**Implications of Twitter Usage for Members of Congress:**

**A Research Design**

**Travis Hagner**

**University of Nevada**

**Western Political Science Conference**

**April 18, 2014**

**Research Question and Theory**

Richard Fenno, in *Homestyle: House Members and their Districts*, argues that members of Congress (MCs) view their constituents through a lens of four concentric circles: geographic constituency, reelection constituency, primary constituency, and personal constituency. The geographic constituency consists of all voters within the district. Fenno ranks the geographic constituency least important of all the constituencies, because they provide very few tools to help the MC achieve reelection. Traditionally, MCs reach their geographic constituencies by advertising, such as television commercials, but little else is achieved. The creation of social media has had no effect on how these constituents are reached, because this group was already not paying any attention to their MC and the additional social media tool would not cultivate that relationship.

Second, the reelection constituency comprises individuals who are likely to vote for the candidate. Fenno views these constituents as the third most important constituency, because these individuals provide a valuable electoral tool: votes. Typically, these constituents have been sought out through door-to-door campaigns or through flyers in the mail. The importance of the reelection constituents ends with attaining votes, because this group will not provide any additional support toward a reelection campaign. Social media positively affects this constituency, because MCs can now use targeted social media campaigns to remind constituents the date of the election. For example, a targeted Facebook advertisement sponsored by an individual’s MC may appear on a constituent’s social media page.

Next, the primary constituency is composed of supporters who will work for the campaign. Fenno ranks these constituents as the second most important group, because they provide important electoral tools. Along with votes, this group will provide infrastructure at the local level for the MC. This is an invaluable resource, since infrastructure allows for time to be allocated most efficiently. Social media is an important tool to this group, because it allows for nearly instantaneous communication between the MC and the primary constituency in order to pass along time sensitive information. An MC may be able to notify thousands of people at a moments notice regarding an unplanned campaign stop in order to have supporters show up at an event in a timely manner. This capability was previously unavailable before social media was utilized as a political tool.

Finally, the personal constituency contains the member’s close personal friends and family. According to Fenno, this group is the most important constituency, because these constituents will be the proverbial ‘ear to the ground’ for the MC. Traditionally, this group provided the electoral tool of knowledge by keeping the MC updated on the day-to-day happenings within the district and alerted the MC of any potential shift in public opinion among any of the constituency circles. The implementation of social media into electoral politics has drastically shifted the importance of this group, because the MC no longer has to rely on friends and family to communicate the day-to-day happenings in the district. Now any member of the constituency circles can communicate directly with the MC using social media.

I posit that with the incorporation of social media into electoral politics, a fifth circle within an MCs constituency is now embraced: the non-geographic constituency. Prior to the creation of social media, the non-geographic constituency was nearly non-existent to MCs. Since social media’s inception into the political landscape, MCs are devoting more time to another group within the constituency: the masses. Historically, MCs have paid little to no attention to non-geographic masses, because they did not provide the MC with any electoral tools needed to secure reelection. Non-geographic constituencies are also referred to as interest groups, but this research will only focus on unorganized individuals. As social media tools continue to gain traction with both electoral circles and the general public, MCs are able to communicate with their non-geographic constituency at a much higher rate. And with the higher rate of communication, comes one of the most powerful electoral tools: money.

Drawing on Fenno’s research, I will go beyond the pre-social media world and analyze how the invention of social media has changed the electoral landscape. Specifically, since the inception of social media, is there growth in the number of constituent circles and is their level of importance shifting as well?

**Literature Review**

 The seminal article, by Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers, suggests that Congresspersons use Twitter to disperse information about news articles in addition to Tweeting about their daily activities (2010). Additionally, Twitter is used to communicate with constituents (2010). Glassman, Straus, and Shogan determine that Congress members’ communication can be divided into eight categories: position taking, policy, district or state activities, official congressional action, personal, media, campaign activities, and other (2011). Drawing from in person interviews and Twitter posts, Mergel finds that initial Tweets by members of Congress were used to advocate for existing positions (2012). Hemphill, Otterbacher, and Shaprio also find that members of Congress use Twitter to advertise their own positions, but hardly ever ask constituents for action in return (2012; 2013). Additionally, Shapiro, Hemphill, and Otterbacher demonstrate that self-promoting statements are strongly correlated with voting records (2012).

