adults online,<sup>22</sup> this is not surprising. For those who have Internet access, the Web is often the quickest and easiest way to find information and communicate with others. Unfortunately, many congressional offices have yet to adapt to online tools and techniques. A significant number still respond to e-mail with postal mail, 42% have substandard or failing Web sites, and few have embraced new media tools for better serving online constituents.

What many congressional offices – and the institution of Congress, itself – must realize, however, is that by failing to maximize use of online communications tools, Congress is not only missing opportunities, it is failing to deliver what many citizens have come to take for granted: the ability to find anything they want, and to communicate with whomever they want, online. Offices can better meet constituents' expectations by:

- **Adopting the techniques of online communications.** Almost more important than implementing online technologies is implementing the techniques of online communications. Information online is brief, “cross-referenced” through links to other information, timely, scannable, and increasingly interactive. Internet users have become accustomed to digesting their information in bite-sized pieces that enable them to access further information if they choose. They are also increasingly accustomed to being able to comment on and share information at will. Congressional offices, on the other hand, are prone to providing as much detail as they can and limiting opportunities for feedback. These techniques worked in the broadcast world, but the Internet is a two-way street. This means changing every way Congress communicates, from the content of their responses to the frequency of their communications.
- **Improving congressional Web sites.** Member Web sites are the first place people look to find out where a Senator or Representative stands on an issue. Even people who never contact a Member visit congressional Web sites, so the Web site may be the only chance an office will have to “interact” with a considerable number of constituents. Unfortunately, CMF’s most recent study of congressional Web sites found that the most common letter grade they received was a “D.”<sup>23</sup> Offices that want to build relationships and meet the needs of their online constituents should consider dedicating the effort to build and maintain an effective “virtual office” that is open 24/7.
- **Working smarter, not harder.** Many offices feel the Internet has increased their workloads exponentially because they are trying to force their existing, paper-based processes to fit in an electronic environment. Or because they have not thought through the ramifications of doing something new like an online town hall, e-newsletter, or blog. As a result, they only get the extra work without any of the efficiencies, and they fail to reap the benefits of increased effectiveness. Instead offices should think through – in a strategic, comprehensive way – what online tools are appropriate for their office. Then create the necessary processes, accountability and resources to support them. Then technology is working *for* you.
- **Taking advantage of available resources.** It is not necessary for every congressional office to reinvent the wheel with their Web sites. The Senate, House, Library of Congress, Government Printing Office, and many others offer resources congressional offices can use to provide the content for which their constituents

---

*....the Internet is here to stay, so Congress – not just individual Member offices – needs to adapt to it. The Internet is the preferred method for citizens to access information about, send messages to, and receive information from Congress.*

<sup>22</sup> Pew Internet & American Life Project, October 24 – December 2, 2007 Tracking Survey. [http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/User\\_Demo\\_2.15.08.htm](http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/User_Demo_2.15.08.htm)

<sup>23</sup> 2007 Gold Mouse Report: Lessons from the Best Web Sites on Capitol Hill. Collin Burden et. al., Congressional Management Foundation, 2007. [http://www.cmfweb.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=235](http://www.cmfweb.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=235)

are looking. In an effort to improve their quality, CMF has assessed all congressional Web sites, identified the best practices, and developed guidance to help congressional offices improve their online communications.<sup>24</sup>

- **Harnessing the potential of existing and emerging Internet applications for Congress.**

Most congressional offices are still unsure of why and how best to use tools such as e-newsletters, blogs, podcasts, social networking Web sites (e.g. MySpace, Facebook), wikis, and other applications that are making their way into the Internet mainstream. Often, the offices that are early adopters of new tools and applications serve as guinea pigs and incubators for other offices, and the tools succeed or fail based on the experiences of a small number of offices. It might be more beneficial for the House and Senate to study emerging Internet technologies and their potential applications to Congress so that all offices can utilize the knowledge. This would also help congressional offices more quickly adopt and adapt to the tools being used by Internet users.

The long term benefits of improving congressional online communications go well beyond simply satisfying citizens' needs and expectations. Once systems are in place, online tools can enable Members of Congress to more easily reach greater numbers of their constituents than ever before. Online tools can also provide congressional offices with powerful means of sending and receiving messages, collecting citizen input, interacting with the public, and managing the information they receive more efficiently. The key is for the institutions of the House and Senate, as well as individual congressional offices, to learn to integrate these tools in ways that enable them to be as effective as possible.

