

Social Networking and Constituent Communication: Member Use of Twitter During a Two-Week Period in the 111th Congress

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September 21, 2009

Congressional Research Service
7-5700
www.crs.gov
R40823

c11173008

Summary

During the past 15 years, the development of new electronic technologies has altered the traditional patterns of communication between Members of Congress and constituents. Many Members now use e-mail, official websites, blogs, Youtube channels, and Facebook pages to communicate with their constituents—technologies that were either non-existent or not widely available 15 years ago.

These technologies have arguably served to potentially enhance the ability of Members of Congress to fulfill their representational duties by providing greater opportunities for communication between the Member and individual constituents, supporting the fundamental democratic role of spreading information about public policy and government operations. In addition, electronic technology has reduced the marginal cost of constituent communications; unlike postal letters, Members can reach large numbers of constituents for a fixed cost. Despite these advantages, electronic communications have raised some concerns. Existing law and chamber regulations on the use of communication media such as the franking privilege have proven difficult to adapt to the new electronic technologies.

This report examines Member use of one specific new electronic communication medium: Twitter. After providing an overview and background of Twitter, the report analyzes patterns of Member use of Twitter during two one-week periods in July and August 2009. This report is inherently a snapshot in time of a dynamic process. As with any new technology, the number of Members using Twitter and the patterns of use may change rapidly in short periods of time. Thus, the conclusions drawn from this data can not be easily generalized nor can these results be used to predict future behavior.

The data show that 158 Representatives and Senators are registered with Twitter (as of August 2009) and issued a total of approximately 1,187 "tweets" during the data collection periods in July and August 2009. With approximately 29% of House Members and 31% of Senators registered with Twitter, Members sent an average of 85 tweets per day collectively. House Republicans sent the most tweets (54%), followed by House Democrats (27%), Senate Republicans (10%), and Senate Democrats (9%). The data also suggest that more tweets were sent on Thursday than any other day of the week.

Members' use of Twitter can be divided into six categories: position taking, press or web links, district or state activities, official congressional action, personal, and replies. The data suggest that the most frequent type of tweets were press and web link tweets, which comprised 43% of in-session and 46% of recess tweets. This is followed by official congressional action tweets during session (33%) and position-taking tweets during recess (14%).

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Introduction

During the past 15 years, the development and adoption of new electronic technologies has altered the traditional patterns of communication between Members of Congress and constituents. Many Members now use e-mail, official websites, blogs, Youtube channels, and Facebook pages to communicate with their constituents—technologies that were either non-existent or not widely available 15 years ago.

These technologies have arguably served to potentially enhance the ability of Members of Congress to fulfill their representational duties by providing greater opportunities for communication between the Member and individual constituents, supporting the fundamental democratic role of spreading information about public policy and government operations.[1] However, electronic communications have raised some concerns. Existing law and chamber regulations on the use of communication media such as the United States Postal Service have proven difficult to adapt to the new electronic technologies. In addition, electronic media could provide Members with the ability to easily communicate information traditionally sent to the district (or state) with non-constituents or non-U.S. residents.

This report examines Member use of one specific new electronic communication medium: Twitter. After providing an overview and background of Twitter, the report analyzes patterns of Member use of Twitter during two one-week periods in July and August 2009.[2] This report is inherently a snapshot in time of a dynamic process. As with any new technology, the number of Members using Twitter and the patterns of use may change rapidly in short periods of time. Thus, the conclusions drawn from this data can not be easily generalized nor can these results be used to predict future behavior.

Constituent Communication

Members of Congress have more choices and options available to communicate with constituents than they did 15 years ago. In addition to traditional modes of communication such as townhall meetings, telephone calls, and postal mail, Members can now reach their constituents via e-mail, websites, tele-townhalls, online videos, social networking sites, and other electronics-based communication applications.

The rise of such electronic communication has altered the traditional patterns of communication between Members and constituents. Although virtually all Members continue to use traditional modes of constituent communication, use of new communications technology is increasing.[3] For

[1] Alfred A. Porro and Stuart A. Ascher, "The Case for the Congressional Franking Privilege," *University of Toledo Law Review*, vol. 5 (Winter 1974), pp. 280-281.

