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## Illinois legislators revisited: a comparison of legislators' perceptions and attitudes toward constituent e-mail

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ILLINOIS LEGISLATORS REVISITED: A COMPARISON OF LEGISLATORS'  
PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD CONSTITUENT E-MAIL

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

In

The Masnhip School of Mass Communication

by  
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*"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."* (Philippians 4:13)

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## **ABSTRACT**

This is a follow up study to a 2000 report, which measured and compared Illinois state legislators' attitudes and perceptions toward constituent e-mail, and its impact on personal political agendas. Along with measuring attitudes, this study sought to measure and compare the impact of advances in e-mail technology on Illinois legislators' use of e-mail as a political tool of communication. The panel comparison consisted of 59% of respondents who participated in both the 2000 and the 2004 study. A survey conducted in February 2000 showed that 89% of Illinois legislators had an active e-mail address, but only 65% of those legislators agreed that they were using e-mail to communicate with constituents, albeit very infrequently. Legislators' inability to determine the origin of e-mail negatively affected constituent e-mail's impact on legislators' personal political agendas. Despite this minimal impact, legislators indicated a strong future reliance on e-mail as a form of communication. Improvements in e-mail technology, especially filtering systems like Echo-mail, could greatly affect legislators' attitudes and perceptions, thus changing constituent e-mail's impact on legislators' political agendas. This study aspires to gauge the impact of advancing e-mail technology on Illinois legislators' perceptions and attitudes toward constituent e-mail.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine and gauge the growing influence of e-mail as a political tool of communication along with its impact on Illinois state legislators' political agendas. Although the use of the Internet as a vehicle for public communication is little more than a decade old, its implications for democratic discourse are potentially staggering. In particular, e-mail has the potential for forging an unprecedented communication link between elected officials and their constituencies that is unprecedented. While legislators have always been sensitive to the concerns of their constituents as expressed through traditional modes of communication, such as postal mail and phone calls, the proliferation of e-mail users is likely to increase the volume of such contacts, as well as diversify the demographic profile of citizen-participants.

A survey conducted by this researcher in February 2000 of Illinois legislators' use of e-mail suggested that future reliance on e-mail as a political tool of communication is inevitable. As a sequel to the 2000 study of Illinois legislators, this study sought to measure and compare Illinois legislators' attitudes and perceptions toward constituent e-mail.

## **Background of the Problem**

### **Democracy and Representatives' Role in Communication**

At the heart of American democracy is the fundamental ideology of citizens voicing their opinions. "Writing a letter to your congressperson is an act of representative democracy at its purest. Such mail is an essential tool for members who wish to know the concerns of their constituents" (Casey, 1996, p. 44). Motivated by the desire to either change legislation or maintain the status quo, constituents contact their lawmakers (Vitucci, 2003, p. 2). Through constituent communication, legislators gain insight into their districts' opinions (Patterson 1968). Some argue, however, that this communication stems from elite or opinion leaders within the legislative district and therefore represents only a sample of the population (Arnold, 2004; Yankelovich, 1991). For democracy to work, Jacobson says, "two-way communication is essential. The stress members of Congress put on their accessibility invites communication from constituents at the same time it attracts their support" (1983, p. 187). This connection, according to Pitkin (1967, p. 61) and Patterson (1968, p 289), allows representatives to better resemble or reflect their constituents. Although this research was conducted at the federal level, these findings can be applied to the state level.

Traditionally, it was thought that representation only exists (Miller and Stokes 1963, Achen 1978, Erikson 1978) if legislators match or reflect the



ideology and positions of their district, thus allowing the “democratic” theory to hold (Pitkin 1967). Therefore, representatives must make an effort to understand the wants, needs, and demands of their district (Fenno 1978). In this view, constituency influence alone affects delegates’ voting behavior (Flinn 1964, Froman 1963).

However, scholars critical of this type of representative theory disagree, citing lack of citizen engagement as the main problem (Wahlke 1971, Pennock and Chapman 1968, Eulau 1967). Typically, constituents do not have clear policy demands and rarely communicate with representatives. Eulau (1967), on the other hand, claims traditional theories fall short because they fail to recognize the difficulty in representing a diversely populated district. Research at the federal level is somewhat divided with some suggesting legislators’ constituent relations and communication are motivated by a desire for reelection, and not a desire to better serve the public (Yiannakis 1982; Fenno 1978; Fiorina 1977; Mayhew 1974), while others argue the desire for reelection leads legislators to work in ways that better serve the public.

Regardless of these criticisms, communication remains an important element in a democratic society. For a dialogue to occur, a link between the public and its leaders must exist, thus allowing representatives the opportunity to reflect their constituencies (Luttbeg 1968).

Early research (Dexter 1956; Kefauver and Levin 1947) showed that “the mailbag is the secret of success” (Dexter 1956, p. 18). Despite the passage of time, personal letters from constituents still remain influential. A former Arizona Congressman states, “On several occasions I can testify that a single thoughtful, factually persuasive letter did change my mind or caused me to initiate a review of a previous judgment” (Frantzich 1986, p. 65). In other words, attention to constituent mail, as well as legislative contact, is pivotal to a legislator's reelection. According to researcher Daniel Lipinski (2001), legislative contact with constituents both through mass media and the mail, impacted voters' evaluations of their representatives. Whether developing communication technology (e-mail) will alter the form of communication that has the most effect remains to be seen.

### **Representative Style**

Essentially, scholars have described representative styles in three main terms: trustees/authorization, delegates/descriptive representation (Fenno 1978; Patterson 1968; Pitkin 1967), and politico/accountability (Jewell 1983; Hedlund and Friesema 1972). Believing that they were entrusted with the power to decide for the people, trustees tend to follow their independent judgment. When faced with a conflict, trustees believed they “are bound finally to conscience and their own legislative expertise rather than to constituency opinion” (Hedlund et al., 1972, p. 742). Typically, trustees are

“well educated and have more legislative experience” (Jewell 1983, p. 311). Trustees believe they fulfill their constituents’ will by following their own convictions (Patterson 1968). In contrast, delegates rely on their perception of district attitudes when making decisions.

As representatives, delegates believe they should mirror or reflect the wishes of their constituency and not their own ideology (Pitkin 1967). Despite this desire to reflect constituent wishes, research has shown that legislators tend to seek out constituents who share their same values (Squire 1993; Fenno 1978; Hedlund et al. 1972). In other words, shared values have the greatest impact when evaluating constituent communication. Based on these values, Hedlund and Friesema show representatives actively “seek out and follow constituent opinions” concurring with their own values (1972, p. 732).

Within the third group, politico, Hedlund and Friesema describe representation as situational. That is, depending on evaluations of independent issues, politico representatives vacillate between trustee ideology (relying on their own instincts) and delegate ideology (mimicking constituent opinion). Differing slightly from this ideology, other scholars believe both party and constituent pressure determine legislators’ individual political decisions (Shannon 1968; Mayhew 1966; Turner and Schneier 1970).

Whether one style of representation is more in accord with constituent wishes is unknown. Past research has produced conflicting results. Gross (1978) concluded, despite delegates' reliance on district opinion, their votes did not consistently reflect constituent preferences. In contrast, Kuklinski and Ellington (1977) found that on issues most salient to constituents, delegates did consistently reflect constituent opinion. In dealing with referenda issues, however, Friesema's and Hedlund's (1974) conclusion resembled that of Gross; trustees and politicians voted more consistently with constituents' desires.

As mentioned earlier, legislative perceptions of their constituency affect communication within their district. Dexter (1956) found that legislators exhibit an extraordinary amount of flexibility in determining which constituents to listen to and which issues to emphasize. According to Squire (1993), Rosenthal (1981) and Fenno (1978), the smaller the district the more communication should occur between legislator and constituents. In other words, district size impacts communication between constituents and legislators.

Fenno (1978) attributed motivation as the driving factor behind representative/constituent communication. According to Fenno (1978), representatives are either expansionists or protectionists. Early in a legislator's career, it is important to build and maintain a reliable reelection constituency and therefore these legislators actively seek to

communicate with constituents - the expansionist stage (Fenno, 1978). More established legislators, the protectionist stage, have already built this constituency and are less enthusiastic about maintaining this type of communication. At the state level, Jewell (1983) found that expansionists tend to maintain contact with constituents using newsletters, newspapers, radio, and opinion polls. With the publics' increased use of e-mail, it is logical to assume that state legislators would include this form of constituent communication among his or her communication repertoire.

Furthermore, researchers state both personal preferences and individual talents impact presentational style of legislators as well as the overall decision - making process (Yiannakis, 1982; Fenno, 1978; Kingdon, 1973; Patterson 1968). Based on these differing approaches, the legislator must strategically "decide whom he will present himself to when he is home" (Fenno, 1978, p. 128). In addition, the type of communication and length of service impact the legislative decision-making process (Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000; Kollman, 1998; Pitkin, 1968; Francis, 1962), as well as the districts' character, which is defined by demographics (Yiannakis, 1982). When faced with a conflict between interpersonal and mass media sources, legislators tend to rely on interpersonal sources (Wyatt et al. 2000).

Additional sources also influence legislators' agenda and decisions besides constituents. Mooney (1991) categorizes these sources into three

groups: insiders, outsiders, and middle range. Insiders have daily contact with legislators and mainly consist of colleagues and staff. It is within this group that legislative committees greatly impact representatives' decisions (Francis, 1985; Fenno, 1978). Outsiders, as the name implies, typically have limited access and knowledge regarding the day-to-day operations of the legislature including: constituents, mass media, and academics. Middle range encompasses sources that fall in between, namely interest groups, lobbyist, and representatives of executive agencies. Although labeled as outsiders, research indicates that constituents are useful sources in developing legislation and thus impact legislators' agendas (Rosenthal and Forth, 1978) and are the focal point of this research.

Despite what style of representation legislators resemble, constituent communication appears to impact legislative behavior. According to Patterson, "those legislators in-tune with their district actively seek constituency opinions through the communication channels of personal contact, letter-writing, and opinion polls" (1968, p. 287). E-mail has become an additional communication channel further connecting constituents with legislators. Following Paterson's communication pattern, a congressional study found that legislators are "trying to learn what e-mail can do and how to be responsive to constituents who are increasingly turning to that form of communication to voice their

concerns. E-mail has become an everyday, everybody tool" (Weisman, 2001, p. 2).

### **Internet Growth**

Through the world of computer technology, people are finding new ways to communicate, especially through the Internet. The number of households connected to the Internet is increasing at an astonishing rate. According to an April 2002 survey by Nua (an online survey group own by Scope Communication), approximately 165 million people (or 59% of the population) in the U.S. were connected to the Internet, and the rate of growth is 2 million new Internet users per month (NTIA, Nation Online, 2002). As early as 1999, researchers were attributing online growth to increased reliability and ease of access, especially with respect to e-mail (Romm, 1999, p 7). Of all the applications available through the Internet, e-mail has emerged as the most popular (Ascribe Newswire, 2003). Nearly 80% of all Internet activity is attributed to e-mail ("Falling through the net: Toward digital inclusion", October, 2000).

The fear of anthrax-laced mail in 2002 created a surge of constituent e-mails, which caused legislators to become more reliant on e-mail (Curley, 2002; Krebs, 2002). Prior to this fear of anthrax-laced mail, a survey conducted in 2001 found that 72% of people polled believed the "Internet and e-government will change things for the better by improving people's ability to communicate with their elected representative" (Greenberg,

2001, p. 25). The surge of e-mail use has continued to grow. Citizens increasingly rely on the Internet as both an information resource and as a means to communicate with their government. According to former Senate democratic leader Robert Byrd, "The age of electronic communication is no longer the wave of the future. It is the reality of the present" (Casey, 1996, p.8). Statistics have shown that the Internet and e-mail have become the core communication for many of Americans (Johnson, 2004).

In addition, the plethora of information available on the Internet could positively impact civic engagement and limit traditional press influences. Some scholars argue the Internet's flexibility and ability to demassify communication could "displace, and not merely supplement, the use of traditional news media" (Norris, 1999, p. 5). As a political tool, the Net is "best understood in the context of burgeoning alternatives to traditional media" (Bimber and Davis, 2003, p. 19). Some observers predict the Internet will enhance interactive citizen participation (Berghel, 1996; Barber, 1984). A more informed citizenry could lead to greater citizen engagement in the political process. The Internet creates a new avenue for dialogue between representatives and constituents. But whether this new avenue will change the content of communication remains to be seen.



Scholars believe that the communication gap between constituents and politicians, however, will lessen the more politicians become active on the Net. It is possible that once there, candidates will be able to engage in direct conversations with voters - conversations that will change the role of traditional intermediaries such as the press and make the democratic process more deliberative (Karmack et al., 1998, p. 122).

### **The Closing of the Digital Divide**

Any discussion of the Internet's impact on mass democracy would not be complete without confronting some of its barriers, conspicuously the Digital Divide. This is more or less an access issue, which separates those who have access to computers and the Internet from those who do not. Researcher Michael Cornfield (1999) takes this premise a step further by defining the digital divide as a division between those people who are politically active from those who are not. According to a report by the Pew Internet and American Life Center (2004), that division can be attributed to any combination of the following factors: income, education level, race, household type and geography. For example, those with a college education were three times as likely to go online as those with only a high school education (88% vs. 52%).

However, these divisions - socioeconomic status, education, occupation, and income - are not new to our political structure; rather they are some of the same factors that determine how active a citizen is

politically (Winders 1999; Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie 1993; Luskin 1993). Despite demographic differences, scholars have noted that the more informed a citizen is the more likely he or she is to participate in the democratic process (Flanagin & Zingale, 1994; Zaller 1992; Squire 1993; Conway 1991; Smith 1989). The Internet's emphasis on information does not create these divisions, but rather it seems to reinforce them. The characteristics that separate the "haves" from the "have-nots" are typically the same characteristics that separate a politically active citizen from a non-politically participant citizen. For instance, similar to the characteristics of the majority of voters, Internet users are typically well-educated or urban Americans with incomes ranging between middle to upper class (Greenberg, 2001; Hatch, 1999; U.S. Commerce et. al., 1999; Taha, 1999; Browning, 1996)

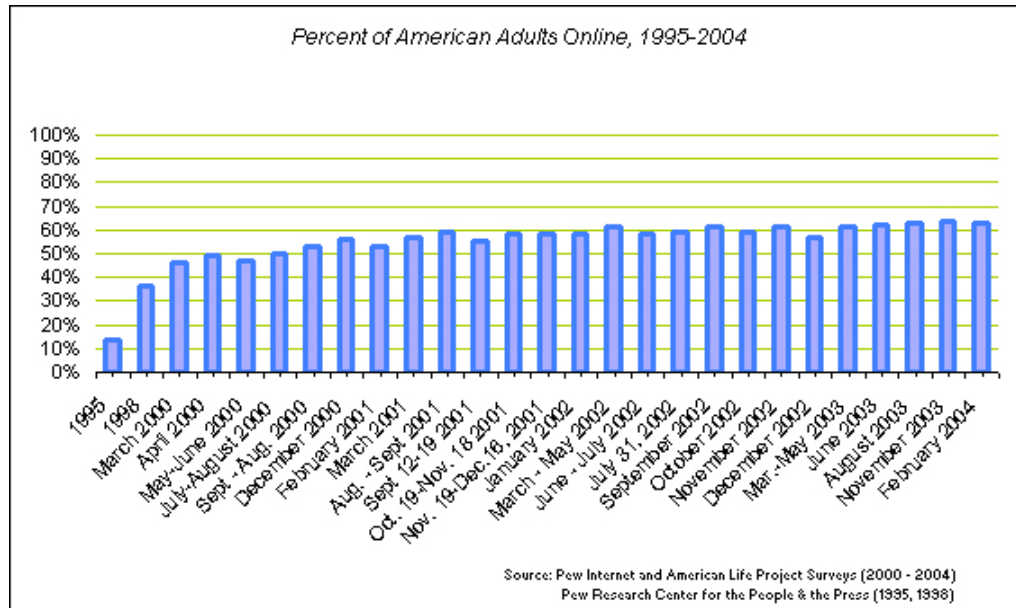
In other words, the Internet does not change behaviors or beliefs, but rather accentuates old established ones (Hill and Hughes, 1998). Some researchers believe the Internet will not revolutionize politics, but rather become another means of communicating (Bimber et. al., 2003; Chaffee, 2001; Davis, 1999). Similar to the telephone, researchers feel guidelines and procedures will tame e-mail. "Inevitably, government agencies will have to establish procedures and capabilities for e-mail communication, just as they once had to establish procedures and capabilities for telephone communication" (Nev, Anderson and Bikson, 1999, p. 11).