### **3. Congressional offices need to rethink their constituent communications strategies.**

Most congressional offices spend a significant amount of time on their outgoing communications. Whether they are drafting responses to constituent messages, direct mail pieces on important issues, paper and e-mail newsletters, press releases for reporters, or talking points for speeches on the House or Senate floor, congressional offices craft and hone their messages to get them just right. After all, effective communication is at the heart of everything Senators and Representatives do. According to our research, however, there appears to be some question about the success of messages sent to constituents in response to direct contacts. For example, fully half of those who said they had received a response to their most recent communication with a Senator or Representative were dissatisfied with it. The most common reasons for dissatisfaction were that the responses did not address their concerns and that they were too politically biased. Furthermore, respondents to our survey felt strongly that their Senators and Representatives do not try to keep them informed and are not interested in what they had to say. If the people who took the initiative to contact Congress felt strongly that their Members are not interested in them, congressional offices may need to rethink their communications strategies.

There are, of course, many possible explanations for disappointment with congressional communication which are out of the control of individual House and Senate offices. For example, there are almost certainly people who will never be satisfied because they disagree with the Member's position on an issue. The fact remains, however, that there are opportunities for congressional offices to improve their images and their communications. For example, offices can:

- **Make the transition from traditional media to new media.** Our research shows that people who have not contacted a Senator or Representative in the past five years and who are not members of an interest group are getting their information about Congress from old media such as television and radio. People who have been in touch with Congress and who are members of an interest group, on the other hand, are more inclined to use the Internet. Most congressional offices dedicate a great deal of their resources to traditional media, often to the detriment or exclusion of new media like Web sites and e-newsletters. That means offices are spending their time and money on media that reaches people who

<sup>24</sup> 2007 Gold Mouse Report: Lessons from the Best Web Sites on Capitol Hill. Collin Burden et al., Congressional Management Foundation. 2007. [http://www.cmfweb.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=235](http://www.cmfweb.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=235)

are less engaged. If offices want to reach the most engaged people, they need to shift their attention and learn to adapt their strategies to new media sensibilities. After all, these are the people who are not only most inclined to communicate with their Senators and Representatives, they are also more likely to be active on issues, to volunteer and give money to political and advocacy campaigns, and – as other research has shown – they are more likely to vote.

- **Let constituents know they are being heard.** Members of Congress have vastly more opportunities now to advance their own agendas with more people than ever before possible. However, our surveys confirm that constituents want to know that the Member cares what they have to say and that their voices have been heard. They want to be acknowledged and respected. When Members focus more on “talking” than “listening,” especially in their replies, they are working at cross purposes. Congressional offices need to shift their thinking and practices away from the traditional media mentality, which focuses on a one-size-fits-all broadcasted message, to the more personal new media mentality, which places greater emphasis on interactivity and exchanges of ideas. This does not have to require added work; it can be as simple as adjusting tone and message to convey that constituent views matter. It can also mean taking advantage of new media not only to invite, but to encourage and show appreciation for interactions. Online polls, tele-town halls, blogs, and online public comment are some of the more time-intensive ways of doing this, but it can also be done by rethinking how to use Web sites to demonstrate accountability and welcome constituent communications. The bottom line is that citizens want to be heard – not “talked at” – by their Senators and Representatives, and offices that adapt their messages accordingly will be well served.
- **Manage constituents’ expectations for action.** Respondents to our surveys who said they contacted Congress to convey their stances on issues were less satisfied with the responses than those who provided or solicited information or requested assistance. This could indicate that people who express their opinions to Congress have some expectation not only that their views will be heard and acknowledged but that they will be acted on. Given that a sizeable number of the messages congressional offices receive attempt to persuade Members to change their views, it will be impossible to please everyone. After all, Members’ votes will always disappoint someone. That said, by helping manage constituent expectations for action – even by acknowledging the disagreement – it is possible that a greater proportion of people will be satisfied with the responses they receive. Offices can do this by clearly conveying their communications policies online and offline, incorporating a shortened version of them into their responses, and always reiterating that the Member does value what constituents have to say. Members can help constituents understand generally what kinds of things they factor into their decisions, what can happen during amendment and debate, and what can cause them to vote for or against a given bill. Knowing that there is more to a Member’s decision than pure politics can help constituents feel reassured that, even if the Member does not vote as they wanted, he/she is looking out for the district’s or state’s interests.
- **Reconsider the tone of your responses.** Our survey found that the most common reason people communicate with Senators and Representatives is to convey their own positions on an issue. They also care deeply about the issues, and they tend to be dissatisfied with the responses to their messages because they do not address their concerns or they seem too politically biased. Some people will never be satisfied, but, given that the people who contact Congress are actually more disaffected than those who do not, it seems worth the effort for congressional offices to revamp their responses to constituents. For example, many use their responses solely as opportunities to talk up the Senator or Representative and explain all the actions and votes he or she has taken on the issue. These messages often sound like press releases or marketing materials. When people express their views and opinions, responses which “sell” the Member may not be the best approach, as it amounts to an exchange of opinion without a meeting of the minds. Congressional offices may want to consider how to craft responses with the primary goal of acknowledging