[2] Other studies have been conducted on the use of Twitter by Members of Congress. For example see Jennifer Golbeck, Justin Grimes, and Anthony Rogers, "Twitter Use by the U.S. Congress," working paper, College Park, MD, 2009. [Hereafter, *Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers, 2009*]. Goldbeck, Grimes, and Rogers collected a total of approximately 6,000 tweets for their analysis. A copy is available from CRS upon request. Also, see Daniel de Vise, "Tweeting Their Own Horns," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2009, p. A13; and University of Maryland, College Park, "UM Study Shows Congressional Use of Twitter Falls Short," press release, September 15, 2009, http://www.newsdesk.umd.edu/culture/release.cfm?articleID=1964.

[3] For journalistic accounts of the rise of electronic communications in Congress, see Elizabeth Brotherton, "A Different (continued...)

example, prior to 1995, there was virtually no e-mail traffic between Members and constituents.[4] In 2008, almost 200 million e-mails were sent to the House of Representatives, and a similar number were sent from House computers.[5] Member official websites, blogs, Youtube channels, and Facebook pages—all non-existent several years ago—also receive significant traffic.[6] Conversely, the amount of postal mail sent to Congress has dropped by more than 50% during the same time period.[7] In addition, electronic technology has reduced the marginal cost of constituent communications; unlike postal letters, Members can reach large numbers of constituents for a fixed cost.[8]

Member use of electronic communications has raised several concerns. Some of these concerns are similar to those associated with traditional modes of constituent communications, such as the potential electoral advantage that the franking privilege may confer on incumbent Members.[9] Other issues, such as the use of third-party communication software platforms, are unique to the new electronic mediums.[10] In addition, existing law and chamber regulations on the use of communication media, such as the United States Postal Service, have proven difficult to apply directly to the new electronic technologies.[11]

Twitter

Created in 2006 by developer Jack Dorsey as a tool to keep in touch with friends, Twitter is a web-based social networking service that allows users to send and read short messages. [12] Also considered a micro-blogging site, Twitter users send "tweets" of up to 140 characters. These

(...continued)

Kind of Revolution; Technology Redefines Constituent Outreach," *Roll Call*, September 10, 2007, p. 1; Amy Doolittle, "31 Days, 32 Million Messages," *Politico*, February 27, 2007, p. 1; Jonathan Kaplan, "2008 Candidates search Web for next new thing," *The Hill*, November 29, 2006, p. 6; and David Haase, "Twitter: One More Medium, Much Shorter Messages," *Roll Call*, July 23, 2009, p. 4.

[4] Chris Casey, *The Hill on the Net: Congress Enters the Information Age* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Academic Press, Inc., 1996), pp. 29-35.

[5] Data provide by the Office of the Chief Administrative Office, House of Representatives.

[6] A survey of the Youtube Senate Hub homepage (http://www.youtube.com/user/senatehub) finds a large range in the number of views each video has received. Some videos have only a few dozen views while others have received tens of thousands of views.

[7] Data provided by the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer of the House of Representatives and the Office of the Secretary of the Senate. See also Kathy Goldschmidt and Leslie Ochreiter, *Communicating with Congress: How the Internet has Changed Citizen Identification*, Congressional Management Foundation, Washington, DC.

[8] This substantially differentiates electronic mail from franked mail, which does incur a marginal cost. See CRS Report RL34188, *Congressional Official Mail Costs*, by Matthew Eric Glassman.

[9] See CRS Report RL34274, *Franking Privilege: Historical Development and Options for Change*, by Matthew Eric Glassman.

[10] See Emily Yehle, "Youtube Gets No $, but Good PR," *Roll Call*, January 14, 2009, p. 4.

[11] For specific House and Senate policies, see U.S. Senate Internet Services Usage Rules and Policies, adopted September 19, 2009, available at http://www.senate.gov/usage/internetpolicy.htm; and House of Representatives Member's Handbook, Committee on House Administration, available at http://cha.house.gov/members_handbook.aspx.