Although a digital gap does exist, there are some indications that it might be decreasing. Government research has shown that “in every income bracket, at every level of education, in every age group, for people of every race and among both men and women, many more people use computers and the Internet now than did so in the recent past” (A Nation Online, February 2002). According to research conducted by the Pew Center, the number of Americans accessing the Internet surged from 14% in 1995 to 41% in November 1998 (Kamarck & Nye, p. 75). A government survey revealed that percentage continued to climb from 46.7% in August 2000 to 56.7% in September 2001 (A Nation Online, 2002). In just a mere three years, the penetration rate of homes connected to the Internet rose from only five U.S. cities at a 50% rate (Scarborough, 1999) to all but six states with more than 50% of their entire population connected to the Net (A Nation Online, 2002). By 2004, a survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project revealed that almost 70% of all American adults are active online (see table 1).

Another recent finding was that men and women now have virtually identical rates of Internet use, 66% and 61% respectively (Pew/Internet, 2004). However, when this aggregate data are sorted by age, “women ranging from age 20 to age 50 are more likely to use the Internet than men” (A Nation Online, 2002). Overall, the greatest increase in Internet users is among children and teenagers. These data may indicate that if

the digital gap is narrowing, one result might be that in the future, legislators will receive more e-mail than postal mail.

Table 1: Percentage of Adults Online



It is the belief of some early Internet researchers, however, that the Digital Divide will widen if the government becomes more active on the Net. Information researcher James Katz argues that "the information-poor will become more impoverished because government bodies, community organizations, and corporations are displacing resources from their ordinary channels of communication onto the Internet" ("Society's Digital Divide", 1997, p. 1). Instead of motivating citizens to participate in the democratic process, the Net will have a greater impact on those already involved, thus further creating a two-tier system (Davis 1999; Raasch 1999; Gitlin, 1980). The Net is basically a new avenue for established existing

players to promote their hegemony and represents a false hope for increased citizen political participation (Bimber & Davis 2003; Gans 2003).

There are those, however, who still believe the Internet will give constituents a new, stronger medium in which to become active participants in the political process. "The Internet makes it possible for citizens to become much more directly involved in the public policy process than ever before" (Carter, 1999, p. 467). To become truly effective in serving democracy, the Internet "would have to be available to all; otherwise it will only serve those who already have access to and control of resources" (Tedesco, Miller, & Spiler, 1999, p. 53).

### **The Impact of E-Mail: The Illinois Study**

In February 2000, a survey of the Illinois General Assembly was conducted to gauge the impact of constituent e-mail on legislators' political agendas. Survey data revealed that constituent e-mail did not impact or affect legislators' agendas. Overwhelmingly, however, legislators stated that the inability to determine whether constituents sent the e-mail caused them to disregard this medium of communication. The geographic location of where the e-mail originated from is highly significant to whether the legislators will respond. Constituent feedback that originates from within their district as opposed to outside their district was considered extremely important. The ability to distinguish the difference has become a vital part of the communication process.

Overall, this study found that constituent feedback does play a role in state legislators' personal political agendas. In fact, 44% of legislators responding chose constituent feedback as the most important influence in determining their own political agenda. More importantly, the study revealed this type of communication impacts legislators' communication behavior.

The amount of political e-mail legislators receive is increasing at an astonishing rate. This was also the case in the 2000 survey; 79% of legislators responding indicated a significant increase in the amount of e-mail they received. More importantly, though, when legislators were asked to predict the importance of e-mail communication, the majority agreed that in the future their offices would become more reliant on e-mail as a means of political communication.

In addition, female legislators were less likely to implement e-mail as a political tool of communication. Female legislators sighted the inability to express emotions and the impersonal nature of e-mail, as negative factors of e-mail communication. Through their research, Kramer and Kramarae found that "women are more likely to be interested in relationships on the Internet, instead of merely exchanging information" (as cited in Sreberny & van Zoonen, 2000, p. 206). Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory might explain the differences between the sexes and their implementation of e-mail. Rogers states that because of a lack of competitiveness "girls are

hesitant to compete with boys for access to computers" (1986, p. 179), thus giving males a greater advantage over females. Technical advances making e-mail more user friendly, however, could change female legislators' perceptions of e-mail. E-mail's continued growth and implementation in everyday life also might impact female legislators' use and perceptions of constituent e-mail. Through a survey, this study also revealed that similar to federal legislators, state legislators' perceived e-mail communication as overwhelming. In other words, Illinois legislators also suffered from e-mail overload.

### **Improving Technology**

Recent technological software, such as Echo-mail and E-mail Exception Handler, which filters unwanted e-mail, could alleviate the issue of e-mail overload. Echo-mail and E-mail Exception Handler disseminates or re-routes e-mails to their proper destination, thus helping to relieve legislative e-mail overload (Congress Online Project, 2002; Greenberg, 2001; Cornfield, 1999). A variation of this software requires e-mails to include postal codes, information that is vital in determining whether the sender is a constituent (Congress Online Project, 2002; Greenberg, 2001; Carter, 1999). Prior to this technological advancement, some representatives required constituents to send a post card stating their postal address along with requesting the privilege to communicate via the Internet

(Casey, 1996, p. 41). Only after postal verification would constituents be allowed to contact their representatives via e-mail.

Based on parameters an office defines, Echo-mail also has the ability to condense, group and summarize numerous e-mails giving the legislator an "overview of what's on the minds of voters" (Greenberg, 2001, p. 26). In addition Echo-Mail's "sophisticated technologies enables it to identify the tone and meaning of messages" (George Washington University Study, 2001), further enhancing legislators' ability to classify e-mails. E-mail Exception Handler gives congressional offices the ability to isolate incoming e-mail by keywords and route them to the right staffers, thus filtering "nut cases, VIP's and non-constituents" from constituents (Cornfield, 1999, p. 45).

Legislators' fear of responding instantaneously via e-mail is combated by another aspect of Echo-mail, Autoresponder. Through this software, legislators have the option of automatically sending a standard response or creating a more individualized response (Greenberg, 2001; Simmons, 2001). "Echo-mail will sort through the Senator's position papers on those issues, string together prefabricated paragraphs from its data bank, and then fuse them into a coherent seemingly personalized whole that would be sent as a response" (Greenberg, 2001, p. 26). Some legislators are using Autoresponse as a filtering device by sending an automated form letter requesting geographic locations, mailing address and phone



numbers (Greenberg, 2001). Since the development of this technology, the majority of legislative offices that receive e-mail, at the federal level, have begun to reply via e-mail indicating a fuller response via postal mail (Congress Online Project, 2002, Carter, 1999, p. 475).

Improvements in legislative web-based forms also helped decipher and categorize constituent e-mail (Nelson 2002, Rosenblatt 2002, Carter 1999). Acting like a password, users must enter their postal mail address before they are allowed to send e-mails. Constituents then use a pull-down menu to select the topic of their e-mail. Through this process, constituent e-mail is automatically categorized. Also, through this menu, constituents indicate whether the legislator needs to respond and which form that response should take. In addition, web-based forms cut staff workload and limit the amount of spam legislators receive while shortening a legislator's reply time (Nelson 2003).

Although e-mail conditions are improving at the federal level, state legislators, with significantly lower budgets, are left to their own devices to combat the deluge of e-mail. Some states like Illinois provide limited to no filter systems to legislators. According to the head of Illinois' computer information system Tim Rice, the state provides no official links to legislative private websites and provides e-mail address when officially requested by legislators. Despite Illinois' lack of initial computer support, 89% of legislators surveyed in 2000 indicated they have a political e-mail address

(Sheffer, 2003). Illinois is not the only state faced with technological difficulties. For instance, although Mississippi legislators were provided with a laptop computer and an e-mail address, their laptop computers won't work from remote locations, forcing most legislators to check their e-mail while the legislature is in session (Gillette, 1998). Similar to Illinois, Mississippi provided no filtering system for legislators' e-mail.

The Internet possesses the capacity to impact politics and the agenda-setting process as a whole. It is the Internet's interactive capability, principally e-mail, which could allow constituents to have a stronger voice in the political arena, thus potentially changing the role of agenda setting.

Because of the Internet's relative newness, little research has been conducted about what effect, if any, it will have on state legislators' political agendas. New technological developments regarding e-mail origination, filtering and automated response may affect legislators' perceptions of constituent e-mail. This leads to many questions, such as: Will legislators regard constituent e-mail as a legitimate form of communication? If so, will e-mail communication cause a shift in the agenda-setting role? This study attempts to answer such questions and to better clarify the role of the Internet via e-mail in political agenda setting.

## **The Role of Communication Theory**

### **Lasswell's Theory**

Lasswell's now familiar model of communication can be stated succinctly: *Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect* (also known as source, channel, message). Traditionally, applying Lasswell's theory to mass-political communication, the media represent the channel with politicians representing the who or the source. Acting as gatekeepers, the media possess the power to interpret or ignore politicians' messages. Researcher Gaye Tuchman labeled this interpretation as "decontextualization" in which journalists' take events or messages out of their original contexts and put them into their own contexts (1977). Media outlets, especially broadcasting, tend to avoid complicated issues that cannot be explained or discussed in short sound bites. One northeastern senator claims the media emphasize the trivial, the sensational, and have almost no interest in complex issues. If a bill cannot be explained in fewer than 30 seconds, it is dismissed as not worthy for news (Moncrief, Thompson, & Kurtz, 1996, p. 65).

By replacing the media as the "channel" with the Internet (especially e-mail), the role of "who" shifts from the gatekeeper back to the politician or the constituent. In other words, sources have a greater probability of getting his or her messages through, unfiltered, to the intended audience. Successful communication and better representation, according to

Mooney, require a clear channel of information from the sender to the decision maker (1991, p. 445).

In this model, little interference exists between the two sources of communication (the politician and/or the constituent) and the receiver. The politician is free to send a message to constituents without fear of manipulation or distortion by the gatekeeper. Also, developing e-mail technology enables the politician to send an instantaneous response: one that is individualized or generic in form. Constituents' ability to choose what information they receive, combined with the instantaneous ability to pass their concerns on to their legislators, could have an effect on those legislators, causing them to change their political agenda by forming new laws or policies.

Lasswell's interest in political communication greatly contributed to developing his communication theory and political theory overall (Eulau, 1962). At the center of Lasswell's perception of communication is propaganda, better known today as mass communication and psychoanalytic interest (Rogers, 1994). Two different analyses appear when approached analytically. In the first opinion, the channel (the Internet) is viewed as a negative means of communicating only in the sense that not all have access to it. Replacing the more established channels of communication with the Internet alienates a part of the audience. The use of this channel lessens the effect on the audience (the

receiver). In the second opinion, however, the constituent gains in the communication process. The Internet, as the channel, allows the receiver to participate actively in the communication process and therefore it has a greater effect on the audience. It is this opinion that is leading some to argue that the Internet and e-mail will give constituents and politicians a new, more effective channel to communicate. "The web and other Internet resources are tools that may be used to better connect the voter, the politician, and the issues" (Berghel, 1996. p. 19).

The Internet possesses the ability to change the nature of political communication from internal, organizational and private, as it is now, to external, constituent-based and public. One-way political pronouncements might evolve into two-way political dialogues with the Internet replacing the press as conduits of information from governments to people and from people to governments (Berghel, 1996; Nerone, 1995).

Until now, the majority of political information was one-sided. Whether the source of information came from the politicians themselves or from the mass media, constituents had little choice in the information they received. As gatekeeper, the press decides what information will be allowed to filter through. Considerable evidence has accumulated supporting the notion that editors and broadcasters shape our social reality as they go about their day-to-day task of choosing and displaying news (Shaw, 1997, p. 5).

The mass audience, not the individual, has become the target of this selected information. The media set the agenda. Through their day-by-day selection and presentation of the news, the mass media influence the public's perceptions of newsworthiness and therefore impact the public's choice in deciding which topics are most important. This influence gives them a major role in setting the public agenda of thought and discussion (Weaver, 1981, p. 1). In addition, scholars espouse a negative relationship between media coverage and civic engagement (Shah, Kwak and Holbert 2001; Sotirovic and McLeod 2001; Chaffee and Schuleuder 1986).

The Internet might not completely replace the press, but it has the potential to supplement the press as well as becoming a competitive rival. The combined capability of constituents' choice in viewing issues along with instantaneous response elevates the Internet to a field all of its own. In fact, some researchers have labeled the Internet as the most powerful information technology in recent years (as cited in Trumbo, 1999, p. 5). The Internet, by combining and extending the characteristics of other mass media (print, visuals and audio), has the ability to pull constituents and their politicians closer together. More information, greater communication, and a greater sense of participation might actually lead to a democratic system that works just a bit better than today (Sullivan, 1995, p. 33). But are state legislators embracing this developing technology?

## **Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation**

The issue of whether legislators are using e-mail might lie in Everett Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory. Acceptance of innovation, according to Rogers, requires five steps: (1) knowledge, (2) persuasion, (3) decision, (4) implementation, and (5) confirmation. Today's state legislator is somewhere between implementation, through which an innovation is put to use, and confirmation (approval or disapproval of innovation). It is important to remember that scholars discovered at least two levels in which adoption and implementation take place: organizational and individual (Prescott & VanSlyke, 1996). Just because an organization provides the means to implement an innovation (through web sites or e-mail addresses), it does not guarantee adoption by the individual.

Rogers (1995, p. 5) defines diffusion as "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system." In this social system, opinion leaders (early adopters) set the trend for the rest of the group. These leaders are the first to embrace and use new technology; in essence, they become the "role models" for other members of their society (Rogers, 1983, p. 249). To maintain a central position within this communication system, early adopters must make "judicious innovation decisions" (Rogers, 1983, p. 249). Therefore, politicians who take the initiative and feel the most

comfortable using new technology will become the opinion leaders or early adopters. Phil Noble, president of [politicsonline.com](http://politicsonline.com), makes distinctions between politicians who are on-line with those who are not on-line. "What distinguishes wired politicians from those who aren't is that the wired ones have ideas, they have a vision and they're boldly trying to attain those goals (as cited in Greenberg, 1999, p. 84). This view reiterates Rogers' theory.

Incorporating a contextual theory of home style is another way to analyze whether legislators implement computer-mediated communication. Typically, scholars suggest three reasons why legislators change their home style: description of district (including economic, social, and geographic characteristics), personal conditions, and strategic factors (Fenno, 1978; Parker, 1986; Yiannakis, 1982). Considering resource allocation dealing with a district's make-up, it is possible to assume that legislators base their e-mail use on constituent use. In other words, legislators who represent computer-literate districts are more likely to implement computer-mediated communication (e-mail) than legislators whose constituency is less likely to use the Internet (Adler et al. 1998). Furthermore, a member's age, ideology and personal interest all contribute to the adoption process. Legislators who are familiar with the Internet or computers are likely to impact or influence fellow members' decisions to alter their home styles and implement e-mail as a political tool



of communication (Adler et al., 1998; Casey, 1996; Browning, 1995). This change in home style thus coincides with Rogers' theory.

Although many factors influence innovation diffusion, scholars have consistently found that interpersonal contacts within and between communities have a strong influence on adoption behavior (Valente & Davis, 1999). There also is some indication that age may play a role in who becomes the opinion leader or innovator. Rogers states that younger people are more likely to implement and accept new technologies than older ones. "The general evidence seems to indicate that innovators are younger than laggards" (Rogers, 1962, p. 174). Gauging Rogers' laggards simply by age, younger legislators are more likely to implement e-mail than older legislators. In addition, Rogers claims that similar types of groups "tend to be suspicious of innovations, innovators and change agents. Their advanced age and tradition slows the adoption to a crawl" (1962, p. 171).

The overall comparison made in the 2000 Illinois general assembly survey concurred with Rogers' theory; however, discrepancies were found in further legislative breakdowns. The biggest difference occurred within the Senate. Older senators (50 and above), instead of younger senators (49 and below), indicated both a greater present use of e-mail to correspond with constituents as well as developing a greater future reliance on e-mail communication.

Rogers' theory also applies to the general public. In this case, however, the opinion leaders are not active in politics, but rather they are active on-line. It is this activity of being on-line that draws the opinion leader into the political process. While on-line constituents are exposed to new means of gaining information, in turn they are using this information to become more active in the political process. According to a report by the Pew Internet and American Life (as cited in George Washington University Study, August, 2002), "42 million Americans last year used the Internet to conduct public policy research; 23 million sent comments to public officials about policy choices; 13 million participated in an on-line lobbying campaign; and 68 million visited a government web site."

Increased constituent communication, however, has created a dilemma for some legislators; namely e-mail overload. A 2000 Illinois State legislative study (Sheffer 2003), revealed; however, that it's not the magnitude of e-mails that causes politicians problems, but rather the inability to determine if the sender is a constituent: the origin of e-mail. In other words, legislators need confirmation that e-mails originate from within their district; something like a postal stamp or postal address. With recent advances in e-mail technology, this confirmation is possible. Therefore, in lieu of these changes, it is important to gauge legislator's perceptions and attitude toward this new form of constituent communication.