 Barbera et al. take the constituent communication a step farther by determining if legislators are responsive to constituent communication (2013). The scholars demonstrate that that legislators are responsive to their more politically interested constituents and those constituents from the same party.

 Another direction of Congressional Twitter use is determining who adopts Twitter and for what reasons. Chi and Yang use the adoption delay-learning model to state that members of Congress will adopt Twitter after those members witness adoption success by fellow members of Congress (2011). Peterson goes beyond the work of Chi and Yang (2011) to analyze the make-up of members of Congress who were using Twitter during the 111th Congress (2012). Also, Republicans are more likely to use Twitter along with members at the ideological extremes of the political spectrum (Peterson, 2012; Williams and Gulati, 2010). Straus et al. also discover that the more conservative or liberal members of Congress were more likely to adopt Twitter than their more ideological centrist colleagues (2013).

Next, Peterson found that district level demographics had no effect on Twitter adoption (2012). Straus et al. also demonstrate that district level factors have no bearing on members adopting Twitter, except for the urban variable, which finds that the more urban a district is, the more likely that member of Congress will adopt Twitter (2013). Conversely, Lassen and Brown analyze Twitter adoption and determine that Congresspersons are more likely to join Twitter if they are in the minority party, party leaders advocate their adoption, young, and if they are members of the US Senate (2011).

 Veering off the communication and adoption path, Hong analyzes the effects of Twitter usage and fundraising (2013). Hong discovers that adopting Twitter will increase political donations from outside one’s constituency, but not from one’s own constituents. Additionally, candidates will Tweet more during competitive elections (Ammann, 2011). The political ramification is that the increased funds may lead to continued uneven distribution of economic capital during a campaign.

 Most of the research conducted about Twitter, and social media in general, has been from an A-theoretical framework (Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers, 2010). This research will attempt to move past this and focus on a framework that will predict under what conditions MCs will use social media. Additionally, this research will go beyond the A-theoretical approach in an effort to couch the literature together in one place.

**Hypotheses & Methodology**

 Article 1: How has the introduction of social media into the electoral landscape changed the way MCs view their constituencies?

The first article of the dissertation will focus on developing a theoretical framework for how social media has changed the way members of Congress view different constituencies. Specifically, I will develop a theory of electoral behavior based upon the creation of social media that includes the aforementioned non-geographic constituency. I will then create a testable model, which I will evaluate in subsequent articles.

Article 2: Does the number of Tweets an MCs tweets affect the total number of votes received?

The hypothesis for the second article states that there will be no relationship between the total number of Tweets a House member posts and the total number of votes. A positive finding for this hypothesis will demonstrate that MCs view a social media presence as important, even though it may not directly translate into actual votes.

The data for this hypothesis will come from the Library of Congress (LoC). The LoC is currently cataloging every Tweet that has ever been posted and this data will be made available to the public this spring. The unit of analysis is the Tweet. The analysis method will be a regression model with the total number of votes as the dependent variable and the number of Tweets as the main independent variable.

The research conducted in the paper will build upon the research conducted by Ammann (2011). Ammann demonstrated that Senators tweet more during close elections, but Ammann only analyzed the two weeks leading up to Election Day. This research will analyze an entire election cycle, starting the day after the 2008 election and ending on Election Day 2010. This will allow for a better understanding of what electoral conditions MCs will choose to tweet or not to tweet.

Article 3: Why do members of Congress tweet?

The first hypothesis for my third article states that House members will tweet with the goal of reelection regardless of its overall effectiveness. A positive finding for this hypothesis will support my theoretical framework that MCs are moving beyond the standard four constituencies and reaching out to non-geographic constituents in an effort to gain reelection.

This data will be attained through an interview process with members of Congress and their aides who are in charge of the MCs official Twitter account. The unit of analysis will be House members. I will ask both open-ended questions and questions asking MCs to rank the importance of an online presence. For example, I will ask the MC what their goals are when posting Tweets. Additionally, I will be asking MCs why they tweet. Also, I will ask members to rank the importance of posting Tweets on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not important and 5 being very important.

The next hypothesis for the third article states that MCs who are currently *trending* and directly after they *trend* on Twitter will receive more campaign donations from non-geographic constituents than MCs who are not *trending* during this same time period. A positive finding for this hypothesis will lend support to my theoretical argument that the rise in popularity of social media has elevated the status of the non-geographic constituency for MCs.

