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Social Networking and Constituent Relationships at the State Level: Connecting Government to Citizens in a Time of Crisis

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Social Networking and Constituent Relationships at the State Level: Connecting Government to Citizens in a Time of Crisis

We live in a time when many of our governmental institutions are under considerable pressure from their constituents to be more responsive and effective. Public confidence in legislative institutions is reaching historically low levels (Saad, 2010, July 21). The growth of the Tea Party Movement (Jonsson, 2010, February 6), the volatile nature of political debate and the parade of public opinion polls reflecting a lack of trust in congress all attest to the failures of the legislative branch in communicating their message to the public. This makes how lawmakers work with their constituents particularly important. The way that citizens are involved in the work of their government is the best antidote to the distrust and distain that many Americans feel toward their leaders.

In the past fifteen or so years communicating with constituents has begun to involve technology to a greater extent than in the past (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2008; West, 2005; Congressional Management Foundation, 2005; 2008; McNutt, Lima, Penkaukus & Rusoff, 1999; Corman, 1994). The development of wired legislatures, legislative information systems and similar innovations has brought technology into legislative halls at the national, state and local level. This has altered, at least to some extent, the work of lawmakers and their staffs. This process started in the early 1990s and has grown rather spectacularly as the e-government movement has matured. There has been a major change in the past half-decade since the Web 2.0 revolution (Germany,

2006). These new tools are more interactive and facilitate networking and the cultivation of relationships online.

Given the ever worsening problem of citizen antipathy for the lawmaking process and the newer tools available to facilitate communication, it stands to reason that many enlightened lawmakers will be using these tools to improve their relationship with constituents. It is critical that scholars examine these new tools in the context of legislative work. Hopefully this research will allow us to move the dialog forward. This is a small scale exploratory study that looks at this issue in the State of Delaware. Part of a larger effort considering social media in the political process, this study examines only the use of two social media tools, Facebook and Twitter, within the context of the legislative session and its immediate aftermath. Delaware is an ideal site for this study because of its retail approach to politics and its small size. It has a part time legislature with a small amount of professional staff and a political system that prizes community and interaction. Delaware is a very tough test of new technologies that are aimed at promoting citizen-lawmaker dialog. To that end we offer the following research questions:

- 1) What is the extent of adoption of social networking technologies by state legislators?
- 2) Does the rate of adoption vary by legislator party, age, gender or education?
- 3) Does the use of one technology crowd out other technologies?
- 4) How do legislators use the technology in constituent relations?

This research should provide parameters that will guide other research and other states.

Review of the Literature:

There are three major bodies of literature that underpin this study. First, there is the literature on legislative use of technology. This has been a growing movement in the past fifteen years. Next, there is the emerging literature on Web 2.0 and social media in government. New tools and new perspectives fuel this growing force. Lastly, there is the literature on the adoption of new technologies. Before examining these bodies of theory and research, however, it is essential to place the issue in context by looking at government in the State of Delaware.

Lawmaking in Delaware

Delaware is one of the smallest states in the union with a total land area of 1,953.56 square miles (US Census, ND). Surrounded by New Jersey, Maryland and Pennsylvania, it is located in the Delmarva Peninsula. The state was previously known for Chemical giant DuPont. In recent years, however, it is more identified with banking, credit cards and corporate charters. The State was the first to sign the Declaration of Independence.

Delaware has three counties: New Castle, Kent and Sussex. New Castle county is the most urban while the other counties have a more rural nature. Wilmington is the largest city and the state capital is in Dover. The US Census Bureau estimates that Delaware's 2009 population was 885,122 (U.S. Census, ND).

Delaware State Government has three branches, the executive branch, the courts or judicial branch and the General Assembly. The General Assembly is a Bicameral legislature consisting of the Senate and the House (<http://legis.delaware.gov/>). Delaware's legislature is a part-time body with most of the lawmakers having other employment during the year. There are a small number of support units that meet some of the legislature's needs for assistance.

There are 62 members of the General Assembly: 21 Senators and 41 Representatives. Most live in their home communities and many commute to Dover when the legislature is in session. Hearing rooms and offices are located in Legislative Hall.

The state has invested in a Legislative Information System that allows tracking of legislation and scheduling of actions and hearing. This interfaces with the state's electronic government efforts. In the past year, there has been a substantial emphasis on the use of social media in Delaware state government. The Governor and Lt. Governor both have Facebook pages (which are regularly updated) and the Governor Tweets frequently.