[12] Twitter, "Where did Twitter Come From?," *About Twitter*, http://twitter.com/about. For more information about social networking see danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, "Social Networking Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 13, no. 1 (October 2007), pp. 210-230; and Lee Humphreys, "Mobile Social Networks and Social Practice: A Case Study of Dodgeball," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 13, no. 1 (October 2007), pp. 341-360.

tweets are displayed on an author's Twitter home page and on the pages of people subscribed to his or her RSS feed.[13]

Sending Tweets

Twitter enables individual users to post thoughts on any number of topics or activities. While Twitter use varies, it has been used by individuals and organizations to state opinions, promote events, and announce the release of products and services. Several legislative branch entities actively use Twitter to communicate with interested parties. These include the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO),[14] the Library of Congress (LOC),[15] and the Government Printing Office (GPO).[16] In addition, Restaurant Associates, the House's food service vendor, uses Twitter to announce daily specials and events. Posting under the user name "ushrcafes," a typical tweet might look like this:

> It's Panini Week in Cannon Cafe! Today's featured panini is Chicken Parmesan. Buy a panini and get a free 16oz fountain drink all week![17]

Because of the 140 character limit on tweets, Twitter messages are necessarily short. The brevity of the messages highlights the ease in which tweets can be quickly sent from mobile devices to followers around the world. The rapid transmission of information allows individuals and groups to communicate instantly without limitation of physical distance.

Following Twitter

Twitter allows individual users to "follow" other Twitter subscribers and read their tweets from the Twitter homepage. Individuals may choose to follow another Twitter account if they are interested in the information provided, are friends with the Twitter account holder, or if they are a "fan" of an activity or place. Following another user's Twitter account allows for almost instant access to his or her tweets. This can be useful if a follower is looking for a featured item or to better understand the activities of the person or group he or she is following. Individuals who "follow" an individual Twitter user can have instant access to tweets through devices such as a Blackberry, iPhone, or other similar mobile, internet-ready devices.

Data Analysis

This report analyzes the following questions related to Member use of Twitter:

- What proportion of Members are using Twitter?

[13] An RSS feed, which stands for Really Simple Syndication, is an opt-in service that allows users to receive targeted content from webpages, blogs, and online news sources. For more information see Tom Barnes, "RSS: Marketing's Newest Communication Channel," *Journal of Website Promotion*, vol. 1, no. 4 (2005), pp. 15-30.

[14] U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Twitter*, http://twitter.com/usgao.

[15] Library of Congress, *Twitter*, http://twitter.com/librarycongress.

[16] U.S. Government Printing Office, *Twitter*, http://twitter.com/USGPO.

[17] House Dining Services, tweet, September 1, 2009, http://twitter.com/ushrcafes/status/3689523683.

- How often and when are Members using Twitter?
- How widely are Member tweets being followed?
- What are Members tweeting about?

Methodology

For two non-successive weeks, July 26-August 1 and August 9-August 16, 2009, Members and Senators who are registered to use Twitter were tracked for their submissions. The website TweetCongress[18] was used to analyze and count all the tweets issued by Representatives and Senators during these two one-week time periods. During the first week of data collection, the House and Senate were in session. During the second week of data collection, the House and Senate were in recess.

Several caveats accompany the results presented. First, CRS relies on TweetCongress's identification and aggregation of Member tweets, which claims to be comprehensive, but may not be exhaustive. Second, the analysis treats all Member tweets as structurally identical, because each individual tweet reveals no information about its genesis. In some cases, Members might be personally tweeting, whereas in others they are delegating Twitter responsibilities to their communications staff. CRS draws no distinction between the two. Similarly, some Members use Twitter as a communication medium in their official public capacity as Members, whereas others use Twitter as a communication medium for their campaign. Although there are important differences in the laws and chamber rules governing these two uses, CRS draws no distinction between the two in its analysis. Third, these results cannot be used to predict future behavior.

Finally, the analysis covers only two weeks of Member tweeting. Therefore, it is inherently a snapshot in time of a dynamic process. As with any new technology, the number of Members using Twitter and the patterns of use may change rapidly in short periods of time. Thus, the conclusions drawn from this data can not be easily generalized.

Who Is Using Twitter?