---

*The bottom line is that citizens want to be heard – not “talked at” – by their Senators and Representatives, and offices that adapt their messages accordingly will be well served.*

constituents' key concerns and a secondary goal of conveying the Member's accomplishments. This is usually more a matter of tone than substance, but the tone of a message from a Member of Congress can make a tremendous difference to constituents.

#### **4. Congressional offices should reconsider how they handle grassroots advocacy campaigns.**

Associations, advocacy groups, unions, coalitions, and the like play an important role in citizens' understanding of, and communications with, Congress. Americans who are members of an interest group, as well as those

---

*When people express their views and opinions, responses which "sell" the Member may not be the best approach, as it amounts to an exchange of opinion without a meeting of the minds.*

who have communicated with Congress, place high trust in, and value on, the information they receive from the organizations with which they are affiliated. Additionally, many who had communicated with Congress did so at the encouragement of a third party. Generally, congressional offices do not dispute the role interest groups and grassroots advocacy campaigns play in the public policy process, but some dispute the value of that role.

As our previous research with congressional staff revealed, there is a growing frustration with, and mistrust of, grassroots advocacy campaigns of identical form messages. Some view the organizers of these campaigns as intermediaries meddling in the relationships between Members of Congress and those they represent. Others have anecdotal stories of constituents saying they *did not* contact the office which has led them to believe identical form campaigns amount to "Astroturf" or ersatz advocacy. Still others believe the organizers of advocacy campaigns are prone to using disingenuous tactics to get what they want, without concern for the consequences of those practices on democracy. As a result, some offices have opted to block or ignore certain advocacy campaigns, especially electronic ones.

In doing so, however, it seems that offices could be doing more harm than good. People rely on the organizations they trust to provide them with information on how public policy affects them, encouragement to get involved in the right way at the right time, and tools to make it as easy as possible to participate. In many cases, citizens proactively join these organizations, and they often pay dues or contribute money to them, specifically because they track the issues that matter most to them. Our surveys show that, rather than viewing these organizations as meddlers, citizens view them as facilitators, and they view grassroots advocacy campaigns as important ways to exercise their democratic rights. In fact, most of our respondents felt strongly that advocacy campaigns are good for democracy. Additionally, our data showed that, no matter the source, motivation, or method of communication, people who contacted Congress cared deeply about the issues.

Interestingly, fully 16% of our respondents who initially said they had not contacted a Senator or Representative in the last five years, after being prompted about requests by third parties, later answered that they had indeed sent such a message to a Senator or Representative. This would seem to correlate with offices' experiences of being told by some of their constituents that they never contacted the office. Perhaps it is sometimes so easy to contact a Member of Congress that some people do not remember having done so. There are also a variety of other explanations which do not involve nefarious practices by advocacy campaigns, such as cookies on computers remembering the wrong profile and a family member sending messages using another family member's name or e-mail address. There are almost certainly some bad actors out there, but in nine years of research on this topic CMF has found little evidence that most of these messages are not genuine. The fact remains that by devaluing or ignoring these communications, congressional offices send a powerful message to a significant number of constituents who believed in earnest they were communicating in the right way at the right time.

With this in mind, congressional offices may want to reconsider their attitudes and practices with respect to grassroots advocacy campaigns. The benefits of doing so go beyond simply demonstrating that the Member values and trusts the communications sent through the organizations which their constituents value and trust. By

embracing grassroots advocacy campaigns, offices can interact more effectively and more often with the most engaged of their constituents. They can develop an understanding of, and even relationships with, the groups generating the campaigns, which can help them in future initiatives. Finally, they can view these organizations – even ones with whom they do not agree – as possible allies and collaborators in educating constituents about the legislative process and facilitating opportunities for them to communicate effectively with the Member. In any case, offices must realize that, whatever their own sentiments about them, their constituents are not going to stop relying on grassroots advocacy campaigns to participate in their civic duties. Offices that persist in devaluing the messages that result do so at their own peril.