This data will come from the LoC and from the non-partisan website opensecrets.org. The unit of analysis is the individual MCs. The analysis method used will be logit regression with the key dependent variables being amount of money raised by non-geographic constituents and total number of donations received by non-geographic constituents and the key independent variable being whether or not the MC has a Twitter account.

This hypothesis will build on Hong’s work that demonstrated that MCs who have Twitter will receive more donations from non-geographic constituents than MCs who do not have a Twitter account (2013). My research will build a stronger link between the use of social media by MCs and their non-geographic constituency.

**Significance and Contribution to the Literature**

Politicians constantly use all the available tools at their disposal to interact with constituents. Initially, face-to-face interactions were the only way for politicians to communicate with constituents. Eventually, radio and television became readily accessible tools for politicians to utilize. The Internet is the most recent medium for politicians to utilize in order to communicate with constituents. This research seeks to understand the political motivation of MCs for using Twitter in order to advance the understanding of online political behavior.

Based on Fenno’s work on how MCs interact with their constituents in the non-social media world, I plan to develop a theoretical framework that will predict how MCs will interact with their constituents in the social media venue. Initially, I will determine what the MCs goals are when interacting in the online universe. Finally, I will determine how members view their constituencies through a social media lens. This research will lead to understanding how, why, and under what circumstances MCs will interact with their constituents, even their non-geographic constituents. This research is an attempt to bridge the gap between electoral behavior in the pre-social media environment and electoral behavior in the social media world.

Bibliography

Ammann, Sky. 2011. "Why Do They Tweet? The Use of Twitter by U.S. Senate Candidates in 2010."

Barbera, Pablo, Richard Bonneau, John Jost, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker. "Is There Anybody out There? The Effects of Legislators' Communication with Their Constituents." 2013.

Chi, Feng, and Nathan Yang. "Twitter Adoption in Congress." *Review of Network Economics* 10, no. 1 (2011).

Fenno. 1978. Home style: House members in their districts. Longman.

Golbeck, Jennifer, Grimes, Justin, and Rogers, Anthony. "Congress, Twitter Use by the U.S." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 61, no. 8 (2010): 1612-21.

Glassman, Matthew, Jacob Straus, and Colleen Shogan. "Social Networking and Constituent Communications: Member Use of Twitter During a Two-Month Period in the 111th Congress." *Journal of Communications Research* 2, no. 1-2 (2011): 219-33.

Hemphill, Libby, Jahna Otterbacher, and Matthew Shapiro. "What's Congress Doing on Twitter?" In *Ideology, Politics and Social Curation: Recent Work on Twitter*. San Antonio, Texas, 2013.

Hemphill, Libby, Jahna Otterbacker, and Matthew Shapiro. "Relationships among Twitter Conversation Networks, Language Use, and Congressional Voting." International Communication Association Conference, 2012.

Hong, Sounman. “Who Benefits from Twitter? Social Media and Political Competition in the U.S. House of Representatives.” *Government Information Quarterly*. 30: 464-472.

Lassen, David, and Adam Brown. "Twitter: The Electoral Connection?" *Social Science Computer Review* 29, no. 4 (2011): 419-36.

Mergel, Ines. ""Connecting to Congress": The Use of Twitter by Members of Congress." *Aufsatz* (2012).

Peterson, Rolfe. "To Tweet or Not to Tweet: Exploring the Determinants of Early Adoption of Twitter by House Members in the 111th Congress." *The Social Science Journal* 49 (2012): 430-38.

Shapiro, Matthew, Libby Hempwill, and Jahna Otterbacker. "Doing What I Say: Connecting Congressional Social Media Behavior and Congressional Voting." Midwest Political Science Association, 2012.

Straus, Jacob, Matthew Glassman, Coleen Shogan, and Susan Smelcer. "Communicating in 140 Characters or Less: Congressional Adoption of Twitter in the 111th Congress." *Political Science* (2013).

Williams, Christine, and Girish Gulati. "Communicating with Constituents in 140 Characters or Less: Twitter and the Diffusion of Technology Innovation in the United States Congress." Midwest Political Science Association, 2010.