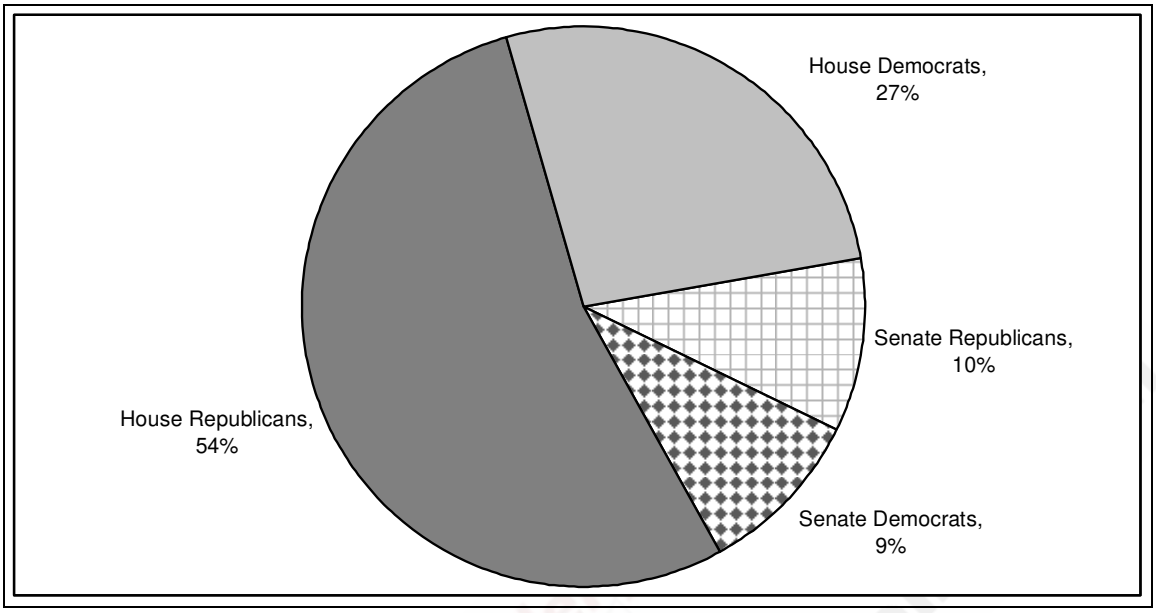
As of August 16, 2009, a total of 158 Members of Congress were registered with Twitter, 31 Senators and 127 Representatives.[19] Although more than 80% of those registered are Representatives, registration rates of each chamber are approximately equal in the House (29%) and the Senate (31%). **Figure 1** presents the chamber and party affiliation of the 158 registered Members.

[18] See http://tweetcongress.org. Tweet Congress is a website that encourages more Members of Congress to use Twitter. The website tracks every Representative and Senator who uses Twitter, and reports their tweets in an ongoing stream.

[19] See http://tweetcongress.org for current figures.

Figure 1. Chamber and Party Affiliation of the 158 Members Registered with Twitter

As of August 16, 2009



Source: CRS analysis of TweetCongress.org data, July 26 to August 1 and August 9 to August 16, 2009.