## **5. Congress needs additional resources to effectively manage its 21<sup>st</sup> Century workload.**

For some congressional offices, their decisions to devalue, block, or ignore certain messages have less to do with their mistrust of advocacy campaigns of identical form messages and more to do with a need to marshal their resources. In the Internet-enabled new environment in which congressional offices operate, it is not just constituent communications that have increased. With a 24-hour news cycle, citizen journalism through blogs and podcasts, and the increased pace on Capitol Hill, there are more constant and less filtered communications in all aspects of congressional work.

Congressional offices have roughly the same number of staffers as they did in the mid-1970's. With all the new demands technology and the Internet have brought – not just the increased volume of constituent messages – many offices' resources are stretched thin. Our 2005 study found that 73% of the senior managers surveyed indicated that their offices were spending more time on constituent correspondence, and half reported reallocating resources to managing them. Clearly, many offices have already shifted resources away from other responsibilities to be able to reply to constituents. Others have adopted technologies that enable them to be as efficient as possible by automating data entry and other administrative tasks. However, if the trends in constituent communications increase, and if those who contact Senators and Representatives continue to be the more politically-active, influential citizens they currently appear to be, some offices may need additional resources to manage constituent communications while still effectively performing their other duties.

The resources can come in many guises. Increased budgets and staff sizes are important options, but there are significant hurdles to increasing congressional budgets, and there is minimal space left in existing buildings on Capitol Hill to place additional staff. However, to respond to the significantly increased demands not only of constituent communications but also of conducting legislative and representational duties in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it seems that Congress will need to consider entirely new staffing concepts or will need to hire more staff and acquire additional office space for them. Improved technology is another option, especially technology provided at the institutional levels in the House and Senate. Individual offices cannot afford high-end technology, but if it is offered as a shared service, they can avail themselves at a lower cost.

In whatever way more help is provided, it seems that congressional offices would generally benefit from some assistance at the institutional level to manage current levels of citizen communications and enable them to invite and encourage more of the same. After all, we may be seeing a resurgence in civic participation from which the public policy process could truly benefit. As the Internet continues to take hold and expand the options for future engagement, this could continue well into the future. However, Members of Congress need to be able to handle the volume effectively while still conducting the legislative and representational work that is at the heart of their duties. It is possible to strike a balance that satisfies both citizens and congressional offices, but probably not without additional resources.

---

*In any case, offices must realize that, whatever their own sentiments about them, their constituents are not going to stop relying on grassroots advocacy campaigns to participate in their civic duties. Offices that persist in devaluing the messages that result do so at their own peril.*

## IMPLICATIONS TO ORGANIZERS OF GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY CAMPAIGNS

### 1. The organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns can help facilitate more positive communications between Members and citizens.

Although congressional offices are used to receiving far more criticism than praise, they do appreciate being told by their constituents, once in a while, that they are doing a good job. Being re-elected is implicit thanks, but on a day-to-day basis, there is little which tells a Member or her staff that their work is appreciated.

Only 5% of our respondents stated the reason they contacted a Member of Congress as the result of a third party request was to thank a Senator or Representative. In fact, the second and third most commonly cited reason after caring deeply about the issue was that the information provided in the request made them angry or worried them. This seems to indicate that grassroots advocacy campaigns are trying to establish and capitalize on an adversarial relationship between Members of Congress and their constituents — an “us” versus “them” mentality. The organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns should consider taking advantage of opportunities to provide positive feedback to Members of Congress and foster more positive relationships between citizens and their elected officials.

---

*By helping to build strong, respectful relationships between Members of Congress and those they represent, the organization doing the advocacy benefits.*

There may be an advantage in focusing some effort on helping build collegial, or even collaborative, relationships between Members of Congress and their constituents by generating more positive communications to Congress and by using less confrontational tactics with citizens. By helping to build strong, respectful relationships between Members of Congress and those they represent, the organization doing the advocacy benefits. The organization will gain a reputation with both Members and citizens as one that is trying to enhance democratic dialogue and get work done through collaboration rather than through conflict.

### 2. The organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns have a greater role in – and responsibility for – democratic dialogue than merely winning legislative battles.