Legislative Use of Technology

While certainly not the original focus of electronic government, the use of technology to facilitate legislative deliberations has made considerable strides in the past decade. This parallels efforts use technology in other forms of public discourse and reflects similar efforts in political campaigning (Cornfield, 2004).

One of the earlier efforts to study the use of technology in Congress was conducted by Bonner and Associates, a political consulting firm and American University's Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies (Bonner, 1998; Bonner & Associates and & American University's Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies, 1998, February 17). In general, this study documented low levels of Internet use but portray areas of optimism about the future of technology in Congress. A subsequent study by OMBWatch (Lemmon & Carter, 1998) found a similar situation.

At the state level, McNutt, Lima, Penkavkaus, & Rusoff (1999) found modest and varying use by lawmakers in Massachusetts. Others (Richardson, Daugherty & Freeman, 2001; Pole, 2001; Cooper, 2002; Adler, Gent, & Overmeyer, 1998) found similar circumstances in a variety of state legislatures. Carter & Turner (2001) did a comparative study focusing on the potential of state legislative websites for democratic dialog. They found current arrangements to be problematic. While technology was becoming a part of the legislative scene, it had not yet reached its potential level of contribution.

Many developments in the next few years focused on how legislatures interfaced with technology. Improvements in technology and the growing sophistication of e-government, as well as changing social attitudes and orientations toward technology turned technology from a curiosity to a tool. At the same time, the growing use of technology in political campaigning was beginning to create expectations that would bleed over from the campaigning side to the governing side (Cornfield, 2004; Trippi, 2004).

The Congressional Management Foundation (<http://www.cmfweb.org/>) has undertaken a long term effort to study the use of technology in Congress (Congressional Management Foundation, 2005; 2007). The research highlights the way that technology has enhanced the ability of lawmakers and their staffs to deal with constituents and other stakeholders and identifies challenges in that regard. This research relies on a variety of strategies to paint a more comprehensive view of how technology supports (or fails to support) the various missions of Congress.

National studies of Internet users have considered the role that technology has played in creating relationships between people and government (Larsen & Raine, 2002). Comparative studies of state government e-government efforts have also recognized new developments in this area (West; 2005; Holzer, Manoharan, Shick & Stowers, 2008).

It is very likely that the trend of adding technology enhancements to the legislative process will continue. The complexity of governing is much greater than in past times and the workload of lawmakers is ever heavier. New technology, however, can change the nature of the systems that are developed. The rising tide of social media also touches the shores of legislative institutions.

Social Media and Web 2.0

During the last decade, technology has begun to change in important ways from the technology that once characterized legislative information arrangements. This development has been called Web 2.0, The Read-Write Web and lately, Social Media. These new developments can be characterized as adding more activity, pooling of

intelligence or collective wisdom, building networks and relationships and creating on-line communities (McNutt, 2007; Germany, 2006; Madden & Fox, 2006). A number of the tools that grew out of this development include the following: Blogging, Social Networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and Ning; Social Bookmarking; Microblogging sites like Twitter, Image Sharing and Videosharing, Podcasting and Virtual Worlds (like Second Life). New applications are constantly being created via combinations of existing applications referred to as “Mashups”.

This set of tools have revolutionized marketing, made substantial contributions to e-government and changed the personal lives of many people throughout the world. It has also become a major force in the political realm, changing radically the nature of political campaigning for both issue and electoral campaigns. Facebook, Twitter and other Web 2.0 applications are relatively common parts of both issue and electoral campaigns (McNutt & Flanagan, 2007).

This newer technology has a number of implications for constituent relations in legislative institutions. Research on the use of Twitter by members of Congress paints a mixed picture of usage in Congressional offices (Glassman, Straus & Shogun, 2009; Senack, 2010). In Glassman, Straus & Shogun’s (2009) study 38% of the Representatives and 39% of the Senators had Twitter Accounts.

Adoption of New Technology

Clearly the use of new technology by members of an organization is often a difficult process and the results are often different from what was originally expected. Resistance, technical problems and so forth often delay or even derail promising

technologies. Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003; see also Dillon & Morris, 1996) is one of the major approaches to explaining why some innovations succeed while others do not. The basic idea behind Diffusion of Innovation theory is that Innovations are communicated to successive population groups via communication networks. An innovation is something that is new to the system in question. While many teenagers subscribe to a social networking site like Facebook, it can still be considered an innovation in the legislative context. It also should be noted that there is a social technology that must be developed before a technology application can be used in a new setting. There are, for example, a different set of rules for how to use Facebook in the context of a legislative office.