## **Statement of Problem**

Most would agree that constituent communication is a vital part of America's democratic process. Therefore, understanding the communication process between legislators and their constituents also becomes a vital part of democracy. In a relatively short period of time, e-mail has become a valid form of communication for the majority of American citizens penetrating both private and public spheres. Despite this penetration, some politicians indicated concerns in using e-mail as a political tool of communication, especially in regard to e-mails received from so-called constituents, and the issue of e-mail overload (Sheffer 2003). Advancing e-mail technology, however, provides answers regarding constituent e-mail authenticity and provides filtering devices to help maintain and control e-mail overload. Politicians who once disregarded e-mail or questioned its validity and use as a political tool of communication are faced with a new conflict found within this advancing technology. In addition, e-mail is rapidly becoming the communication tool of choice among voters.

Traditional agenda-setting scholars argue that there is a correlation between what the media think and what concerns the public, but the vast amount of information available on the Internet could alter this relationship. The media no longer possess the gate-keeping power to interpret or ignore politicians' messages. According to Rogers and

Dearing (1988), agenda setting operates within three separate categories: media agenda setting, public agenda setting, and policy agenda setting. In the public-agenda process, the people decide which issues are important. The media decide which issues are important within the media-agenda process, while governmental bodies decide which issues are most important within the policy agenda-setting process (Rogers, 1994). As in other agenda-setting theories, however, Rogers suggests that all three separate parts seem to initiate from the media. Again, according to Rogers, "it is usually assumed that the agenda-setting process consist of the media agenda's influencing the public agenda, which in turn influences the policy agenda" (1994, p. 239). However, political research has determined that other factors such as ideological makeup of the legislature (Adams, 1996), perceptions of legislators' constituency (Dexter, 1960), method of communicating with the district (Fenno, 1978), and the role of committees (Francis, 1985) play an integral part in an individual politician's decision making. With the increasing ease and use of political e-mail, public agenda setting might have a greater impact on state legislators political agenda. This study investigates the possibility of one such influential factor: constituent e-mail.

Therefore, to better understand both the communication process between state legislators and their constituents, and the effect of this communication on legislators' political agendas, it is important to gauge

any changes in state legislators' perceptions and attitudes toward the political use of e-mail. This dissertation aspires to make a significant contribution to this goal.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **The Media As Agenda Setters: An Historical Perspective**

The concept of agenda setting is not new. The root of its definition is grounded in the principle that by repeated coverage "over time the priorities of the press become the priorities of the public" (Weaver, Garber, McCombs and Eyal, 1981 p. 4). This is particularly true when dealing with politics. Prior research has determined a definite correlation between what the media think and what concerns the public and politicians (Weaver et. Al, 1981, p. 76). In other words, "agenda setting is the ability of news coverage to affect the compositions of the political agenda – that is, to influence those issues, events, themes, or persons that the public considers important enough to think and talk about" (Joslyn, 1984, p. 164).

It is through the media that the political trail is blazed. "By choosing and displaying the news the media play an important part in shaping political reality; the mass media may well determine the important issues – that is, the media may set the agenda of the campaign" (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, p. 176). Besides affecting campaigns, the media impact the entire legislative process.

Perhaps Cohen (1963, p. 13) described agenda setting best when he said, "The mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about." The

media, through repeated coverage, raise the "importance of an issue in the public's mind" (Severin and Tankard, 1997, p. 249). With the Internet, however, the role of the media as gatekeeper shifts to the user. Through the Internet, constituents (users) have some control over what type of information they receive. In some respect, they have more control over the actual content of political information (Browning, 1996).

Prior to the Internet, politicians relied on mass mailings or media outlets to send their message to a majority of their constituents. In regard to broadcasting, legislators were faced with two choices; buy precious airtime - or convince the news media to cover certain issues. Inadequate state budgets, however, placed most state legislators at the mercy of news outlets. Through the multitude of websites on the Internet, this concept is changing. Browning (1996) claims that politicians can actually compete with media outlets through web pages and e-mail. "Thus, the gateways that limit the dissemination of political messages in the mass communication media like television are simply non existent on the Internet" (Browning, 1996, p. xii). Hager and Sullivan (1994) suggest that improving technology makes it possible for legislators to better control the flow of information when facing a hostile media. "The Internet is an effective political tool because it gives people the chances to become involved by building activism from the ground up" (Marre, 2003, p. 5).

Politicians who acknowledge the Internet's role in bringing back one-on-one communication along with one with many are benefiting. According to Vice President of Juno Online Services Roger Stone, the Net played a decisive role in the 2000 election. Politicians who ignored the virtual voter or computer-mediated communication suffered, costing some incumbents their seats (Marre, 2003; Baker, 2002). The Internet's impact on elections continued to increase in the 2004 election. A study conducted by Johns Hopkins University (2004) concluded that the Internet was a major force in the campaign and stated: "Election 2004 was the first national elections where the Internet was an integrated part of the election and used in every facet of this campaign." The 2004 elections highlighted the Internet's ability to engage and mobilize the public, as well as encourage the democratic idea of many-to-many communication (Gelman 2004; Pope 2004). The Internet continued to empower citizens and served to increase the marketplace of ideas (Pope 2004).

This new instant, virtually free, channel of communication among constituents and legislators could have an effect on the legislative process, one that causes legislators to change their political agenda by forming new laws or policies. Thus, through this new open line of communication, political agenda setting might be affected. It is no longer a question of whether the Internet will change American politics,



“but who will utilize the new technology best, and when its full impact will become known” (Marre, 2003, p 5).

### **Agenda-Setting Studies**

Prior studies on media impact/role in political agenda setting and how that agenda affects the electorate are numerous. Some researchers believe that through agenda setting the press affects the future of political candidates and the likelihood of obtaining reelection, as well as impacting attitudes and behaviors of political elites (Protess, Cook, Doppelt, Ettema, Gordon, Leff, & Miller, 1991; Cook, 1989; Joslyn, 1984; Cook, Tyler, Goetz, Gordon, Protess, Leff, & Molotch, 1983). “It is clear the press makes political judgments about candidates that affect both the fortunes of candidates and the understanding of the public” (Joslyn, 1984, p. 132). Even some reporters acknowledge this power. “We are filters,” says reporter James Perry, “and it is through our smudgy, hand-held prisms that the voters meet the candidates and grow to love them or hate them, trust them or distrust them. We are the voter's eyes and ears, and we are more than that, for some times we perform a large and, some would say, a more controversial function. We write the rules and we call the game” (Shaw, 1977, p. 157).

An example of agenda-setting research is McCombs and Shaw's Chapel Hill Study (1972). This study matched what Chapel Hill voters “said” were key issues of the campaign with the “actual content” of the

mass media used by them during the campaign. It also focused on the correlation between news media content dealing with the Presidential election as well as other types of campaign news and voters attitude toward political issues. McCombs and Shaw's study "suggests a very strong relationship between the emphasis placed on different campaign issues by the media and the judgments of voters as to the salience and importance of various campaign topics" (Severin et al., 1997, p. 252). The agenda of the press becomes the agenda of the viewers. As a result of this groundbreaking study, other researchers were able to conclude "the power of the press rests largely on its ability to select what will be covered and to decide the context in which these events will be placed" (Joslyn, 1984, p. 134).

In determining newsworthiness and setting the public's agenda, journalists tend to depend on routines. According to Eliasoph (1988), journalists are habitual and follow a pattern of reporting routines. Reporters become dependent upon routines to alleviate the stress of producing daily news. Typically, television journalists begin their day with a meeting to determine which events will make news. During this time, reporters make suggestions based on several different sources including press releases and press conference notifications. Whether a press release or press conference is covered depends on presentation as well as its news value. In other words, reporters decide the strength of issue

salience. Tuchman refers to this routine as the “negotiation of the news,” in which journalists decide what makes sources newsworthy (1977).

Despite recognizing a mutual dependency, some scholars argue that more often than not, the media initiate issues legislators will support. Along those same lines, researchers argue that legislators base their political agenda on media cues (Herbst, 1998; Cook, Tyler, Goetz, Gordon, Protess, Leff, & Molotch 1983; Fishman 1979). The media, according to Lawrence (2000), focus the public's attention on certain issues and events, which compels politicians to respond.

Legislators do not necessarily look to journalists to set their overall political agendas, but rather they are affected by reporters' power in deciding what's newsworthy. In other words, reporters have a greater impact in determining which issue legislators will include in their media strategies compared to a legislator's overall political agenda. According to Cook, “Although politicians largely decide what is important, journalists define what is interesting” (1989, p. 12). Ultimately, journalists possess more power through story selection and coverage (Clayman & Heritage, 2002).

In defining the gate-keeper theory, David Manning White, in his study of “Mr. Gates” (1950), argued that editors (the press) routinely exert subjective choices when determining the selection of news. Through this subjective process, influenced by beliefs, biases and conveniences, editors filter an abundant amount of information, in which only a fraction

of the information available to the press actually gets passed along to the public (1950). The gate filters or limits the flood of information. Ensuing studies (Reese and Ballinger, 2001; Shoemaker, 2001; Clayman and Reisner, 1998; Berkowitz, 1990; Smith et al., 1988) expanded on the impact of routines in newsgathering that determine which information passes through the gates. The plethora of information available via the Internet could ultimately negate the press' gatekeeping role.

Two researchers, Lang and Lang (1983), argue that the President, politicians, press and the public all interact within a cycle, which they refer to as agenda building. The media choose to cover an event causing public attention, which leads to a response by an elite official, whose response is covered by the media. In other words, agenda building suggest that the various participants contribute to the press cycle. Within this circle, however, "investigative reporters make certain issues more salient to the media, the public, and policy makers" (Protess et al., 1991, p. 6). According to Joslyn (1984), the power rests with journalists, especially in regard to the amount of coverage a candidate or politician receives. Through the guidance of the media, the public discerns what information is important. "We judge as important what the media judge important. Media priorities become our own" (Shaw, 1977, p. 99). Again, political researchers believe the more control and knowledge constituents have the more involved they will become, thus by-passing the media as

gatekeeper. The Internet provides an alternative means of obtaining unfiltered information. "The Internet is turning interested voters into informed voters and enabling these informed voters to participate more easily" (Kamarck & Nye, 1998, p. 111).

According to researchers Wanta and Wu (1992), if information is obtained through interpersonal communication, it becomes a competing force with the media message, thus interfering with the media agenda-setting effects. In fact, prior research (Mutz, 1989; May: Weaver, Zhu, & Willnat, 1992) has identified interpersonal communication rather than media influence as the "bridging function" between respondents' perceptions of personal problems and societal issues. Through the Internet and e-mail, constituents are able to send and receive information to and from their legislators with greater ease, perhaps even on a more personal level.

Gender differences also impact the effects of agenda setting. Both Reingold (1992) and Thomas (1991) find that women tend to support issues that affect females, the family and children more than males do. Perhaps female legislators have a distinctive political agenda and only the media issues that relate to this agenda influence them. This might also hold true in regard to constituent communication. In addition, the form of constituent communication might have a greater impact on female legislators than male legislators. According to a 2000 Illinois general

assembly survey (Sheffer, 2003), female legislators stated e-mail's lack of emotion was a predominate reason for its ineffectiveness in altering their political agenda. Surprisingly, poor personal grammar along with the pressure of instantaneous responses intimidated female legislators and caused them to avoid political e-mail more than male legislators. Female legislators overall seemed to place a greater emphasis on emotions than male legislators.

Since the Internet is still relatively new, a limited amount of research has been conducted to determine what effect, if any, it has on agenda setting. Scholars have, however, conducted research on the impact of agenda setting on both politics and newspapers and politics and broadcasting. The following section summarizes these findings.

### **Agenda Setting's Impact on Politics and Newspapers**

Looking back on the coverage or communication of politicians in America, a pattern develops. Historically different forms of unequal access to the press and the public sphere can be found (Kaplan, 1997). Even though we are led to believe that we are in a political community "in which the citizens freely participate as equals" (Kaplan, 1997, p. 337), it seems as if only a chosen few have been granted the privilege of being the speakers. According to Pierre Bourdieu "in reality, beyond its symbolic fabrication of a shared democratic discourse, journalism necessarily reports a highly limited and, therefore, stratified set of public speakers" (as

cited in Kaplan, 1997, p. 337). In other words, constituents are not only limited by the number of agenda setters, but also by newsgathering routines.

As early as the 1800s, someone other than the people or constituents was setting the agenda. At the beginning of the 1800s, partisan papers dominated journalism for the first two-thirds of the century, allowing political parties to control the American agenda (Schudson, 1978; Rutenbeck, 1995). This trend continued throughout the "Gilded Age." During this time, agenda setting was not limited to the editorial section of the paper but also heavily influenced the news. Journalistic agenda was not dependent upon the occurrence of "news events" to justify the reporter's story selection. "What would be forbidden to our contemporary independent and objective press as editorializing as exposing the reporter's subjective point of view could be thoroughly pursued by the 19<sup>th</sup> century press" (Kaplan, 1997, p. 341). By controlling resources, politicians controlled the press. "Because of their control over political resources and their legitimacy as the public representative of the electorate, parties became the dominant if not exclusive voice on issues of national importance. The very choice of news events for reporting was often defined by the party's political agenda" (Kaplan, 1997, p. 339).

"As competition between parties developed more clearly in the 1820's and after, the papers were identified with their editorial voice and known

by their partisan affiliations" (Schudson 1998, p. 202). Papers, in return for political and economic favors, joined forces with a particular candidate. For example, the Washington Gazette benefited financially by backing presidential candidate William H. Crawford. By providing the printing from the Treasury Department, Crawford gave the paper financial stability, which enabled it to become a daily (Smith, 1977). Newspapers resembled campaign flyers instead of an unbiased source of information. The Gazette was not the only paper showing bias. The National Journal openly backed John Quincy Adams. "Writers for the Journal, such as John Agg and Dr. Tobias Watkins, soon made their paper into a hard hitting campaign sheet" (Smith, 1977, p. 57). This type of practice was the norm in the early stages of American newspapers.

The onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century further influenced the change of agenda setting from the politician to the media themselves. Explicit partisanship in the news all but disappeared. A combination of anti-partisanship ideology articulated by a movement of the middle-classes, along with underlying economic reasons, all but forced newspapers to break from party control (Kaplan, 1997, Schudson, 1978). The penny paper, by lowering prices, increased circulation to include a new audience, the middle class. Relying on commercialism/advertising instead of subscriptions to survive, the penny press separated itself from party papers. This separation between politicians and newspapers created a



new ideology. "Instead of private interest, the press was guided by the ideal of public service" (Kaplan, 1997, p. 343).

But even with this "public service" motto, the papers were still the gatekeepers of information. "Newspapers claimed to determine the news upon the basis of independent, expert criteria" (Kaplan, 1997, p. 345). In other words, the press now deemed itself the expert who decides which news is worthy of coverage. The gatekeepers were deciding for the group, not focusing on the individual.

### **Agenda Setting's Impact on Politics and Radio-Television**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw the emergence of radio and television, and both have had an enormous impact on political agenda setting. Unlike print, radio and television are required to operate in the public's interest, convenience and necessity. Therefore, society has charged the broadcast medium with the responsibility of giving a voice to citizens. Because of limited spectrum space, the medium was established by government regulation. As a result, no one political party could control the "airwaves." Instead, the broadcast industry would provide greater public access, thereby giving substance to the Hutchins' Commission observation that the press plays an integral part in maintaining a democracy. A successful democratic society relies on the press to provide a truthful comprehensive and intelligent account of the days' events (as cited in Leigh, 1947).

Franklin Roosevelt's fireside chats revolutionized the use of radio in political communication. For the first time constituents could hear the President speak from the comfort of their homes. Also, for the first time, radio allowed millions to hear political conventions and to audibly observe congressional hearings (Selnow, 1998). The utilization of radio through these fireside chats brought a new excitement to political communication. Some historians, however, argue by anticipating politicians' (especially the president's) role as newsmaker, agenda setter, and public educator, McKinley actually molded future political communication instead of Roosevelt (Gould, 2003). In addition to implementing radio in reaching constituents, Roosevelt was "very interested in his mail and used it as one form of public opinion assessment" (Herbst, 1998, p. 17). Again, Gould would suggest that Roosevelt was following in McKinley's footsteps. According to Gould, McKinley valued all forms of communication, "whether in the shape of mail, telegrams, or newspapers" in gauging public opinion (2003, p. 11). Gauging public opinion through letter writing, however, dates back to the origins of American democracy and affects all aspects of politics.

A modern application of Roosevelt's fireside chats is the Presidential weekly radio address. Ronald Reagan implemented this application in an attempt to control his political agenda. This medium coincided with Reagan's "ability to get a policy issue explained in clear, simple terms"

(Gould, 2003, p. 194). In addition, Reagan used these brief radio addresses to communicate with his conservative base. Although state-level politicians do not have the opportunity to provide weekly radio addresses to their constituents, they do utilize the medium through talk shows thus disseminating their views.