Our research shows that people participate in advocacy campaigns because they truly believe in them. Our respondents, even those who had not participated in an advocacy campaign or sent a message to a Member of Congress, felt strongly that advocacy campaigns are good for democracy. They also looked to the organizations they trust for information and assistance in getting engaged in public policy, and people who have contacted Congress were often motivated to do so by interest groups. As a result, the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns must realize that they occupy a key role in the connection between their activists and the Members of Congress who represent them, one that must be respected accordingly.

Grassroots advocacy must be about more than just winning. CMF recognizes that most organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns employ good practices. However, there have been instances where, whether inadvertently or on purpose, advocacy campaigns have misled constituents, misrepresented Members' positions and actions, or employed practices which resulted in lasting mistrust between the Member and the constituents who participated in the campaign. Other advocacy campaigns have demonstrated to congressional offices that the organizers did not understand Congress or the legislative process or were more interested in generating contacts for their fundraising than for influencing public policy. Although they are not employed by the bulk of the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns, bad practices erode the trust between Members of Congress and their constituents. They also chip away at the reputation of the industry. They may serve short-term ends by gaining a victory or engaging a large number of citizens, but over time the victories will be harder won if Congress' trust of advocacy campaigns wanes. In addition, engaging citizens will be more difficult if the public's sense of being able to make a difference diminishes. When it comes to democratic communication and the relationship between Members of Congress and their constituents, the ends do not always justify the means.

## Conclusion

As discussed in the introduction to this report, the goal of our *Communicating with Congress* project is to improve the interactions between citizens and Congress. The Internet has affected the relationship between citizens and Congress in many ways, some of which have only begun to be identified and explored. One thing is certain: there are deeply-held frustrations, formidable challenges, and tremendous opportunities on both sides which are often getting in the way of the interactions themselves. There is so much attention being paid to the operational details of sending and receiving messages that it has become easy to lose sight of the big picture. These messages are part of the debate that is at the very heart of a vibrant and robust representative democracy.

The findings of our research are both heartening and daunting to Congress. They are heartening because it appears that citizens really do want to hear from and interact with their Members of Congress. They are daunting because citizens' preferred method for doing so – online – is currently a weak point for many congressional offices. It also seems as though congressional offices face a challenge in improving their images, especially with people who contact them, but the opportunity is certainly there for offices that choose to seize it. Up to now, the incentives to congressional offices for genuinely embracing online communications have been unclear, since there has been limited data to demonstrate the need and value to doing so. Our research now offers some compelling reasons. After all, it seems that the people who are most engaged – those who have contacted Congress, who are involved in other political activities, and who are members of interest groups – are even more interested in using online tools for civic engagement than their less politically active counterparts.

This research, especially considered alongside previous *Communicating with Congress* studies, also presents some challenges to the organizers of grassroots campaigns. Interest groups definitely play an important role in how citizens are getting information about Congress and how they are motivated to contact Congress. Even citizens who have not contacted Congress are inclined to trust and want to receive information about Congress from the organizations with which they are affiliated. With that in mind, however, the organizers of grassroots campaigns must acknowledge that their campaigns are necessarily about more than just winning a legislative victory. They are about the democratic process, citizen engagement, and the relationship between Members of Congress and those they represent.

Grassroots campaigns must behave responsibly both toward the citizens they are informing and mobilizing and the Members of Congress they are trying to influence. Organized citizen advocacy and interest groups have played a role in the democratic process practically since the founding of our country, but only with the advent of the Internet has it become so easy and inexpensive to organize an advocacy campaign that almost anyone can do it. However, just because something can be done easily and cheaply does not mean it should be done. As greater capabilities become available, interest groups must carefully consider the impact their strategies and practices will have not only on the outcome of the debate they are trying to influence, but also on the long-term health of our democracy.

Although our findings present challenges to both Congress and the public affairs community, they are, by and large, very hopeful. The Internet has made it possible to engage more people than ever before and to invite them

to participate in the public policy process. People want to hear from their Senators and Representatives, and they are looking to the organizations they trust to give them the information and tools they need to help convey their own views to Congress. More people than ever before appear to be communicating with Congress. This presents great opportunities for Members of Congress and for interest groups to use this momentum to improve citizen participation in the public policy process.

The Internet has tremendous potential and power to enhance democratic dialogue. The challenge now is simply to harness it effectively.



CONGRESSIONAL  
MANAGEMENT  
FOUNDATION

---

---

SPONSORED BY



**BlueCross BlueShield  
Association**

An Association of Independent  
Blue Cross and Blue Shield Plans