The Innovation is introduced by a change agent who makes the innovation available to the system. This can be a colleague, a representative of a software company, a consultant or someone else.

Population groups are introduced in succession. First, the innovators are introduced to the innovation. This group tends to be well educated and with a strong interest in new ideas. This group then communicates with early adopters who adopt the innovation and then pull in the early majority. The early majority persuades the late majority. The final group, which may or may not adopt, are the laggards. There is a point where the innovation reaches critical mass and subsequent adoptions become easier.

This entire process is fueled by communication networks and influential people within them called opinion leaders. These actors move the innovation along through the successive groups. Those people with higher levels of access to communications

networks are more likely to learn of an innovation. These networks could come from consultants, state government or a political party.

Diffusion of innovation theory is not without criticism (See Rogers, 2003 and Lundblad, 2003). Some feel that it too deterministic and too innovation centered (see Rogers, 2003). Others criticize its rather single minded concentration on communications to the exclusion of other social factors. Still others criticize its focus on individuals as opposed to organizations.

Methodology

This is an exploratory study of the adoption and use of technology by a single legislature in a Mid Atlantic American state. Subjects were selected from the list of elected members of the general assembly. The entire population (n=62) was used.

The research proceeded in two phases. Member characteristics were identified with the webpages created for each member and the profiles in Vote Smart (<http://www.votesmart.org>). The search functions in Twitter and Facebook were used to identify individual profiles. The decision to focus on Facebook and Twitter was a consequence of the preliminary investigation undertaken prior to the study. Many of the other Web 2.0 tools do not lend themselves as readily to this type of work. While these are often considered discrete technologies the two applications can be used (and are often used) in synergistic ways. May 1 was used as the cutoff date for adoption.

Tweets were collected from every member with a Twitter account for the time period March 15-September 20. This time period was selected to take in most of the legislative season and the small amount of aftermath that occurred before Campaigns for

reelection began. Tweets were analyzed with a set of categories developed by Glassman, Straus & Shogun (2009) for their study of Congressional Twitter user. Tweets were also classified for ReTweets, Links, Links to Facebook, Links to Twitpic and Hashtags. These features extend the basic Twitter model.

Results

Information was developed on all 62 members of the General Assembly. The age variable was the sole variable with significant missing data. The data, both coded and uncoded, was preserved in multiple formats.

Demographics

The 62 members of the Delaware General Assembly consist of 41 members of the house and 21 members of the senate. Most were (45 or 72.6%) Male. There were 24 Republicans and 38 Democrats. The mean age was 60.69 with a median of 62 and a Standard Deviation of 9.8. Given the amount of missing data, this value should be regarded with care.

There was considerable variation in education with about a fifth (19.4%) having a high school diploma. The balance had at least some college or a trade school with five having a PhD, Law Degree or Medical Degree. There was also a wide variety of occupations, with business being the most common.

Adoption of Technology

The first part of the analysis looks at the number of legislators that had adopted the technologies of interest. Almost a third had a traditional website apart from the one provided by the state. At least some of these were developed for a campaign.

Table One: Technologies Adopted by Members of the General Assembly

Technology	N	%
Traditional Website/In addition to the state provided site	17	27.4
Facebook	8	12.9
Twitter	7	11.3

This would seem to suggest that the member has some understanding and motivation to adopt technology for constituent relations. Of those that had a website, seven also had social media of some kind (either Twitter or Facebook). This relationship was statistically significant (Chi Square 10.863 P=.001). Less than half that number that had a website had a Facebook Account and even fewer had Twitter. The relationship between Facebook and Twitter was moderate (Lambda=.333).

Table Two: Factors Predicting Social Media Use

Factor				
House	Senate 3	House 7	Chi Square .080	Sig.778
Gender	Female 7	Male 3	Chi Square 10.286	Sig.003
Party	GOP 6	Dem 4	Chi Square 2.278	Sig .125
Age			F=9.819	Sig. .003
Higher Ed	HS 0	HE 10	Chi Square 2.861	Sig. .096

The only significant differences between members in terms of social media adoption are for gender and age. Women were the more common social media adopters. Given the missing data in the age variable, that impact is probably questionable.

This analysis suggests that Gender, previous technology experience and possibly age are probably the best predictors of adoption. Given the small population size, a more sophisticated analysis would probably be unreliable.