The visual element of television brought additional changes to political communication and greatly affected the agenda-setting process. In the early 1950s, politicians began using "spot ads." These ads impacted communication by creating illusions of two-way communication. During the 1952 general election campaign, Eisenhower ran a series of sixty-second commercials in which he responded to questions ostensibly posed by ordinary citizens (Joslyn, 1984). This type of advertisement was successful on several different levels. First, it helped Eisenhower gain votes and, second, it created an illusion of two-way communication. Television, however, is still one sided. "The medium holds all the cards. The process does not constitute a genuine, two-way flow of information; they don't receive information from their audiences" (Selnow, 1998, p. 21). The medium still dictates what the constituents as well as the politician will see. It has become the norm for politicians to monitor broadcast media reports; a tradition was started by Lyndon Johnson when he had three television sets installed in the Oval Office so he could monitor the networks (Gould, 2001, p. 141). Starting with the Kennedy-Nixon debates, television

was recognized as being one of the greatest influences on political campaigns.

Television, however, has also had a negative impact on political communication. The most obvious negative impact is the broadcast soundbite. Through soundbites, politicians are forced to voice their view or message in three to eight short seconds. This lack of control has had a dramatic effect on complex issues. Faced with short attention spans caused by television, politicians are forced to either explain complex issues in a relatively short time or ignore the issue entirely (Rheingold, 2000). According to Baumgartner and Jones (1993), reporters limit themselves to one-dimensional news, consisting of the least complicated issues. In essence, the press forces legislators to concentrate on narrow topics, which ultimately could affect the legislator's political agenda and media strategies.

Finlayson argues television actually alters legislators' rhetoric and conditions legislators to speak in soundbites (2001). In addition, Rheingold believes "some of the most costly drawbacks of the age of mass media is the packaging of candidates and issues as high production-value television commercials and the transformation of an active communicating citizenry into a passive audience" (2000, p. 2). Researchers suggest the very nature of television, especially interviews, conflicts with the nature of political debate (Finlayson, 2001, Clayman &

Heritage, 2002). Television interviews force politicians to both condense his or her speech into short sound bites, and to conform to a restricted conversation structure. Within this structure, the interviewer controls the pace and direction of the interview and controls the agenda.

Researcher William Galston argues “the penetration of television into nearly every home affected, not only the dissemination of news and entertainment, but also patterns of social interaction” (2003, p.2). Some researchers are applying this same argument to the Internet. In an ABC news report, UCLA researcher Jeffrey Cole stated, “The Internet changes everything from our values to communication patterns and consumer behavior” (2000, p 1). Researcher Mathew Wall-Smith argues “new media technologies present what is a major shift in the discourse of the human subject.... The Internet transforms the computer’s primary role from that of computation to communication” and thus competing with television (2003, p. 2).

As evident through the previous examples, mass media have impacted political agendas. The following section addresses the potential impact of the latest technological advancement, the Internet, and what impact it might have on political agendas.

### **The Internet and Politics**

“The Internet is beginning to gain respect as a viable tool of communication. This is not a fad, but a highly effective way to

communicate with the masses. In fact, it has the potential to become the most effective medium for reaching voters because of its unique interactive qualities" (Connell, 1998, p. 48). It is this interactive quality, especially direct access that leads researchers to question what impact the Internet will have on politics. Some researchers contend that the issue of access, or lack thereof, has led to the public's detachment from the political system. This detachment could be reconnected by instant direct communication available through the Internet. "A lot of people feel disenfranchised that they don't have access to the (political) system. This is the best cure for that malaise, being able to have instant communication" (Tech Report, 1999, p.1).

Traditionally, the media focused on the audience as a group. In the past, constituents had to pass through numerous obstacles to communicate with politicians. Some researchers, however, suggest the public could use the Internet's direct line of communication to remove these obstacles (Congress Online Project, 2002; Johnson, 2000; Bennett et. al, 1999; Carter, 1999; Rheingold, 1999). "The Internet makes it possible for citizens to become much more directly involved in the public policy process than ever before" (Carter, 1999, p. 467). For the first time in history, a medium is available "to accommodate instant direct voter feedback" (Selnow, 1998, p. xiv).

E-mail enables politicians to directly send messages to their constituents without fear of manipulation or distortion by the gatekeeper (the media). More important, politicians are able to instantaneously individualize responses. Researcher Berghel (1996) argues that lack of personal contact makes constituents feel disconnected to their politicians. Legislators rarely individually tailor responses to constituent mail. This lack of individualized response is attributed to legislative time restraints, but new research suggests the Internet can change this (Berghel, 1996). With e-mail, politicians and constituents could communicate as individuals instead of on an aggregate level. E-mail allows politicians the ability to respond immediately with a form letter, thus acknowledging the communication and acquire time to properly respond to constituents. Since the Internet is designed for individual interaction, placing control in the hands of the user, it is plausible to believe the user can help set the political agenda. Again, referring to Lasswell's channel of communication, which emphasizes the who, constituents and legislators increase their odds for an open-line of communication.

There is evidence, says researcher Russell Neuman (1991), that computer networks help to empower citizens and encourages discussion between citizens and leaders. Concurring with Neuman, researchers Stromer-Galley and Foot believe the Internet offers potential for increased political participation (2002). And still other researchers argue the Internet

will free citizens and their representatives, opening the line of communication and eliminating the media as gatekeeper (Shah et. al, 2001; Bennett et. al, 1999). Again, this could impact the origin of agenda setting. Until recently, even agenda-setting studies were based on aggregate data (media coverage, public opinion surveys) that often overlooked the individual-and-personal network level of analysis (Brosius and Weimann, 1998, p. 562).

E-mail can be used to communicate at an individual level and as a means to gather and mobilize the masses. According to Bimber and Davis, starting with Bob Dole's presidential Web site, candidates began utilizing e-mail as a means of communicating with constituents and as a means to organize and mobilize. Jessie Ventura's use of e-mail to organize thousands of volunteers, especially young, traditional non-voters, during the 1998 Minnesota Governors race is another example (Conhaim, 2000, Taha, 1999). Basically, the Internet rekindles a desire for a real dialogue between the elected and the electors.

In considering the role of the user (constituent) on the Internet, one must keep in mind that "the flow of issues between the media and the public is found to be more complex than a one-step, one directional flow (media to public). First the public is not a monolithic and passive recipient of the media agenda" (Brosius et al., 1996, p. 561). The constituent becomes an active participant in the information process, which is the



basic concept of the Internet: interactivity. Some researchers suggest if the Internet continues to evolve "it may weaken television's control of the public agenda, loosen its stronghold on third-string candidates' philosophies and impose an antidote to the sometimes toxic form of political communication" (Selnow, 1998, p. 191).

Through online debates, dissemination of information, and quicker/easier access to representatives, civic engagement could flourish on the Internet (Norris, 1999; Carter, 1999; Conhaim, 2000). In addition, the Internet attracts younger, more traditional non-voters to the world of civic engagement. "Those aged 18-29 voted in numbers that were double the voting rate of those generation Xers who did not use a computer" (Browning, 1996, p. 12). Given this fact, it should not be surprising that Internet users believe legislators should consider e-mail equal to other forms of communication ("E-mail Overload in Congress", 2002, p. 1).

Not all agree, however, that the Internet's ability to individualize communication is for the better. "If this so called transferring of power from the media to the user continues, we will find ourselves contending with a fragmentation problem that could be immensely destructive to democracy (i.e. segments the audience). The Internet's extraordinary capacity to target, compared with that of the other media, is the key to deepening concerns about the dangers of fragmentation, especially in a political system built on a consensus of view among a popular majority of

voters" (Selnow, 1998, p. 193). Davis (1999) argues that the Internet increases social isolation, adding to a more fragmented society. In addition, Davis suggests that democracy via the Net is an illusion, in which one assumes policy-makers are listening to Net communication.

But is this fragmentation necessarily bad? Yes, the Internet could cause audience fragmentation, but it also has the ability through chat rooms, blogs and e-mail to allow like-minded constituents to become united at least in a communication network. Also, the web can offer citizens the opportunity to chat with each other about issues of shared interest and communicate directly with their elected officials. Some researchers believe the most democratizing aspect of the Internet is "the ability for people to organize and communicate in groups" (Clift, 1998, p. 10). Even the smallest of interest groups will be able to use the web to disseminate views and mobilize members (Sullivan, 1995, p. 33). Overuse of mass mailings, however, is detrimental to the legislative-constituent communication (Herbst, 1998). "Once groups start sending mass mailings, the marginal effectiveness of mass mailings declines" (Kollman, 1998). E-mail is not immune to this type of abuse. It is possible that mass e-mailings could cause legislators to abandon this form of communication.

The Internet by its nature is interactive, especially through the use of e-mail. Consequently, it is logical to assume that if the Internet is used to enhance political communication, more constituents will become active.

Scholars are predicting a continuous growth in political Internet trends, enhancing the level of communication between constituents and representatives (Ascribe Newswire, 2003). The Internet creates new avenues for constituents to become involved. "For advocates of cyberdemocracy the opportunities provided by the Net will eventually lower the barriers to participation and widen access to those currently excluded from policy making process" (Norris, 1999, p. 15).

Some contend that the communication gap between constituents and politicians will lessen as more politicians become active on the Net. It is possible that once there, candidates will be able to engage in direct conversations with voters, conversations that change the role of traditional intermediaries such as the press and make the democratic process more deliberative (Karmack et al., 1998, p. 122).

In addition, some argue that access via e-mail is changing the manner in which people relate to one another, in a manner that breaks restrictive barriers. Two researchers, Sproull and Kiesler (1991), found that e-mail reduces the influence of social cues such as job titles, hierarchical position, race, age and appearance. Preliminary research indicates that computer-mediated communication is impulsive and emotional. "The Internet reduces restraints on verbal behavior and invites individuals to communicate in impulsive ways" (Galston, 2003, p. 7). Based on these findings, Media Richness Theory predicts that computer-mediated

communication would be most effective in communication that does not require "rich" nonverbal cues of face-to-face communication (Daft and Lengel 1986). Media Richness Theory espouses that media vary with regard to their "richness." Richness refers to "the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval" (Daft et al., 1986, p 560). A premise of the Media Richness Theory is that organizations must communicate to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity (Daft and Macintosh, 1981). "Leaner" media allow for fewer nonlinguistic cues in a slower period of time. Therefore, face-to-face is considered richer than e-mail or direct mail because of its immediate feedback and greater capacity to assimilate emotional understanding of a message (Lengel and Daft, 1988). As a result, message content could impact which communication medium legislators prefer to use.

As mentioned early, however, some researchers (Bimber et. al., 2003; Davis, 1999; Chaffee, 2001) doubt that the Internet will revolutionize politics. Instead, the Internet will become another means of communicating. Similar to the telephone, some researchers believe guidelines and procedures will tame e-mail. "Inevitably, government agencies will have to establish procedures and capabilities for e-mail communication, just as they once had to establish procedures and capabilities for telephone communication" (Nev, Anderson and Bikson, 1999, p. 11).

Constituent feedback via e-mail has already become a tool in political communication; whether it is truly effective still remains to be seen. For example, according to an article on ZDNet, one political campaign site, moveon.org, drew some 450,000 signatures calling Congress to censure President Clinton and move on (as cited on moveon.org, 1999). Moveon.org is not merely a web page, but rather it is a politically active organization that encourages constituents to use the Internet to become more involved in politics and boasts a membership of 2.8 million (Oanh Ha, 2004). "The impeachment process gave the first clear evidence of the massive impact the Internet can have on the level of congressional correspondence" (Bennett et. al. 1999, p 126). Again, centering on the impeachment trial of President Clinton, the Washington Post reported that within a 36-hour period, then Congressman Bart Stupak received 205 e-mails telling him to censure President Clinton and then "move on" to the vital issues of the day (as cited on Moveon.org, 1999). In other words, politically active organizations are promoting the use of e-mail as a means to voice personal opinions to politicians.

### **Online Growth and Its Impact on Political Communication**

Political activism via the Internet is increasing, especially political e-mail. "E-mail is quickly becoming the preferred method used by Americans to register their opinions with elected officials" (Juno, 2002). During the 1998 campaigns, the country witnessed a surge in political

Internet activity. "Political activists more often went online to engage in political discussions, to contact officials or groups about an issue, or to get specific information about the 1998 campaign" (Norris, 1999, p. 80).

Use of computers and the Internet grew at rapid rates throughout the 1990s. By the end of 1998, the penetration rate of personal computers in the United States was slightly more than 50% (Li and Scherf, 1999). Currently, that penetration rate has exceeded 70% (MacCentral, 2003). Among the adult population alone, more than two-thirds (66%) are now online (Harris Interactive Poll, 2002). As early as 1999 researchers were attributing online growth to increased reliability and ease of access, especially through e-mail (Romm, 1999). This online growth is becoming more apparent in legislative/constituent communication. For example, in 1999, 13 percent of Rep. Zach Wamp's (R-Tenn) constituent communication was via e-mail; in 2002 that percentage rose to almost 50 (Nelson 2002).

Again, using the impeachment trial of President Clinton, "Moveon.org" encouraged constituents to use the Internet to become more involved. As a result of this site, one house member, Representative Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., received 3,121 e-mails calling for President Clinton to be censured (1999, p.1).

More and more constituents are using e-mail to communicate. In fact, a study by George Washington University (2002) revealed that in 2001 the

House and Senate received more than 117 million e-mail messages, comprising almost half of all their constituent communication. "The ease and speed of e-mail has made it the second most popular way for Internet users to contact members of Congress" (Matthews, 1999, p. 1). Postal mail, however, is still rated number one. According to a survey by Juno Online Services (2000), 93% of Internet users believe "e-mail should be treated as seriously as calls and letters."

Again, it is not just constituents who benefit from the Net; politicians have found e-mail to be an effective means of communicating with constituents. In 1993, the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress began experimenting with the Internet when seven members of the House took part in a pilot e-mail program (Browning 1994). Three years later in March 1996, Congress acknowledged the potential use of the Internet in communication and established the Congressional Internet Caucus to investigate its use as a political tool (Owen, Davis & Strickler, 1999). The caucus decided it would be in the best interests of members of Congress to use the Net to communicate with their constituents (Owen et. al, 1999, p. 14). Reports indicate that indeed legislators are using this new avenue of communication. "House and Senate members who used to rely on the postal service and news media to reach constituents are increasingly using e-mail to take their message directly to voters" (Tech Report, 1999, p. 1). In fact, a report by the Congressional Management Foundation

states that legislators are increasingly answering electronic correspondence from constituents with e-mail instead of postal mail (Nelson, 2002).

During the late 1990s, politicians began to experiment with this new technology, to the point that some legislators replaced older traditional means of communicating with Web communication, especially e-mail accessible via Web pages. Even as early as the 1996 general election, "Fifty of 68 Senatorial candidates had home pages" (Klotz, 1997, p. 482). Included in most of these home pages were e-mail addresses. Also, in this same election, constituents became politically active via the Internet. "More than a quarter of all voters were on line; 10 percent made their voting decisions based upon information collected primarily from the Internet" (Connell, 1998, p. 48). As a cheaper form of communication, the Web has become more attractive to legislators. "State and congressional candidates are using the World Wide Web as a cost-effective way of reaching millions of voters" (Forstel, 1998, p. 232).

Increase in Internet activity among federal legislators continued throughout the 1990s as politicians included web sites in their normal distribution of Congressional information to constituents (Net Gains, 1999; Elving, 1998). Increasingly, politicians are learning the value of participatory web pages. "The passive web page, where people get vertical access to 'top-down' information much as they would from



conventional political leaflets, is gradually being superceded by more active designs allowing horizontal communication among networks of citizens, and 'bottom-up' feedback into the political process" (Norris, 1999, p. 10).

In 1996, "during the primaries, the Dole for President campaign reported that its home page received more than 3 million 'hits', or visits, in its first 6 months of operation, with more than 10,000 people joining the campaign e-mail list and 1,700 registering as volunteers" (Bucy, Angelo, & Newhagen, 1996, p. 337).

It appears that political e-mail is becoming a major political tool of communication and to remain "in touch" with constituents, politicians need to "go online" or they'll lose votes (Fielding, Duritz, and Baker, 2002; Greenberg, Sacirbey, Suterwalla, Robert, Matthews, Masland and Zarembo, 1999; Owen, Davis, and Strickler, 1999). "As more and more citizens turn to the Internet as a tool for communicating with Congress, governors, and state legislators, it is increasingly clear that the savvy elected leader will learn to embrace and communicate in cyberspace" (Bennett and Fielding, 1999, p. 5). This open line of communication could allow citizens to "participate in agenda-setting by making their views on issues known to a campaign through e-mail" (Stromer-Galley et. al. 2002, p. 16).