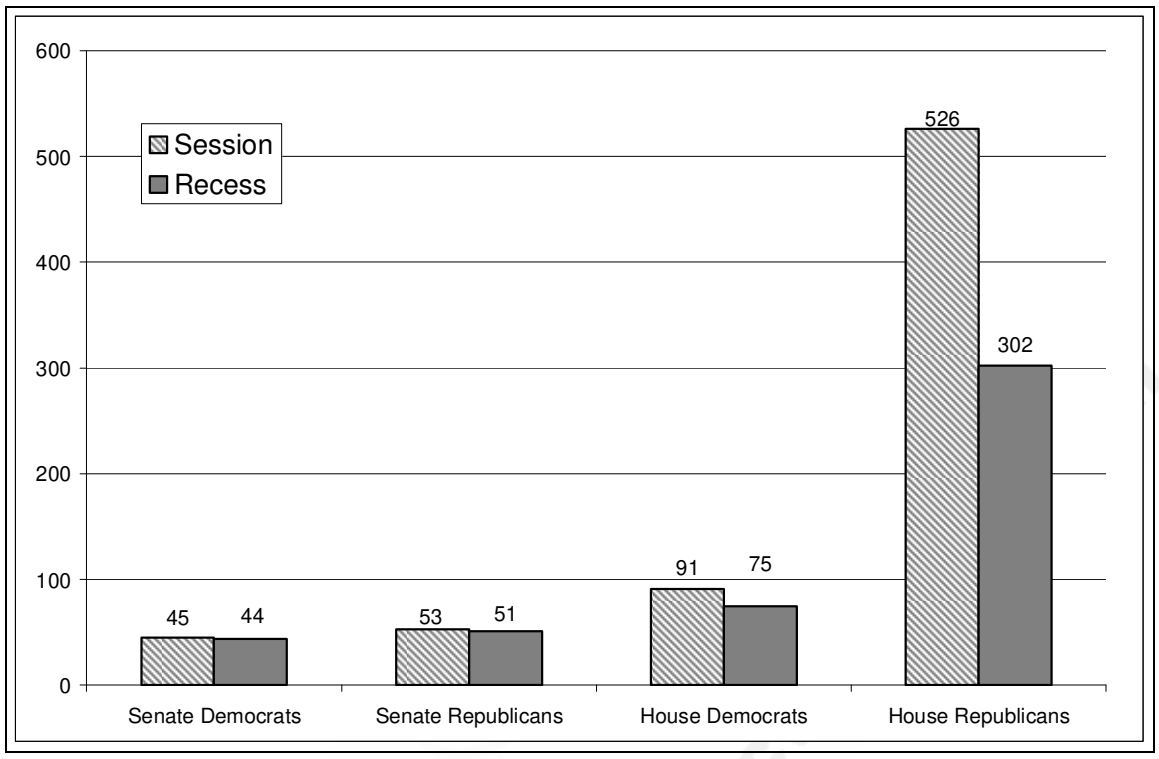
As shown in **Figure 1**, more than half (54%) of the Members registered with Twitter are Republican Members of the House of Representatives. Overall, 64% of registered Members are Republican and 36% are Democrats.

In addition to the registration data in **Figure 1**, by collecting data for time periods where both the House and the Senate were in session and out of session (in recess), patterns emerged suggesting consistent Twitter usage by Republicans and Democrats regardless of chamber. **Figure 2** shows the number of tweets sent by party and chamber affiliation.

House Republicans, who constitute 54% of Members registered with Twitter, sent approximately 74% of all tweets during session and approximately 64% of tweets during recess. This is in contrast to House Democrats, who sent 13% of total tweets in session and 16% during recess. Overall, the data also suggest that Senators tweeted less than House Members. In session, Senate Republicans (7%) and Democrats (6%) tweeted almost equally. Although the percentage of Senators tweeting increased during recess (11% for Republicans and 9% for Democrats), the overall usage remained consistent.

Figure 2. Number of Tweets Issued by Members of Congress

Including Session and Recess Comparison



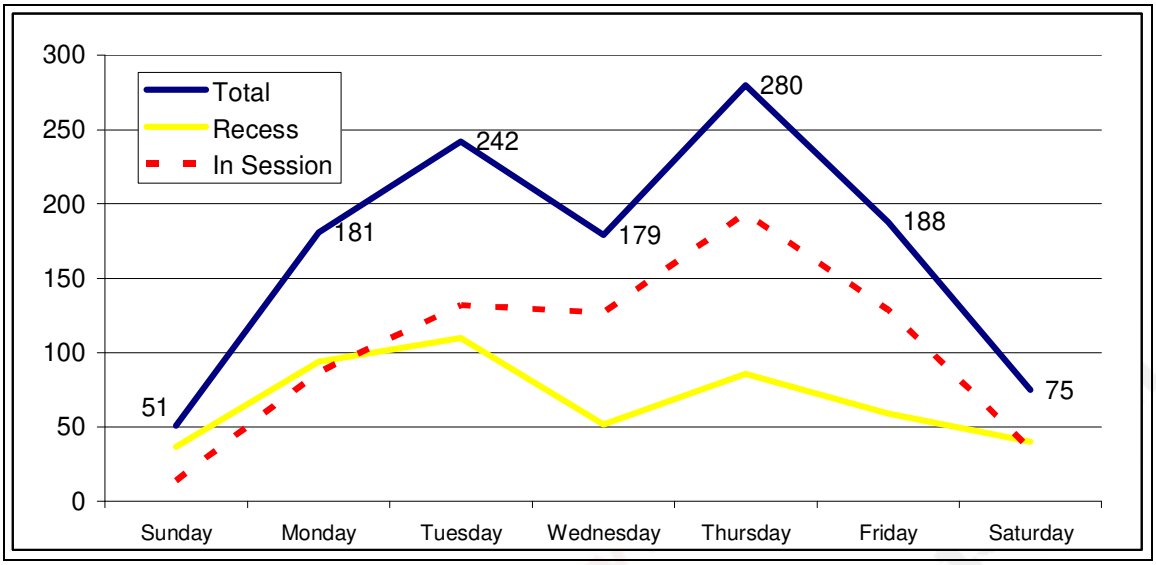
Source: CRS analysis of TweetCongress.org data, July 26 to August 1 and August 9 to August 16, 2009.