Patterns of Tweeting

The messages in Twitter are called Tweets. In the next step the content of Tweets was examined. Twitter limits users to 140 characters, including hyperlinks and conversation organizers called hashtags. The scheme developed by Glassman, Straus & Shogun (2009) was used to classify tweets. The results are in the table below.

Table Three: Tweets Classified by Category

Category	N	%
Position-Taking	12	4.3
Policy Statement	56	20.2
District or State	82	29.6
Official Announcement	4	1.5
Personal	20	7.2
Media	20	7.2
Campaign	66	23.8
Other	16	5.8

The overwhelming large number of tweets was for district and state matters. This was similar to the Congressional results in Glassman, Straus & Shogun's (2009) study. There were a sizable number of campaign and policy statement tweets. It should be noted that

two lawmakers accounted for the majority of the tweets. Also, one member that had signed up for a Twitter account apparently never used it.

One interesting set of tweets involved a number of lawmakers in a workshop type session on social media. Several local social media authorities were also involved.

In addition to the content of the messages, the use of more advanced Twitter technique was reviewed. The results are presented below:

Table Four: Message Enhancement Techniques

Characteristic	N	%
RT ReTweet	11	4.0
Link	124	44.8
Facebook Link	86	31
Twitpic	17	6.1
Foursquare	1	.4
Hashtag	22	7.9

Hyperlinks are the most common enhancement. These links are mostly to Facebook (which provides a platform for pictures and video as well as text). Twitpic is a facility for images linked to Twitter. Only one Tweet was linked to Foursquare. This is a geospatially oriented social network site. Hashtags are used relatively infrequently. A Hashtag can be used to keep a conversation together. If, for example you add the

hashtag *#netde* to your Tweet, others can do a search and see your tweets and comment on them. The low frequency for Hashtags coupled with the small number of retweets suggests that many of these tweets are announcements rather than a dialog or conversation.

Discussion

This research has examined the use of emerging new media technologies by the legislature in a small state. The first research question was “What is the extent of adoption of social networking technologies by state legislators?” Since the inquiry was limited to Facebook and Twitter, the results can only speak to those technologies. The results of this examination are modest. When compared with similar findings on Congressional usage, Delaware’s lawmakers make less use of Facebook and Twitter. On the other hand, lawmakers in the first state represent far fewer people than their federal counterparts and have far fewer staff.

The second question was “Does the rate of adoption vary by legislator party, age, gender or education?” In part, gender and age appear to be related to social media adoption. Given the age range of the legislators that we do have age data for combined with concern about missing data, it would be risky to put too much stock in the age factor. The fact that more women than men adopt social media is interesting. This is somewhat surprising since even a decade ago there was considerable concern about the gender gap in technology. On balance, we are really talking about a tiny number of cases so any generalization is probably unwarranted.

The Third Question “Does the use of one technology crowd out other technologies?” is easier to answer. The relationships between the two social media technologies are modest at best. There is some evidence that the technologies are used together within the Tweet analysis. Links to Facebook are the most frequently occurring links.

Finally, the question “How do legislators use the technology in constituent relations?” probably can be summed up in terms of talking at you rather than talking with you. Many of the Tweets are announcements of events, bills and other positions. This does not fully use the power of social media.

These findings should be considered in light of the limitations of the study. The study design is limited to a small group of technologies, the sample is small and there is always the possibility of coding and clerical errors.

This research is in general agreement with diffusion of innovation theory. Time will tell if the situation actually conforms to what the theory predicts. At this point, it is difficult to say that social media has reach the point of critical mass in the Delaware state General Assembly. There are certainly the beginnings of something, perhaps a core group. In November many of the members of the legislature will be running for office. Facebook and Twitter are very much a part of the campaign technology world and many nonparticipating members will undoubtedly adopt these technologies at the behest of a campaign consultant or even a volunteer. As we move forward into examining that situation, it may very well be possible to answer some of the questions that now elude us.

Politics and government are changing in Delaware. In a recent op Ed piece John Sweeney (2010, October1), Editor of the *Wilmington News Journal's* editorial pages argued that the Delaware Way of politics was at risk in a social media age. He stated that “A big difference is technology. Facebook is now more important than television advertising. And Twitter messages do a better job of mobilizing supporters than party bosses”. It remains to be seen if he is actually right, but even if he isn't, technology in the political process is not going away.

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