The rapid increase in political e-mail, however, has caused e-mail overload in legislative offices, leaving some politicians feeling overwhelmed. According to industry analysts, legislative offices spend an average of two hours per day working on e-mail, a figure expected to double by 2005 (PR Newswire, 2003). Analysts attribute this overload to constituent spamming, which “clogs members’ in-boxes and makes it difficult for offices to respond” (Casey and Reich, 2003, p. 2). As stated earlier, a 2000 Illinois State legislative study (Sheffer, 2003), however, shows that it’s not the magnitude of e-mails that causes politicians’ problems, but rather the inability to determine if the sender is truly a constituent. In other words, legislator/constituent communications is hindered by the lack of knowledge in the origin of e-mail. Recent advances in e-mail technology, however, could change this.

Legislators also expressed concerns over the instantaneous nature of e-mail and its effect on the legislative process (Berghel, 2000; Greenberg, 2001; Sheffer 2003). E-mail technology, especially certified e-mail, has created additional pressures for legislators to respond immediately. Companies like *Certifiedemail.com* notify senders when recipients “pick up” messages, enabling “users to send, track and verify delivery of e-mails” (Software Industry Report, 1998, p1). Advances in e-mail technology, however, have also alleviated some of the e-mail mayhem.

Unlike other forms of communication, the culture of e-mail causes users to expect instant responses (Greenberg, 2001). Colorado Senator Ron Teck fears e-mail might negatively affect the entire democratic system. "Government was designed to work slowly, and I'm often glad that it is slow. Sometimes I'm afraid if we do speed up the process just because we can, we may destroy the process and make it more reactionary" (Greenberg, 2001, p. 25). Yet other federal legislators as early as the late 1990s "regarded e-mail more highly than petitions, sign-on letters, post card campaigns and form letters, but less important than personal visits, phone calls and personal letters" (Cornfield, 1999, p. 45).

In recent years, scholars have begun to study the impact of the Internet on politics, although research is still limited. Richard E. Sclove, founder of a public-affairs research organization, Loka Institute, investigated whether the Internet will erode participatory democracy. Sclove believes the Internet is an illusion "that makes people feel as if they're participating when in reality they're not" ("Online Forum", 1996, p.1). A previous study by Steven Corman (1994) contradicts Sclove's claim. Studying people's reaction to a U.S. Representatives gopher site, Corman discovered that constituents valued these sites because they believed they could monitor their legislators. Even though enhanced participation was the least often cited value, Corman's data showed 37% of the people surveyed valued the Gopher site because it allowed them

to monitor what their representative was doing (as cited in Guernsey, 1996). These early web pages and e-mail sites became a way of holding the politicians more accountable. Corman concluded that the Internet would indeed help people become more connected and better understand the workings of government.

Since this study was conducted, further strides have been made regarding the Internet. Web sites have replaced Gopher sites, allowing users to become more active and providing more tools at their disposal. Most of that "interactivity" is found in e-mail. Researcher Jennifer Stromer-Galley investigated the ability to interact with constituents via political web pages during an election. She found a definite correlation between the days closest to the actual Election Day and the amount of e-mail received per day. One gubernatorial candidate, Ellen Sauerbrey's web page, "reported receiving 600-700 e-mail messages a day in the last days of the Maryland campaign. Prior to that, they were receiving approximately 200 a day" (as cited in Stromer-Galley, 2000, p. 123).

Overall, studies indicate a growing increase of political e-mail. According to a government study (E-mail Overload in Congress), the number of e-mails directly sent to the House of Representatives "rose from 20 million in 1998 to 48 million in 2000, and continues to grow by an average of one million messages per month" (George Washington University Study, Aug. 2002, p. 1).

Two researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Rodger Hurwitz and John C. Mallery, conducted studies on who is using the Internet to collect political information. As a result of their research, they believe the Internet will indeed impact politics. "Mr. Hurwitz, for example, is confident that the Internet will change the shape of politics, as long as it is used as a two-way medium, through which people write electronic-mail messages to their legislators, for example, and receive meaningful responses" (Guernsey, 1999, p. A32). Studies indicate a significant increase in the number of citizens relying on the Internet for political information (Bennett et al. 1999, Juno Online Services and e-advocates, 2002, Pew Center Research, April 2002). In fact, one study revealed that 65% of survey respondents trusted the Internet as the medium for obtaining candidate information (Juno Online Services and e-advocates, 2002).

One reason researchers believe political online activity is growing is easy access to government documents. The government's independent counsel investigation regarding President Clinton's sexual relations with a White House intern, the Starr Report, is a prime example of increased immediate access to government documents. "The release of the Starr report signaled the coming of age of a new technology that is going to play a commanding role in politics" (Bennett et al., 1999, p. 16). Despite

growths at the federal level, state legislators, however, seem reluctant to rely on e-mail (Greenberg, 2001).

### **Hypotheses and Research Question**

After reviewing the literature, several questions remain unanswered, thus indicating the need for further research. Therefore, the following hypotheses and research question were developed.

RQ1: How have legislators' perceptions and attitudes toward constituent e-mail changed over time?

The following hypotheses attempt to answer this research question. In addition, to maintain consistency between the 2000 study and the present study, hypothesis one and hypothesis two remained unchanged. Furthermore, it is possible that improved e-mail filtering devices could have an impact on the outcome of these original hypotheses.

H1: The more constituent e-mail received on a specific topic, the more likely a politician is to report a shift in his or her agenda to focus on that topic.

H2: The instantaneous nature of e-mail will cause politicians to respond faster to constituent e-mail than constituent postal mail.

Based on traditional representative theory, which emphasizes constituent legislative communication, the following hypothesis was tested:

H3: E-mails that are known to have come from an identifiable constituent are more likely to receive a response from legislators than e-mails in which the sender cannot be identified as a constituent.

Legislators also were asked to assess and gauge the impact of e-mail on personal political communication techniques. Based on Rogers' theoretical model, legislators who put a higher value on e-mail as a new viable communication tool should have a greater legitimacy and less resistance to the implementation and acceptance of e-mail as a new political tool of communication. Based on this premise, the following hypothesis was composed.

H4: Legislators who have more experience using e-mail are more likely to view electronic mail as an effective means of communicating with constituents.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study increases the body of knowledge regarding the impact of constituent and state legislators use of e-mail communication. As stated in the literature review, e-mail has become a popular form of communication and, therefore, the study of its implication as a political tool is justified. Just as in the past, legislators have had to adapt and incorporate developing technology; today's legislators must do the same. Therefore, this survey was an attempt to explore state legislators' attitudes, perceptions and adoption of this new form of political communication.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

To answer these questions a survey measuring the attitudes and responses of Illinois legislators was conducted on February 24, 2004. To gauge changes in state legislators' perceptions and attitudes, a follow-up analysis using data from a 2000 survey of Illinois legislators was compared with this survey. This study also includes a panel comparison made up of 59% of legislators who participated in the 2000 and 2004 studies. There were 29 overall incumbents (15 senators and 14 representatives) within the 2004 survey. Of those 29 incumbents, five senators (34%) and 12 representatives (86%) were resurveyed.

In addition, in-depth personal interviews with selected representatives were conducted the same day the survey was distributed (February 24, 2004). Because of legislative restrictive issues regarding availability and access, Representative Bost assisted in the selection of representatives interviewed. As a party leader, his assistance both increased the likelihood of legislative participation and ensured key interview attributes were met. These attributes included: years in office, gender, party affiliation and availability. Interviewee selection, therefore, was determined by a combination of these attributes. A total of five interviews was conducted. Legislators also were able to express beliefs through open-ended questions within the survey.



It was determined that a content analysis of legislators' web pages would further enhance the study and contribute additional information regarding accessibility of legislators e-mail addresses. The analysis was conducted in May 2004. Initially, both "Google" and "Yahoo" Internet search engines were used to locate Illinois legislators' web addresses. A unique trend appeared within both sites; legislators' web pages originated from the Illinois General Assembly home web page and thus were unified in appearance. Further research revealed that Illinois provides a web page with an e-mail link to individual legislators. As a result, unfortunately, the analysis of these web pages revealed minimal insight.

To supplement the lack of findings found in the original content analysis of state provided web pages, a second exhaustive "Google" search and content analysis of private Illinois legislative web pages was conducted the week of October 24<sup>th</sup> 2004. Furthermore, a personal e-mail was sent the last week of November to each legislator who did not appear in the exhaustive Google search. The personal e-mail asked legislators if they maintain a private web page in addition to the state-provided web page.

The second content analysis further sought to gauge how accessible legislators were via e-mail. In other words, do legislators make themselves available to constituents by providing an e-mail link on their main web page? The content analysis was conducted based on three variables:

web page maintained by legislator or staff, e-mail link on main page, and implementation of e-mail filter system. Variables were coded either yes or no. As stated in the literature review, e-mail filter systems require senders to provide postal address prior to sending e-mails. Through postal addresses, legislators are able to detect constituent e-mail from non-constituent e-mail and thus reduce e-mail overload. Private web pages were defined as not provided by the state, committees to re-elect, or municipalities. In other words, the web pages originated from and were maintained by the legislator and or staff.

Because the timing of the distribution of the survey was critical to the number of responses received, the survey was distributed when the legislature was in full session. To replicate the first study, the survey was distributed in February 2004. To increase responses, the survey was distributed by hand to each legislator's office and collected later that same day. The legislators had the option of returning the surveys by mail or hand-delivering them to either Representative Mike Bost or Senator David Luechtefeld, both of whom were party leaders in their respective chambers. To further increase the response rate, both Senator Luechtefeld and Representative Bost issued a written statement, which was attached to the survey, encouraging their fellow politicians to complete the survey.

There are 59 senators and 118 representatives in the state of Illinois, making the total population 177. Although the population is limited, in this case, the increase in politicians' response was deemed more important.

The study was limited to Illinois for several reasons. Past research has deemed Illinois as a "political microcosm of the nation" and worthy of study (Herbst, 1998, p. 10). According to researcher David Everson (1990), Illinois represents both agricultural and industrial cultures along with having a diverse population reflecting both southern and northern demographics. With communities ranging in population from roughly 800 (Ullin) to more than 3 million (Chicago), Illinois reflects both small town rural America along with major urban dwellings (e-Podunk, 2003). In addition, since this study includes a panel analysis the data should include the same population as the original 2000 survey.

For the purpose of this study, the term "online" was defined as actively being connected to the Internet. The term "e-mail" (electronic mail) refers to the act of communicating through written messages via the Internet and the term "cyberdemocracy" refers to political communication or interaction via the Internet.

### **Survey Instrument**

A questionnaire was developed to test the attitudes and perceptions of Illinois legislators' use of e-mail as a political tool of communication. In constructing the survey, dependent and independent variables were

determined based on the original hypotheses. The independent variables were generally the different aspects of constituent e-mail (volume, instantaneous nature, and ability to identify constituent e-mail from non-constituent e-mail).

Dependent variables focused on the effect of constituent e-mail on state legislators perceptions. This included such possibilities as shifts in legislators' political agenda, increased reliance and use of e-mail as a political tool of communication and/or an increase in legislators' personal response to constituent e-mail.

For both independent and dependent variables, questions were phrased as often as possible allowing for the most comprehensive data (see table 3.0). In addition, the questions allowed the researcher the ability to analyze the relationship between certain independent and dependent variables.

For example, when testing H1, the respondents were broken into two categories: legislators who communicate via e-mail and all other respondents. Also, legislators were divided in terms of which factor most influences their own political agenda (question 18). The division of these two categories allowed for individual testing of dependent variables such as agenda shifts (questions 14, 16, 19) and legislative response time (questions 2, 10, 13).

For H2, the independent variable was the instantaneous nature (or speed) of e-mail. In other words, the type of constituent-initiated communication impacts or affects the type of communication legislators used to respond. Hypothesis three deals directly with the origin of e-mails that are known to have come from an identifiable constituent and the likelihood of legislative response. These were tested against other responses that relate to legislative response time in regard to constituent communication.

For hypothesis four, the independent variables were legislators' responses to specific questions, which dealt with experience in using e-mail. For example, how a legislator responded to question five regarding the length of having a political e-mail account served as the independent variable and measure against legislators' perception of e-mail's effectiveness in communicating with constituents. Table 3.0 provides a further breakdown of this analysis.

Issues of reliability and validity were addressed in several ways. A filter question was used to separate those legislators with e-mail accounts from those without e-mail accounts. The instructions were as specific as possible without getting too confusing. There was a little more flexibility in this area, in that the respondents were a special audience with a unique level of knowledge on the subject.

Table 3.0: Statistical analysis of dependent and independent variables to test modified hypotheses and research questions

<u>Variables</u>		
<u>Hypotheses/RQ</u>	<u>Independent variables</u>	<u>Dependent variables</u>
H1	E-mail Volume Q4, Q6, Q12, Q17	Questions 3, 7, 9, 13, 15, 19, 21
H2	E-mail's Speed Q2, Q14	Questions 1, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 18, 27
H3	Response Q16	Questions 7, 9, 21, 23
H4	Effectiveness Q11, Q20	Questions 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 23, 25, 28, 30, 31
RQ1	Question 16 (comparison with 2000 findings)	Questions 9, 17, 18, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30

Note: Question numbers refer to the questionnaire (see Appendix A)

Questions and answers flowed from left to right in a consistent pattern and were arranged by similar nature. Ordinal scaled questions were worded with the positive responses listed first, to overcome problems associated with primacy effect. Several follow-up and open-ended questions were included to add attitudinal depth to the numeral data. In addition, personal interviews were conducted to further add depth and insight to the perceptions and attitudes of Illinois legislators. Each interview began by asking the legislator if he or she used e-mail to

communicate with constituents. Depending on his or her response, the legislator was then asked to specifically state the pros or cons of using e-mail. In addition, each legislator was asked whether the content of constituent e-mail determined the type of communication he or she used to respond (This question directly relates to H2).

### **Pilot and Readability Tests**

A readability test was conducted to determine any potential face validity problems with the construction of the questionnaires. The test included a professor at Louisiana State University and a professor at the University of Mississippi, both of whom are familiar with the study and the subject matter. Results from the readability test indicated no significant problems with the design, format or questions. Some minor changes were made to individual questions. Questions using a Likert type scale were grouped together in table form making it easier for legislators to respond as well as reducing survey space. Changes with question 31 included dropping "1-2 years High School" and adding "Less than High School" to make the responses more inclusive. In addition, question 32 was left open-ended to add flexibility in data regarding age.

### **Questionnaire**

A copy of the survey appears in Appendix A, but it is broken down here for individual analysis. The survey separates each legislator into several

demographic facets, such as party affiliation, age, gender and length in office.

(Q1) In general, how long does it take you to respond to constituent postal mail?

- \_\_\_\_\_ SAME DAY
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 DAYS
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3 DAYS-WEEK
- \_\_\_\_\_ MORE THAN A WEEK

(Q2) In general, how long does it take you to respond to constituent e-mail?

- \_\_\_\_\_ SAME DAY
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 DAYS
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3 DAYS-WEEK
- \_\_\_\_\_ MORE THAN A WEEK

Questions one and two were designed to see if politicians felt a greater sense of urgency in responding to e-mail over postal mail. The literature review infers an added sense of pressure to respond quicker to e-mail than direct mail. If more politicians respond to e-mail the same day, H2 would be supported. To determine whether the significance is statistically significant, a chi-square was run. In addition, a correlation between the 2000 survey data and the current data was run to gauge changes in legislative behavior.

(Q3) On the average, how much direct constituent mail do you receive per day?

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1- 10
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11 – 25
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26 – 50
- \_\_\_\_\_ 51 – UP



(Q4) On the average, how much constituent e-mail do you receive per day?

- ☐ 1- 10
- ☐ 11 – 25
- ☐ 26 – 50
- ☐ 51 – UP

Questions three and four were designed to measure the amount of postal mail versus the amount of e-mail politicians receive. This question helps support H1. If a respondent does not receive a significant amount of e-mail then H1 could not be supported. Although a significant amount of e-mail received does not solely support H1, it helps build a foundation based on increased usage of e-mail as a means of political communication. A chi-square was run to see if the differences were significant.