How Much Is Twitter Being Used?

During the two non-consecutive weeks of observation, Members sent a total of 1,187 tweets, for an average of almost 85 Member tweets per day. Just over 60% of tweets (715) were sent during the first week of observation, when both the House and Senate were in session; just under 40% of tweets (472) were sent during the second week of observation, when both the House and Senate were out of session. **Figure 3** reports the number of tweets sent by Members during each day of the week of the observation period.

Figure 3. Member Tweets, by Day of Week

Includes In Session, Out of Session, and Total Tweets



Source: CRS analysis of TweetCongress.org data, July 26 to August 1 and August 9 to August 16, 2009.

As shown in **Figure 3**, Member tweeting during recess was relatively uniform; no day had less than 40 tweets and no day had more than 110 tweets. During session, however, the tweet rate varied more significantly; only 14 tweets were sent on Sunday, but 194 were sent on Thursday. Members were least likely to tweet during Saturday and Sunday, in both the session and recess observation period.[20]

Each tweet was coded according to two main characteristics: who issued the tweet and the type of tweet issued. All tweets were coded according to the issuer's party affiliation and whether the Member serves in the House or the Senate. All tweets were also coded into discrete categories concerning the type of message issued. To maintain consistency in coding, one author coded all of the data analyzed.

What Are Members Tweeting About?

To assess the content of Member tweets, six major message categories were hypothesized: position taking, press or web link, district or state, official or congressional action, personal or other, and reply.[21] Each observed Member tweet was coded into one, and only one, category.

[20] Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers found a variant pattern of Twitter usage. Their data shows that more tweets are sent on Wednesday than any other day of the week. *Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers, 2009*, p. 4.

[21] These six categories constitute one plausible way to examine the data collected from Twitter; other categories may also be defensible. These six categories, however, are differentiable from each other, and capture all the Tweets issued during this two-week time period.

The categories were defined as follows:

Position-Taking

Tweets in which a Representative or Senator took a position on a policy or political issue. The expressed position could concern a specific bill under consideration or a general policy issue.

> Met with Bernanke this morning. Reiterated my support for S. 604, legislation to audit the Federal Reserve.[22]

> Listened to the President tonight and what we need is a new bill, not a new speech. The problem isn't the messenger, it's the message.[23]

Press or Web link

Tweets in which a Representative or Senator provided information about an upcoming media appearance or included a link to another website, such as a newspaper, blog, video, or official press release. All tweets with a web-link were coded in this category.

> Testimony given in front of my sub comm on contracting appears to be misleading at best. http://bit.ly/UqmPH[24]

> On Rachel Maddow right after this commercial break. Tune in![25]

District or State

Tweets in which a Representative or Senator discussed a trip, visit, or event in a home district or state. Tweets might include invitations for Tweet recipients to attend town hall meetings or events in the state or district.

> Reminder that I'm holding a health care town hall TOMORROW (Sept. 2) in the Rancho Buena Vista high school gym at 630 PM. #tcot[26]

> Awesome Jefferson parade. Passionate crowd. People calling for leadership.[27]

Official Congressional Action

Tweets in which a Representative or Senator described or recounted an official congressional action. For example, a Member might tweet about a roll call vote, or discuss participation in a committee hearing or recent trip abroad.