(Q5) I have had an e-mail address for

- ☐ Less than a year
- ☐ 1-2 years
- ☐ More than 3 years
- ☐ I do not have an e-mail account

(Q6) In the last year, the amount of constituent e-mail my office received:

- ☐ Increased Significantly
- ☐ Increased Marginally
- ☐ Declined Significantly
- ☐ Declined Marginally
- ☐ No Change

Questions five and six are both filter questions and a means of correlating the use of e-mail with the length of time using e-mail. If a

politician has been using e-mail for several years, he or she is more likely to become the opinion leaders and apply this technology in the office. In this case, the filter question sought to determine those legislators who have e-mail from those who do not. This information helps to determine if suppositions made in the literature review, that the longer a respondent used e-mail the more reliant he or she would become on e-mail, were supported or refuted. In addition, question six addressed H1 (shift in agendas) and H4 (effectiveness of e-mail). It was believed; the amount of e-mails received by legislators affects both legislators' perception of e-mail and its impact on their legislative agenda. In essence, this question was another way to test H1. If a politician's e-mail has not increased, H1 would not be supported. This question also gauges the importance of e-mail as a political tool of communication. If more people regard e-mail as an important means to communicate then politicians should see an increase in the amount of e-mail received. In addition, question five directly relates to H4 in that the length of having a political e-mail account (more experience) correlates to legislators perception of e-mail's effectiveness.

Questions 7 through 16, and questions 21 through 23 used a Likert scale to gauge politicians attitudes ranging from 1=Strongly Agree to 7=Strongly Disagree, 1=Very Likely to 7=Very Unlikely, and 1=Very Frequently to 7=Very Infrequently.

(Q7) How likely are you to respond to any and all forms of constituent feedback?

This question was designed to gauge the importance of all types of constituent feedback and to act as a filter question for H3. If legislators typically do not respond to constituent communication then whether legislators know the origin of e-mails will have little to no effect on their responding to political e-mails (H3). In addition, a negative response from legislators would indicate that the method of response used by legislators is insignificant (H2).

(Q8) I communicate with e-mail both professionally and in my private life.

(Q9) I regard e-mail as an important political tool of communication.

Question eight was designed to detect any correlations between legislators using e-mail in their personal life with using e-mail in their professional life. It was thought that if legislators used e-mail in their private lives they would be more willing to use e-mail politically, thus addressing the question of e-mails effectiveness (H4). Question nine, therefore, was designed to address this assertion.

(Q10) Through e-mail, I can communicate with my constituents in a timelier manner than other forms of communication.

(Q11) Using e-mail is an effective way to communicate with my constituents.

Questions 10 and 11 deal with H2 and the instantaneous nature of e-mail. In these questions, the issue of e-mail's speed and its effectiveness as a political tool was addressed. If respondents agree, H2 is supported. Both questions also address H4, which directly deals with e-mail's effectiveness in communicating with constituents. It is presumed that a portion of e-mail's effectiveness lies in its timeliness, that a greater impact is achieved with a quicker response. This would be supported if the majority of legislators agreed. In addition, question 11 directly gauges the respondent's attitude in using e-mail as a means to communicate.

(Q12) My constituents are increasingly using e-mail to communicate.

This question indirectly addresses the issues of e-mail's effectiveness as a means of communicating and the impact of constituent e-mail on legislators' agendas. A negative response by legislators would negate H1.

(Q13) In general, how often do you shift your position on an issue or change your legislative agenda?

Again, this question was designed as a filter question in conjunction with H1. A negative response by legislators would make H1 and the issue of constituent e-mail's effect on legislative agendas a moot point.

(Q14) I feel constituents communicating via e-mail expect a quicker response than constituents using other forms of communication.

This question focused on the effects of the instantaneous nature of e-mail on a legislator's style of communicating, H2. If legislators feel pressure to respond quicker to e-mail than other forms of constituent communication then H2 would be supported. In addition, H2 addressed the type of communication legislators' use when responding to constituents' e-mails. If legislators feel pressured to respond quicker to e-mail than other forms of communication, it stands to reason they would respond to e-mails via e-mail. However, content of constituent e-mail might also impact the form of communication used to respond.

(Q15) Strong constituent feedback on an issue causes me to shift or change my agenda.

(Q17) The more constituent feedback I receive via e-mail, the more likely I am to shift or change my agenda.

These questions directly addressed the agenda-setting issue found in H1. Again, if respondents agree positively to the questions then H1 is supported. Question 17 also applies to RQ1. In this particular question, we try to isolate the role and impact of constituent e-mail in political agenda setting. The significance of this question required it being placed toward the middle of the survey.

(Q16) I respond more to e-mail when I know they come from constituents.

This question directly addresses H3, which deals with legislators' ability to determine the legitimacy of constituent e-mail. If legislators know e-mails originated from constituents, they are more likely to respond than if the origin is unknown. In essence, this question also addresses the impact of improved e-mail technology and its impact on legislators' perceptions and attitudes, RQ1. Inclusion of postal addresses within e-mails was thought to legitimize and validate constituent e-mails from non-constituent e-mail. In addition, this question indirectly addresses RQ1. As indicated in the literature review, improved e-mail technology includes the ability for web-induced e-mails to demand postal addresses before sending e-mails.

(Q18) Typically, I respond to constituent e-mail via:

- ☐ Direct Mail
- ☐ Personalized E-mail Response
- ☐ Automated E-mail Response
- ☐ I Don't Respond to E-mails

This question sought to answer how Illinois legislators respond to political e-mail and indirectly applies to H2. This question could have several implications including, but not limited to, legislators' implementation of new technology or their rejection of this new form of communication, RQ1.

(Q19) What factor most influences your own political agenda?

- ☐ Personal Beliefs & Convictions
- ☐ Constituent Input/Feedback
- ☐ Media

- ☐ Legislative Party or Agenda
- ☐ Other (Please Explain)

(Q21) What type of constituent feedback most influences your political agenda?

- ☐ E-mail
- ☐ Postal Mail
- ☐ Telephone
- ☐ Face to Face

Both questions 19 and 21 relate to H1. Before determining the impact of constituent e-mail on a legislator's agenda, it was important to determine how legislators rank political influences. If constituent communication ranks low, then the issue is a moot point. Regarding question 19 and H1, however, if constituent feedback obtains the greatest response, then respondents would positively indicate that constituent e-mail could impact a legislator's political agenda. A negative impact would occur if the other choices ranked higher. With question 21, if the majority of legislators respond by choosing e-mail, H1 is supported. A negative response to e-mail negates H1.

(Q20) How effective do you believe the following mediums are in communicating your message to your constituents?

This question was broken into the following six categories: postal mail, web page, newspaper, television, radio, and e-mail. Legislators individually ranked each form of communication using a seven point Likert scale ranging from highly effective (1) to not at all effective (7). This question sought to gauge legislators' attitudes toward various forms of

communication. In addition, because of the unique opportunity to gather information, this question was also designed for future research and analysis.

(Q22) Do you have a web page? (if yes, proceed to question 21, if not skip to question 24).

\_\_\_\_ Yes      \_\_\_\_ No

(Q23) I use a filtering system to distinguish constituent e-mail from non-constituent e-mail.

(Q24) I feel using my web page is an effective means of communicating.

Questions 22, 23 and 24 were designed to address RQ1. A positive response would indicate that legislators have begun to implement new e-mail technology in their political communication. In addition, Q22 gauged whether legislators were aware of developing technology that is available to them. As stated in the literature review, the state of Illinois provides a web page for each legislator, which includes an e-mail link.

(Q25) In the future, my office will become more reliant on the Internet (especially e-mail) as a means to communicate.

Question 25 indirectly refers to H4. If politicians regard e-mail as an effective means of communicating (H4), it was thought in the future they would become more reliant on this type of communication. Correlating with H4, if legislators become more reliant on e-mail it is believe they will



respond to constituent e-mail via e-mail instead of other forms of communication.

(Q26) How well do you feel you are coping with the volume of e-mail you receive?

- ☐ Very Well
- ☐ Reasonably Well
- ☐ Adequately
- ☐ Not Very Well
- ☐ Badly – being swamped

(Q27) Do you have the resources and skills to make best use of e-mail?

- ☐ Yes      ☐ No      ☐ Not sure

Question 26 and 27 relate to RQ1 and the effect of new e-mail technology on legislators' perception of e-mail communication. Again, it was thought the implementation of improved e-mail technology would result in positive legislative responses in regard to perceptions and attitudes toward e-mail communication. Thus, a negative response to question 27 should negatively correlate to question 26 and visa versa.

(Q28) Have you or your staff received any training on how to use e-mail effectively?

- ☐ Yes      ☐ No      ☐ Not sure

(Q29) Who in your office responds to the majority of constituent e-mail?

- ☐ You      ☐ Staff

(Q30) Has e-mail helped you provide a better service to constituents?

☐ Yes      ☐ No      ☐ Not sure

These questions relate to both H4 and RQ1. Advanced training on improved e-mail technology (RQ1) could impact whether legislators believe communicating via e-mail is effective (H4). Furthermore, the answer to question 28 could greatly impact the response to question 30. It was believed the more informed legislators were in regard to e-mail communication the more likely they were to respond positively to question 30.

(Q31) Do you proactively send e-mails to constituents (if yes, please specify).

☐ Yes      ☐ No      ☐ Not sure

This question indirectly relates to H4. If legislators respond positively to this question, then it's logical to ascertain that legislators believe e-mail is an effective means of communicating with their constituents. In addition, the author hopes to apply information obtained through this question to further research and analysis.

(Q32) What party do you represent?

☐ Democrat  
☐ Republican  
☐ Other

(Q33) Education Completed.

☐ Less Than High School  
☐ High School Degree

- \_\_\_\_ Some College
- \_\_\_\_ 4yr College Degree
- \_\_\_\_ Some Graduate Level
- \_\_\_\_ Graduate Level (including Law Degree)

(Q34) What year were you born?

(Q35) What district do you represent?

(Q36) How long have you held that office?

These questions were added to discover relevant demographic information, especially questions 34 and 35, which dealt with the ages of legislators and the geographic district they represent. As stated in the literature review, Rogers theorized that younger people are more apt to integrate new technologies than older ones. Through question 34, we sought to test this theory by comparing legislators' under-50 years of age with those legislators' over-50 years of age. Prior research indicated that geographic location might impact legislators' use of e-mail. Therefore, this question was designed to test this validity.

The demographic information offered the potential for explaining partisan, age-based, and geographic differences among the respondents. At this point, since existent studies are sparse, these questions were exploratory only and no directional hypotheses were projected.

Since the information gathered from the survey was nominal or ordinal in nature, the researcher chose to initially use Chi Square, t-test, and

correlations to test for statistical significance. Based on these findings, regression analyses were performed to further strengthen statistical findings. In addition, regression analysis could uncover relations that would otherwise go undetected. Breakdown of regression are located in the result section.

The specific construction of the Chi Square took three forms. To test for H1, we compared the average amount of postal mail received per day versus the amount of e-mails received. It was stated in H2 that the instantaneous nature of e-mail would cause politicians to respond faster to e-mail than direct mail. This was tested by measuring the results from (Q1) versus (Q2), the response time of direct mail versus that of e-mail. Hypothesis four stated that legislators' belief in e-mail's effectiveness depended on the amount of experience in using e-mail. In addition to running correlations, this was tested by measuring the results from (Q6) versus (Q11).

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

There are 59 Senators and 118 Representatives in the state of Illinois, bringing the total population to 177. A total of 31 surveys from the house and a total of 20 surveys from the senate were received on February 24, 2004. To increase the response rate, both Representative Bost and Senator Luechtefeld sent inter-office memos to their colleagues encouraging them to complete the survey and return it to their respective offices. As a result, 20 additional representative surveys were mailed by Rep. Bost and received on March 15, 2004, bringing the total house surveys to 51. A total of six surveys were mailed by Senator Luechtefeld and received March 11, 2004, bringing the total senate surveys received to 26. Given the census size of 177, this yielded an overall response rate of 43%.

Since the survey was distributed to a majority of the state legislature, the response was a representative sample. In addition, the relatively high response rate gives statistical validity despite the relatively small population. Table 4.0 shows a comparison between the total population of the senate and the house, which comes from the Illinois Handbook of Government (2004), and the number of responses received. The table also shows a demographic breakdown between total number of Republicans and Democrats and the amount of responses received.

Table 4.0: House and Senate party demographics

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	Survey
<u>Overall Senate</u>	26 (45%)
<u>Republican</u>	19 (74%)
<u>Democrat</u>	6 (20%)
<u>Independent</u>	1 (100%)
<u>Overall House</u>	51 (44%)
<u>Republican</u>	27 (53%)
<u>Democrat</u>	24 (37%)

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Note: The values represent actual numbers and percentages. Parenthesis represents the percentage of total population of Illinois legislators.

As mentioned earlier, five in-depth personal interviews were also conducted on February 24, 2004, and the results were used to supplement the quantitative data of the study.

### **Data and Results**

Responses to the questionnaire supported much of the literature, in that legislators felt an added sense of pressure to respond quicker to e-mail than direct mail (H2); that perception of e-mail's effectiveness as a political tool of communication depended on length of experience in using e-mail (H4); and that improved e-mail technology increased the likelihood of legislators responding to constituent e-mail (H3). In addition, similar to the 2000 study, there was limited support for H1. Results indicated that perception of e-mail, instead of volume of constituent e-mail received, correlated to reported shifts in legislators' agendas.

## E-mail Volume

The study tested the statistical significance of the amount of e-mail received by comparing questions three and four. Question three asked how much direct mail was received per day; question four asked the same thing in regard to e-mail. There was not a significant difference, as seen in table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Amount of daily postal mail received versus e-mail received

<u>Volume</u>	<u>1-10</u>	<u>11-26</u>	<u>26-50</u>	<u>51 and up</u>
<u>Postal</u>	25(33%)	28(37%)	18(23%)	5(7%)
<u>E-mail</u>	29(39%)	23(31%)	15(20%)	7(10%)
$\chi^2 = 1.366$ $df=3$ (Postal N=77, E-mail N=77)				

Note: The values represent the number of legislators responding. For significance at the .05 level, chi-square should be greater than or equal to 7.82.

According to the 2000 survey results, legislators were receiving more direct mail than e-mail. Therefore, the insignificance of this finding adds support to the increasing amount of e-mail legislators are receiving. In fact, when asked to gauge the amount of constituent e-mail received, 49% of legislators indicated a significant increase with an overall increase of 76%. In addition, when asked if legislators believed constituents were increasingly using e-mail to communicate, a majority (72%) agreed while 14% chose either disagree or neutral. Controlling for a set of demographic variables that addressed Rogers' theory of diffusion along

with these independent variables the findings were further supported (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Regression of E-mail Received per Day

Variable	B (t-value)	
<u>Demographics</u>		
Party	.328	(1.420)
Education	-.004	(-.302)
Age	-.141	(-.620)
Sex	.06	(.269)
General Assembly	.131	(.524)
Race	.574	(1.334)
<u>Independent Variables</u>		
Postal Mail	.391	(3.037)*
Constituent E-mail Use	.160	(2.378)*
Constant	1.708	(1.843)
R-Square	.282	

Note: Note: \*Asterisks denotes significance level of confident  $\alpha = .05$ ,  $\alpha = .01$  (two tailed test). Dependent variable ranged from low (less e-mail) to high (more e-mail). See Appendix B for variable definitions.

The analysis indicated that legislators were receiving the same amount of e-mail as postal mail. In addition, there was a positive relationship between legislators' perception of increased constituent use of e-mail and the amount of e-mail received. Although not statistically significant, older legislators indicated e-mail volume had not increased. Since H1 was based on the assumption of increased e-mail communication's impact on political agendas, it is important to determine the amount e-mail received in comparison to direct mail.



## Constituent Feedback

Through questions 15 and 19, the study sought to gauge the factor that most influences legislators' own political agendas (Q19), and the overall importance of constituent feedback (Q15). If constituent feedback was not important to legislators, then it stands to reason that the means of that communication did not matter. Using the same assigned values as before, responses were weighted toward the high end of the scale (overall importance of constituent feedback mean = 5.07). Overall, 37% of respondents chose constituent feedback as the most important factor in determining political agenda, surpassed only by personal belief at 41% (see table 4.3), further solidifying the foundation of H1 that constituent feedback could have an impact on legislative agendas.

Table 4.3: Factor that most influences political agenda

<u>Factors</u>	<u>Response by Percentage</u>
<u>Legislative Agenda</u>	3 (4%)
<u>Constituent Feedback</u>	28 (37%)
<u>Personal Beliefs</u>	32 (41%)
<u>Other</u>	13 (17%)
N74	

Note: Other indicates a combination of both constituent feedback and personal belief.

Based on prior research, constituent feedback is a contributing factor when determining political agendas. Correlations were used to determine the strength of this relationship at the state level. The findings indicated

that correlations among reported shifts in legislators' agendas caused by constituent e-mail with legislators who chose constituent feedback as the most influential factor in deciding political agendas ( $r = .418, p < .01$ ), and with legislators who indicated that overall constituent feedback impacts agendas ( $r = .675, p < .01$ ) were significant. Since this study focused on the perceptions of state legislators, a further correlation regarding legislators' perception of e-mail as an important political tool ( $r = .351, p < .01$ ) with reported shifts in agendas caused by constituent e-mail was performed and was found significant.

A regression was run to account for the simultaneous interactions among these bivariate relationships, including the original set of demographic controls that address Rogers' theory (see Table 4.4). As seen in Table 4.4, while holding other variables constant, there remains a positive relationship between shifts in agendas caused by increased e-mails with legislators who regard e-mail as important and overall shift their agenda based on strong constituent feedback. The volume of e-mail received, however, did not cause legislators to reportedly shift agendas. In fact, an inverted relation exists in that increased volume of e-mails received was negatively related to shifts in agendas. So that the more e-mail received, the less likely legislators were to shift their agendas. Instead, legislators' perception of e-mail as a political tool, rather than the volume of e-mail received, positively impacted changes in agendas. The

basic premise of H1 that increased constituent feedback would positively impact legislators' agendas was not supported.

Table 4.4: Regression of Agenda Shifts Based on Increase Constituent Email Communication

Variable	B (t-value)
<u>Demographics</u>	
Party	.428 (1.347)
Education	-.008 (-.448)
Age	-.388 (-1.288)
Sex	.195 (.516)
General Assembly	-.004 (-.135)
Race	.388 (.719)
<u>Independent Variables</u>	
Constituent Feedback=Changed Agenda	.495 (4.365)***
E-mail Important	.162 (1.916)*
E-mail Volume	-.427 (-2.369)*
Constant	3.687 (2.380)
R-Square	.511

Note: \*Asterisks denotes significance level of confident \*=.05, \*\*=.01, \*\*\*=.001 (two tailed test). See Appendix B for definition of variables. Dependent variable ranged from low (disagree) to high (agree).

However, results to question 17, which directly asked if legislators would shift their agenda depending on the amount of constituent e-mail received, were mixed. On a scale from one to seven with one representing strongly agree, most respondents (36%) chose the neutral "four" position for this question. Overall, however, 35% of those responding chose agree and 28% chose disagree; indicating a 20% increase in agree from the 2000 study. Furthermore, 77% of legislators responding indicated that in general they infrequently changed their

political agenda, which could explain why 36% of legislators chose neutral for question 17.

The regression does, however, support Rogers' innovation theory, in that younger legislators indicated a greater shift in agendas based on increased constituent e-mails than older legislators. In addition, the insignificant difference between the sexes indicates the gender gap has lessened and women are no longer the "laggards."

## **H2 and E-mail Response Time**

H2: The instantaneous nature of e-mail will cause politicians to respond faster to constituent e-mail than constituent postal mail.

The results of the survey showed support for H2. Questions one and two asked legislators how quickly they respond to direct mail and e-mail respectively. A Chi Square of 9.96 showed a significant difference between the two responses (as seen in Table 4.5).

Table 4.5: Overall comparison of time of response to postal mail v. e-mail

<u>Type of Mail</u>	<u>Response Time</u>			
	<u>Same day</u>	<u>1-2 days</u>	<u>3 days/week</u>	<u>more than week</u>
<u>Postal</u>	3(4%)	21(27%)	38(49%)	15(20%)
<u>E-mail</u>	11(15%)	29(40%)	24(32%)	10(13%)
$\chi^2 = 9.96^* \quad df=3$ <span style="float: right;">(Postal n=77, E-mail=77)</span>				

Note: The values represent the total number of legislators responding.

\*p<.01. Percentages rounded to nearest whole number.

### **Timeliness of E-mail**

Most respondents (68%) agreed that constituents communicating via e-mail expected a quicker response than other forms of communication; overall, 11% disagreed while 18% chose the neutral position. In addition, a positive correlation ( $r = .510$ ,  $p < .01$ ) between legislators who perceive e-mail as a timelier means of communicating with those legislators who respond faster to e-mail than direct mail was significant. Since timeliness of e-mail, e-mail's importance and effectiveness were highly correlated in revealing legislators' perceptions of e-mail (Cronbach alpha = .79), these variables were collapsed into one, e-mail characteristics.

A regression considering the impact of legislators' perceptions of constituents' desire to receive a quicker response when using e-mail communication on legislators' response time further supports these findings. As seen in Table 4.6, legislators with higher levels of education and who believe e-mail is a timelier form of communication and regarded e-mail as both effective and important were more likely to respond more quickly to e-mail than postal mail. In addition, a positive relationship exists between legislators who overall respond more quickly to postal mail and e-mail.

Constituent expectation, however, had a negative impact on legislators' response time. In other words, constituent expectation regarding e-mail response time did not make legislators respond more

quickly. Even though this seems counter intuitive, it appears response time to e-mail depended more on the importance legislators place on e-mail communication rather than on constituent expectations. In addition, a positive correlation ( $r = .422$ ,  $p < .001$ ) between legislators who felt constituents communicating via e-mail expected a quicker response and with those legislators who respond to constituent e-mail via e-mail, thus indicating that legislators were using e-mail to respond more quickly.

Table 4.6: Regression of E-mail Response Time

Variables	B (t-values)	B (t-values)
<u>Demographics</u>	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>
Party	-.002 (-.140)	-.009 (-.482)
Education	.002 (.381)*	.004 (.669)*
Age	.104 (.604)	.198 (1.094)
Sex	-.248 (-1.253)	-.265 (-1.249)
General Assembly	-.380 (-1.982)*	-.388 (-1.884)**
Race	.228 (.632)	.727 (1.844)*
<u>Independent Variables</u>		
Email Characteristics	.008 (3.974)****	.009 (4.298)****
Postal Response Time	.471 (4.238)****	.412 (3.518)****
Constituents Expect Quicker Response	-.184 (-2.702)***	-.254 (-3.363)***
Filter System		.572 (2.176)**
Constant	1.615 (1.959)	.973 (1.106)
R-Square	.502	.599

Note: \*Asterisks denotes significance level of confident  $^* = .10$ ,  $^{**} = .05$ ,  $^{***} = .01$ ,  $^{****} = .001$  (two tailed test). See Appendix B for definition of controlled variables. Dependent variable ranged from low (slow) to high (fast). E-mail characteristics = timeliness, effectiveness and importance.

According to the regression results, a negative relationship also existed between the two chambers. In other words, representatives significantly responded slower to e-mail than senators.

So far, we have found that legislators' response time to constituent e-mail is associated with legislators' perception of the importance and effectiveness of e-mail. Developments in e-mail technology, however, suggest that other variables might cause legislators to respond more quickly to e-mail than postal mail. Filtering systems and auto response systems allow legislators to send an instant message to constituents, which could lead to increased perceptions of e-mail's importance in constituent communication and cause legislators to respond quicker to e-mail than other forms of communication.

A regression – including use of filter system, e-mail characteristics (importance and effectiveness of e-mail and e-mail timeliness), postal response time, a set of demographic controls, and constituent expectation - was run to test these propositions (see Table 4.6, Model 2). In this analysis, legislators who use filtering systems respond quicker to e-mail than postal mail, thus supporting assumptions made in the literature review. Furthermore, e-mail response time remained positively associated with perceptions of e-mail's importance in communicating. Constituent expectations also remained negatively related to legislators' e-mail response time, indicating that legislators' perception and not constituent expectations determine response time to e-mails.

In both models, level of education also had a significant positive relationship to the overall speed in responding to constituent e-mail. In

other words, legislators with higher levels of education tend to respond more quickly to e-mail than postal mail. Adding the variable filter system to the equation had a significant impact on race, in that white legislators significantly indicated that they respond more quickly to e-mail than black legislators (see Model 2 Table 4.6). Female legislators also appeared to respond more quickly to e-mail than male legislators, albeit the difference was not significant. Since the majority of respondents indicated positive responses, it was concluded that the preponderance of results supported H2.

In addition, a comparison between (Q2), which asked how quickly legislators respond to e-mail, with (Q18), which asked what form of communication legislators use when responding to constituent e-mail, revealed some interesting findings. Legislators responded more via e-mail instead of postal mail when responding within two days and generally responded to e-mail via e-mail (as seen in table 4.7).

Table 4.7: Comparison of response time with type of communication

<u>Response Time</u>	<u>Form of Communication</u>		
	<u>Postal Mail</u>	<u>E-Mail</u>	<u>Total</u>
<u>Week or More</u>	2(3%)	7(10%)	9(13%)
<u>3-6 Days</u>	5(7%)	18(26%)	23(32%)
<u>1-2 Days</u>	6(8%)	22(31%)	28(40%)
<u>Same Day</u>	0	11(15%)	11(15%)
			N=71

Note. The values represent the total number of legislators responding.



H3: E-mails that are known to have come from an identifiable constituent are more likely to receive a response from legislators than e-mails in which the sender cannot be identified as a constituent.

Legislators were asked their attitude toward responding to all forms of constituent communication on a scale of one to seven, with one indicating strongly disagree and seven indicating strongly agree. Responses were heavily weighted toward the high end of the scale (overall response to constituent feedback mean = 6.15). This question acted as a filter to H3 and helped determine the level of importance legislators placed on responding to constituents.

Overall, when legislators were asked if they respond more to e-mail when they know it comes from constituents (Q16) the majority (90%) agreed, with 45% of respondents indicating they strongly agreed while 5% chose either disagree or neutral. A correlation further confirmed that legislators who tend to respond to all forms of constituent communication were more likely to respond to e-mails that were known to have come from constituents ( $r = .250$ ,  $p < .02$ ).

To see if these correlations hold true when other variables are present, a regression with response to known constituent e-mail, the same set of demographic controls, and overall response to all forms of constituent

communication was run. As seen in Table 4.8, these correlations remain significant, thus indicating strong support for H3.

Table 4.8: Regression of Response to Known Constituent E-mail

Variable	B (t-values)
<u>Demographics</u>	
Party	-.118 (-2.442)*
Education	-.019 (-1.055)
Age	-.059 (-1.199)
Sex	-.042 (-.759)
General Assembly	-.025 (-.474)
Race	.351 (3.115)**
<u>Independent Variables</u>	
Respond All Forms of Constituent Feedback	.220 (1.966)*
Constant	.884 (3.756)
R-Square	.360

Note: \*Asterisks denotes significance level of confident \*=.05, \*\*=.01, \*\*\*=.001 (two tailed test). See Appendix B definition of controlled variables. Dependent variable ranged from low (disagree) to high (agree).

The data indicated that race was significantly positively related to legislators responding to known constituents. Party had a significant negative relation. In other words, white-republican legislators significantly responded to constituent e-mails more than other legislators. Although not significant, a negative relationship existed with education, age and general assembly. These negative relations indicated that younger female senators were more likely to respond to known constituent e-mails.

### **E-mail Experience**

H4: Legislators who have more experience using e-mail are more likely to view electronic mail as an effective means of communicating

with constituents.

To test relations between experiences in using e-mail with perceptions of e-mail's effectiveness, Q20 (e-mail's effectiveness) was compared with Q5 (length of using e-mail). A positive relationship, albeit a weak one ( $r = .196$ ,  $p < .10$ ) indicates that the longer legislators use e-mail the more they believe it is effective. Further analysis of how legislators' use e-mail revealed additional significant factors impacting legislators' perceptions of e-mail's effectiveness. Correlations among e-mail's effectiveness with the use of e-mail both privately and professionally ( $r = .535$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and with the volume of e-mail received in the last year ( $r = .272$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were significant. The first finding indicates that the more experience in using e-mail leads to an increased belief in e-mail's effectiveness in communicating with constituents, thus supporting H4.

The second finding also indicates a positive relationship between the two variables, in that legislators who have witnessed an increase in constituent e-mail in the last year believed e-mail was an effective means of communicating. In addition, a cross-tabulation showed that 46 of 52 legislators responding who witnessed an increase in the amount of e-mails received agreed that e-mail is an effective means of communication. A Chi Square of 5.67 adds statistical support to this finding (as seen in table 4.9).

Since 43% of legislators indicated that they personally respond to e-mails instead of staff members, it is logical to assume that the more e-mail legislators receive the more experience they have in dealing with electronic communication. A final correlation between legislators who have had an e-mail account for more than 3 years with increased future reliance on e-mail to communicate with constituents was significant ( $r = .235, p < .02$ ). This finding indirectly lends support for H4. If legislators did not believe e-mail was effective, they would not become more reliant on e-mail in the future.

Table 4.9: Comparison of increased e-mails received with legislators attitudes toward e-mail's effectiveness in communicating with constituents

<u>Amount of E-mail Received</u>		<u>E-mail's Effectiveness</u>		
		<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Total</u>
<u>No Change</u>		6(9%)	10(15%)	16
<u>Increase</u>		6(9%)	46(67%)	52
$\chi^2 = 5.674^*$		df= 1	N=68	

Note. The values represent the total number of legislators responding.

\* $p < .025$ . Dependent variable = amount of e-mail received.

To further test the significance of these relations, e-mail's effectiveness was regressed against volume of e-mail received, use of e-mail both privately and professionally, the same set of demographic variables, and future reliance (see Table 4.10 Model 1). Because use of e-mail both privately and professionally was correlated with future reliance on e-mail

(Cronbach Alpha .63), the two variables were combined to form a single variable, use/future reliance.

In addition, the literature review indicated that e-mail's timeliness could impact perceived perceptions of e-mail's effectiveness. Question 10 asked if e-mail allowed legislators to respond in a timelier manner than other forms of communication. Based on a scale from one to seven, with one representing strongly disagree, responses were weighted toward the high end of the scale (overall mean score = 5.45), indicating support of legislators' perception of e-mail's effectiveness in communicating. Furthermore, when directly asked how effective legislators believed e-mail was in communicating with constituents overall, 65% chose effective. Therefore, to test the strength of this relationship, Table 4:10 Model 2 included the variable timeliness.

The results indicate that the use of e-mail both privately and professionally positively impacted legislators' perception of e-mail's effectiveness in both models. The significance of this relationship lends support to H4 in that increased use of e-mail enhanced legislators' positive perception of e-mail's effectiveness. The correlation between e-mail volume and perceived effectiveness of e-mail, however, no longer remained significant, thus indicating that individual use of e-mail determined the effectiveness of e-mail and not the volume of e-mail

received. In other words, the more legislators used e-mail, the more they perceived e-mail to be effective.

Table 4.10: Regression of Legislators Evaluation of E-mail's Effectiveness

Variable	B (t-value)	B (t-values)
	Model 1	Model 2
<u>Demographics</u>		
Party	-.147 (-.396)	-.277 (-.756)
Education	-.246 (-1.993)**	-.219 (-1.806)**
Age	-.070 (-.205)	-.285 (-.806)
Sex	-.624 (-1.606)	-.356 (-.886)
General Assembly	.375 (.962)	.518 (1.343)
Race	-.959 (-1.543)	-.911 (-1.504)
<u>Independent Variables</u>		
E-mail Volume	.329 (1.501)	.306 (1.432)
Use/Future Reliance	.286 (4.998)****	.172 (2.155)***
E-Mail Timeliness		.265 (1.984)**
Constant	3.631 (2.160)	3.111 (1.878)
R-Square	.482	.518

Note: \*Asterisks denotes significance level of confident \*=.10, \*\*=.05, \*\*\*=.01, \*\*\*\*=.001 (two tailed test). See Appendix B for controlled variables definitions.

Timeliness of e-mail also had a significant positive association with legislators' perception of e-mail's effectiveness, thus negating assumptions made in the literature review that the quickness of e-mail communication adds to legislators' overall evaluation of its effectiveness. Education level also significantly impacted perceptions of e-mail effectiveness. However, even though legislators with less education rated e-mail more effective in both models, the typical education level of legislators includes some college. Although not statistically significant, representatives perceived e-mail more effective than senators. In addition, a negative relation existed

between race and perceptions of e-mail's effectiveness, in that white legislators perceived e-mail less effective than black legislators, albeit not at a significant level.

### **RQ1: Attitude Changes**

Findings regarding RQ1, which asked how legislators' perceptions and attitudes toward constituent e-mail changed over time, were interesting. Overall, 72% of legislators in the 2004 study regarded e-mail as an important political tool of communication, an increase of 31-point% from the 2000 study. Increased percentages also occurred in regard to e-mail's impact on political agendas and overall influence of constituent e-mails on legislators (as seen in table 4.11).

Table 4.11: Comparison of E-mail's Impact on Legislators' Perceptions

	<u>Year of Survey</u>	
	<u>2000</u>	<u>2004</u>
<u>Email important political tool</u>	41%	72%
<u>Email impacting agenda</u>	22%	32%
<u>Email feedback most influential</u>	0%	5%
	N=89	N=74

Note: Percentages rounded off to nearest whole number.