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[22] http://twitter.com, September 10, 2009.

[23] http://twitter.com, September 9, 2009.

[24] http://twitter.com, September 1, 2009.

[25] http://twitter.com, September 9, 2009.

[26] http://twitter.com, September 1, 2009.

[27] http://twitter.com, September 20, 2009.

> Beginning the "vote-a-rama" - where we vote on a bunch of budget amendments one after another, all day and late into the night.[28]
>
> McCain alternative failed 38-60 #dembudget #tcot[29]

Personal

Tweets in which a Representative or Senator discussed events in his or her personal life or provided opinions concerning matters that were explicitly unrelated to work in Congress.

> While in St. Joseph I made a second stop at the Stetson outlet store to get a second pair of Levi's.[30]
>
> I'm at a joint performance with Steven Curtis Chapman and Michael W. Smith and about to have lunch with them in the Capitol[31]

Reply

Tweets in which a Representative or Senator directly replied to another person via Twitter. Reply tweets begin with the "@" symbol and are followed by the addressee's Twitter username. All tweets that begin with the "@" symbol were coded in this category.

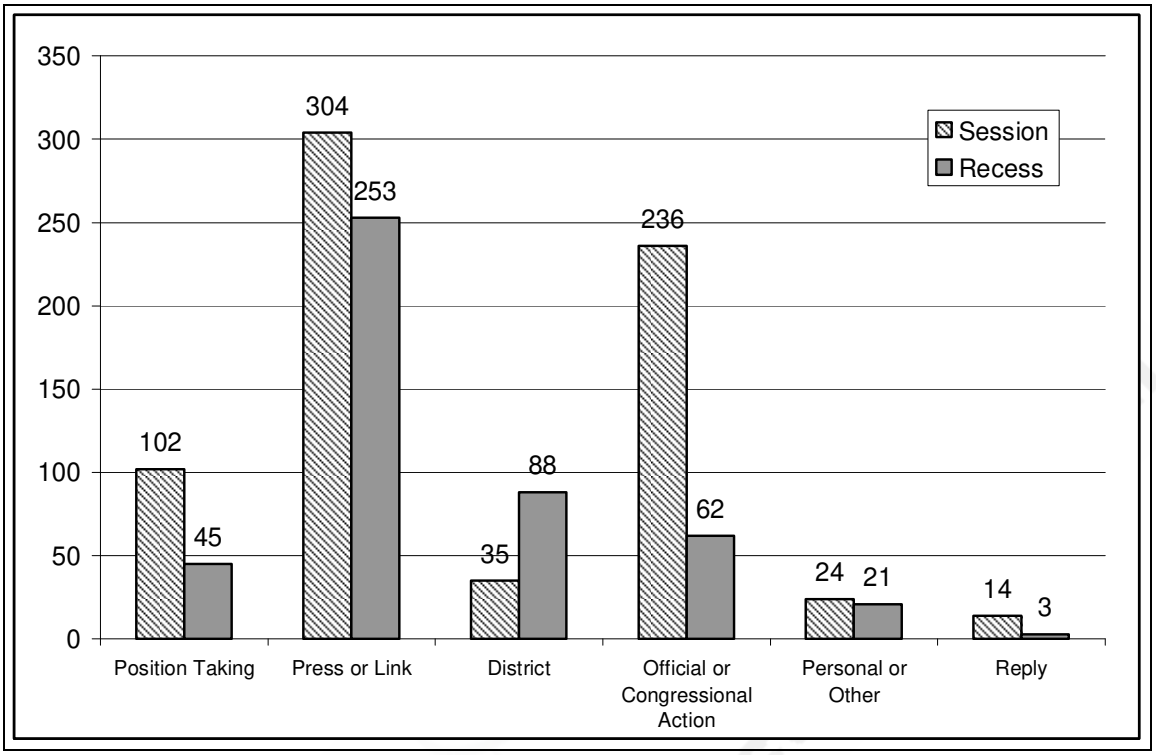
> @CitizenTweet Thanks for your tweet. I voted against H.R. 1388. http://is.gd/p97m[32]
>
> @darrenlabrum Thank you for being my 3,000th follower. Who is going to be Mr. or Mrs. 4,000?[33]

Figure 4 reports the number of Member tweets by category.

[28] http://twitter.com, April 2, 2009.
[29] http://twitter.com, April 2, 2009.
[30] http://twitter.com, September 1, 2009.
[31] http://twitter.com, April 2, 2009.
[32] http://twitter.com, April 2, 2009.
[33] http://twitter.com, April 2, 2009.

Figure 4. Member Tweets, by Category

Including Session and Recess Comparison



Source: CRS analysis of TweetCongress.org data, July 26 to August 1 and August 9 to August 16, 2009.

As shown in **Figure 4**, the most common Member tweets both during session and recess were "press or link" tweets. These tweets comprised 43% of in-session tweets and 46% of recess tweets. During session, both "position taking tweets" and "official or congressional action" tweets were common, comprising 14% and 33% of all tweets, respectively. Such tweets were less common during recess. Conversely, "district" tweets contributed a much larger proportion of tweets during recess (18%) than during session (5%). This may reflect the changing nature of Members' daily duties in session and during recess. The two remaining types of tweets—"personal or other" and "reply" comprised less than 5% of all tweets, both in session and during recess.

Technological innovations have altered traditional patterns of communication between Members of Congress and their constituents. However, at this time, Twitter largely facilitates a one-way transmission of information from Members to the public. Members use Twitter to convey information about their official actions, press appearances, or policy positions. Given the limited data available thus far, a two-way exchange of information or policy dialogue, appears less frequent. Of the 1,187 tweets coded, only 17 (1.4%) were direct replies to other tweets.[34]

[34] A different coding schema with additional categories produces slightly different results. Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers used a nine categories coding scheme with categories including direct communication, personal messages, activities, information, requesting action, fundraising, and unknown. They found that the majority of tweets were information tweets (53%), followed by location or activity tweets (27%), and constituent (or outside Congress) communications (7%). *Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers, 2009*, p. 4.

How Widely Are Member Tweets Being Followed?

The effectiveness of using Twitter to communicate information is partially dependent on the number of "followers" that have subscribed to an individual Twitter stream. The number of followers of any individual stream varies widely; a private citizen using Twitter only to communicate with his or her family might have only a handful of followers, whereas several contemporary celebrities currently have millions of followers.[35] Because the marginal cost of sending a Tweet to an additional follower is zero, there is little reason for a Member using Twitter to prefer fewer subscribers.

On September 2, 2009, data were collected on the number of subscribed followers for each Member of Congress with a registered Twitter account. In aggregate, Members had a total of 1,733,065 followers. The median Representative had 1,617 followers, with the most-followed Representative having more than 13,000 followers and the least-followed having 130 followers. In the Senate, the median Member had 3,998 followers, with the least-followed Senator having 353 followers, and the most-followed Senator having more than 1.2 million followers.[36]

Republican Members of Congress, both Representatives and Senators, had more followers than their Democratic counterparts. The median Republican Representative had 1,615 followers, compared with 969 for the median Democratic Representative. The median Republican Senator had 4,186 followers, compared with 2,874 for the median Senate Democrat.

Concluding Remarks

The use of Twitter by Members of Congress is an evolving phenomenon. As Members continue to embrace new technologies, their use of Twitter and other forms of social media may increase. These mediums allow Members to communicate directly with constituents (and others) in a potentially interactive way that is not possible through mail or e-mail. For Members and their staff, the ability to collect and transmit real time information from constituents could be influential for policy or voting decisions.

[35] Many Internet sites have been developed to rank Twitter users by their number of followers. For example, see http://twittercounter.com/pages/100 and http://twitterholic.com/. Each of these websites list the top Twitter user as having approximately 3.5 million followers.

[36] The median number of followers for Members of Congress was used instead of the mean because of an outlier in the dataset. One Member of Congress has more than 1.2 million followers. Inclusion of this data point in the calculation of the mean provides an unrealistic average of followers for all Members using Twitter.

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