To test whether these percentage differences were significant, we regressed changes in agenda based on increased e-mail - response from 2000 and 2004, the same set of demographic controls, the private/professional use of e-mail, and importance of e-mail as a political tool. Again, use of e-mail both privately and professionally was highly

correlated to perceptions of e-mail as an important tool of communication (Cronbach alpha .88). Therefore, the variables were combined into one (use/importance). As seen in Table 4.12, legislators in the 2004 survey were significantly more willing to shift agendas based on constituent e-mails. Also, use of e-mail and belief in its importance as a political tool positively impacted shifts in legislators' agendas. Consistent with prior findings, younger legislators were willing to report they were influenced the most by constituent e-mail. Although not significant, male democrat representatives indicated a greater willingness to shift agendas based on constituent e-mails than other legislators.

Table 4.12: Regression of Agenda Shifts Based on Constituent E-mail

Variable	B (t-values)
<u>Demographics</u>	
Party	.233 (1.261)
Age	-.370 (-2.05)**
Sex	.287 (1.297)
General Assembly	.203 (1.025)
<u>Independent Variables</u>	
Year	1.218 (4.436)****
Factor Influencing Agenda	.330 (1.776)*
Use/Importance	.081 (2.253)***
Constant	1.208 (1.821)
R-Square	.477

Note: \*Asterisks denotes significance level of confident \*=.10, \*\*=.05, \*\*\*=.01, \*\*\*\*=.001 (two tailed test). See Appendix B for definition of controlled variables. Dependent variable ranged from low (strongly disagree) to high (strongly agree).



A correlation between legislators' perception of e-mail as an important political tool (Q9) with legislators' perception of available resources in using e-mail effectively ( $r = .484$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was significant.

When directly asked if legislators believed that e-mail has helped to provide a better service to their constituents, 63% agreed while 13% chose disagree (24% chose unsure). A cross-tabulation between this question and legislators' perception of the importance of e-mail indicated strong support of e-mail's use as a political tool of communication. A regression, based on the 2004 data alone, was run to test the strength of legislators' perception of e-mail importance against these variables (see Table 4.13 Model 1). The second model regressed variables that were included in both the 2000 and the 2004 surveys, while incorporating the variable year.

As seen in Table 4.13 Model 1, the 2004 data showed that in addition to believing that e-mail helped to better serve constituents, senate democrats were significantly more likely to regard e-mail as an important tool of communication. This finding, however, did not hold true when year was added to the equation (as seen in Table 4.13 Model 2). Use of e-mail both privately and professionally, however, was significantly positively associated with legislators' perception of the importance of e-mail in both models. Again, this finding indicated that legislators' perception of e-mail's importance depended on individual use and experience with e-mail. In addition, a significant positive relation existed between legislators

who believed e-mail helped to provide a better service to constituent and with the overall importance of e-mail as a political tool of communication. Although not significant, the regression revealed a negative relationship between legislators who believed they had the resources to best use e-mail and the importance of using e-mail to communicate.

Table 4.13: Regression of Legislators Perception of the Importance of E-mail

Variable	B (t-value)	B (t-value)
<u>Demographic</u>	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>
Party	.672 (1.875)*	.242(1.474)
Education	-.001 (-.110)	.002 (.025)
Age	.381 (1.301)	.081 (.510)
Sex	-.445 (-1.375)	.003 (.019)
General Assembly	-.393 (-1.065)	.030 (.177)
Race	-.476 (-.796)	
<u>Independent Variables</u>		
E-mail Provide Better Service	2.373 (5.013)****	
Resources to Best Use E-mail	-.002 (-.079)	
Year		1.837 (9.292)***
Length of Using E-mail	.384 (1.581)	.003 (.396)
Use E-mail Privately and Professionally	.456 (5.618)****	.605 (11.84)***
Constant	2.740 (1.974)	.017 (.027)
R-Square	.799	.805

Note: \*Asterisks denotes significance level of confident \*=.05, \*\*=.01, \*\*\*.001 (two tailed test). See Appendix B for controlled variables definitions. Dependent variable ranged from low to high.

### Filtering E-mail

Fifty-three percent of legislators responding agreed that they are using advanced technology to filter constituent e-mail from non-constituent e-mail, while 26% chose disagree and 22% remained neutral. Although 31%

of legislators responding agreed that they proactively send e-mails to constituents, the majority (65%) disagreed while 4% chose not sure. A correlation comparing the relationship between these two variables, however, was not significant at the .05 confidence level. In addition, a correlation between coping with e-mail volume and filter systems was also not significant.

A significant relationship, however, was found between legislators' belief in e-mail's effectiveness with perceptions of coping with the volume of e-mail received ( $r = .390$ ,  $p < .001$ ), thus indicating a possible connection between the impact of advanced e-mail technology on legislators' perception of e-mail communication. The causal relationship, however, still remains unclear.

Despite the volume of e-mail received, when asked if legislators would respond to constituent e-mail, 90% of legislators agreed and 72% indicated they would respond to e-mail via e-mail. Cross-tabulations among coping with e-mail volume with e-mail's effectiveness and with the medium used to respond to e-mail produced interesting findings (see Table 4.14).

Legislators who responded to e-mail via e-mail did not feel overwhelmed by the volume of e-mail received. In addition, those responding via e-mail also believed that e-mail was an effective means of

communication. Furthermore, those legislators who did not filter e-mail gauged e-mail as less effective.

Table 4.14: Cross-tabulation of coping with e-mail volume with form of response to e-mail and e-mail's effectiveness

<u>Coping with e-mail</u>	<u>Form of response</u>		<u>E-mail's Effectiveness</u>	
	<u>Direct Mail</u>	<u>E-Mail</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Agree</u>
Badly swamped	0	2(3%)	2(3%)	0
Not very well	1 (1%)	1(1%)	1(1%)	2(3%)
Adequately	4 (5%)	9(13%)	2(3%)	8(12%)
Reasonably well	6 (9%)	22(32%)	4(6%)	25(36%)
Very well	3 (4%)	22(32%)	3(5%)	21(31%)
	N=70		N=68	

Note. The values represent the total number of legislators responding.

The ability to distinguish constituent e-mail from non-constituent e-mail has had a positive impact on legislative response and perception of e-mail's effectiveness. To test the significance of coping with e-mail and developing technology, we regressed filtering e-mail with a set of demographic controls, resources available, e-mail training, and e-mail's effectiveness. As seen in Table 4.15, while controlling for other variables, e-mail effectiveness remained significant, indicating those who believe e-mail was effective believe they were coping well with e-mail volume.

A positive relationship, although not significant, also existed between availability of resources to best use e-mail and perception of coping well with the volume of e-mail received. In addition, white male democrats indicated that they were not coping well with the volume of e-mail received. Contrary to references made in the literature review, a

negative relationship existed among legislators who filter e-mail and received e-mail training with perception of coping with e-mail; however, the relationships were not significant.

Table 4.15: Regression of Coping with E-mail Volume

Variable	B (t-value)
<u>Demographics</u>	
Party	-.177 (-.483)
Education	-.275 (-2.112)**
Age	.171 (.540)
Sex	-.347 (-1.011)
General Assembly	.017 (.048)
Race	.376 (.477)
<u>Independent Variables</u>	
E-mail Effectiveness	.182 (2.155)**
E-mail Training	-.226 (-.944)
Resources to Best Use E-mail	.145 (.577)
Filter E-mail	-.123 (-1.423)
Constant	5.069 (3.795)
R-Square	.349

Note: \*Asterisks denotes significance level of confident \*=.10, \*\*=.05, \*\*\*=.01, \*\*\*\*=.001 (two tailed test). See Appendix B for controlled variables definitions. Dependent variable ranges from low to high.

Despite an increase in the amount of e-mail received (as seen in Table 4.16), 35% of legislators in the 2004 study indicated they were coping “very well” with the volume of e-mail received, followed by “adequately” at 17%, “reasonably well” at 10%, “not very well” at 4% and “badly-being swamped” at 3% (also see Table 4.14).

These findings indicate a positive shift in legislators' perception of constituent e-mail and the overall implementation of e-mail as a political tool of communication. Overall, advanced e-mail technology was

having a positive impact on legislators' perception of the political use of e-mail, albeit a minimal one.

Table 4.16: Comparison of the amount of e-mail received in the 2004 and 2000 surveys

<u>Amount of email received</u>	<u>Year</u>	
	<u>2000</u>	<u>2004</u>
<u>Declined marginally</u>	1 (%)	0
<u>Increased marginally</u>	47 (56%)	20 (26%)
<u>Increased significantly</u>	19 (22%)	37 (48%)
<u>No change</u>	17 (20%)	17 (22%)
$\chi^2 = 21.689^*$ $df = 3$	(2000 N=94, 2004 N=77)	
	10 missing in 2000, 2 missing in 2004	

Note: The values represent the total number of legislators responding.

\* $p < .001$ .

### **Aggregate Panel Analysis**

Panel comparisons produced significant findings regarding H1, H2, H4 and RQ1. As seen in Table 4.17, a significant shift in constituent e-mails' impact on legislators' agenda occurred between the 2000 data and the 2004 data ( $t=2.61$ ,  $df=30$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Legislators indicated that increased constituent e-mail on a specific topic resulted in an increased reported shift in their political agenda, thus supporting H1. Furthermore, legislators within the panel significantly considered e-mail as an important political tool more in the 2004 survey than in the 2000 survey ( $t=4.485$ ,  $df=34$ ,  $p < .000$ ), thus lending support to H1 and indirectly answering RQ1.

In addition, in regard to H2, legislators reported a significant increase in the amount of constituent e-mail received per day between the 2000 survey and the 2004 survey ( $t=2.90$ ,  $df=33$ ,  $p < .007$ , see Table 4.18).

Increases in constituent e-mail, however, did not result in legislators responding more quickly to e-mail ( $t = -.452, p < .655$ ); rather, e-mail response time is better gauged by legislators' ranking of e-mail as a political tool of communication.

Table 4.17: Panel comparison of agenda shifts caused by increased constituent e-mails received

<u>E-Mail Factors</u>	<u>2000</u> <u>Mean</u>	<u>2004</u> <u>Mean</u>
<u>Reported Agenda Shift</u>	2.27 (.92)	3.00 (.69)
	t-score = 2.61 df = 30	p < .01
<u>Amount of E-mail Received</u>	3.06 (.64)	3.71 (.69)
	t-score = 2.90 df = 33	p < .007

Note. First response ranged from "one" meaning "strongly disagree" to "four" meaning "strongly agree." Second response ranged from "one" meaning "declined significantly" to "four" meaning "increased significantly."

According to H4, experience in using e-mail should positively relate to a stronger belief in the effectiveness of e-mail communication. Experience was defined through years of use along with implementation of e-mail in both legislators' private and professional lives. Group comparisons of these two issues produced significant results (see table 4.18).

Correlations between panel legislators' use of e-mail privately and professionally with perceptions of e-mail as an important political tool ( $r = .755, p < .000$ ) and with changed perceptions of e-mails' effectiveness ( $r = .691, p < .001$ ) were also significant, thus adding support to H4 and indirectly answering RQ1. This finding indicated that legislators who

participated in the 2000 survey had significantly shifted their perception of e-mail to a more positive one.

Table 4.18: Panel comparison of e-mail's effectiveness between 2000 survey and 2004

<u>E-Mail Factors</u>	<u>2000</u> <u>Mean</u>	<u>2004</u> <u>Mean</u>
<u>Effective Communication</u>	2.83 (1.02)	3.44 (.86)
	t-score = 1.922 df=34	p< .03
<u>Important Political Tool</u>	2.50 (.86)	3.61 (.61)
	t-score = 4.485 df=34	p< .000
<u>Privately/Professional Use</u>	2.75 (.81)	3.44 (.78)
	t-score = 2.51 df=33	p< .000

Note. First two factors response ranged from "one" meaning "not very effective" to "four" meaning "very effective." The last factor response ranged from "one" meaning "strongly disagree" to "four" meaning "strongly agree."

### Further Breakdowns

Further breakdowns and comparisons of the data resulted in some rather interesting findings. The first comparison divided legislators into two age groups: 50 and above (56% of respondents), and 49 and under (44% of respondents). Significant findings were found in several areas involving H1 and H4. In regard to H1, a comparison of reported shifts in agendas (H1) revealed a significant difference ( $t= 2.09$ ,  $df=45$ ,  $p< .04$ ). The independent-sample t-test indicated that younger legislators were more likely to shift their political agenda based on the volume of constituent e-mail received than older legislators (see Table 4.4).



Table 4.19: Legislative age comparison of effectiveness of different means of communication

<u>Factor</u>	<u>49 and under</u> <u>Mean</u>	<u>50 and above</u> <u>Mean</u>
<u>Television</u>	5.31 (1.89) t-score = 1.77 df=65	4.44 (2.03) p< .05
<u>Newspaper</u>	5.19 (1.27) t-score = 2.83 df=70	4.22 (1.49) p< .006
<u>E-Mail</u>	5.36 (1.37) t-score = 1.81 df=70	4.65 (1.76) p< .04
<u>Radio</u>	5.23 (1.63) t-score = 1.99 df=68	4.40 (1.79) p< .05
<u>Web</u>	4.80 (1.27) t-score = 3.16 df=68	3.60 (1.60) p< .002

Note. Response ranged from "one" meaning "not at all" to "seven" meaning "highly effective."

In relation to H4, significant differences also were found among legislators' perception of the effectiveness of different media communication, especially the Web. Overall, younger legislators believed all forms of media communication were more effective than older legislators. In other words, younger legislators' ranked the effectiveness of communicating messages through newspapers, television, radio, web page and e-mail higher than older legislators. Contextual theory of home style could explain why younger legislators found all forms of mediated communication more effective than older legislators. According to the contextual theory of home style, personal conditions (like age) influence politicians' communication availability and overall style. In regard to the effectiveness of e-mail, however, both age

groups rated it higher than any other source (see Table 4.19). Older legislators were less likely to implement e-mail filtering systems than younger legislators. In fact, data showed only 17% of legislators over 50 filter e-mail compared to 43% of younger legislators (older 47% disagreed and 36% neutral, younger 39% disagreed and 18% neutral).

Legislators over 50 indicated both a lack of adequate e-mail training (52%) and insufficient resources and skills (25%) to best use e-mail when communicating with constituents than younger legislators (46% and 9% respectively). In addition, 8% of legislators over 50 said they did not respond to e-mail communication via e-mail while 0% of legislators 49 and under chose this category. Overall, however, the majority (68%) of legislators over 50 said they respond to e-mail communication via e-mail (as seen in table 4.20). When regressed against other variables, however, this finding was not significant (see Tables 4.13 and 4.15).

Table 4.20: Legislative age comparison of method used to respond to e-mail communication

<u>Age</u>	<u>Means of Communication</u>		
	<u>E-mail</u>	<u>Postal Mail</u>	<u>Do not Respond</u>
<u>49 and under</u>	27(85%)	5(15%)	(0%)
<u>50 and above</u>	30(68%)	8(24%)	3(8%)

Note. Percentages rounded off to the nearest whole number.  
N=73

## Party Differences

There were some slight differences between democrats and republicans. Generally, democrats seemed slightly more receptive to e-mail communication than republicans. For instance, democrats significantly were more likely to respond to e-mails that were known to originate from constituents than republicans (see Table 4.8). Furthermore, the majority of democrats (94%) agreed that constituent e-mail communication had increased. However, in gauging e-mail's importance in political communication, republicans significantly regarded e-mail as a more important tool of communication than democrats (see Table 4.13), but were less likely to strongly agree that constituents who communicate via e-mail expected a quicker response than democrats (15% and 30% respectively).

While both democrats and republicans responding indicated that they were handling the volume of e-mail received well (75% and 74% respectively), 5% of republicans indicated that they were either badly swamped by e-mail or were not handling the volume very well, while 0% of democrats chose either of these categories, these differences were not significant at the .05 confidence level. Furthermore, more democrats than republicans responding agreed that they have the resources and skills to best use e-mail (80% and 61% respectively) and filter their e-mail (47% and 30% respectively). Both parties, however, agreed that e-mail

has helped provide a better service to their constituents (66% republicans and 64% democrats). All of these percentage differences were not significant at .05 confidence level.

### **Chamber Differences**

Comparisons between the two chambers produced two significant findings. Senators responded quicker to e-mail than representatives (see Table 4.6), and regarded e-mail as an important political tool of communication more than representatives (see Table 4.13). Although not significant, there were a few differences worthy of mention in which representatives rated e-mail more positive than senators. In regard to the type of constituent feedback that influences political agendas, 0% of senators chose e-mail compared to 9% of representatives. Another difference was found in the amount of e-mail training legislators received. Fifty-eight percent of senators agreed that they had received adequate training compared to 39% of representatives. Slightly more than half of the representatives (51%), however, indicated that they had not received any training while 34% of senators disagreed.

### **Gender Differences**

Gender comparisons revealed minimal differences. Although not significant at the .05 confidence level, in general a greater percentage of male legislators shifted their agenda based on increased e-mail communication than female legislators.

In regard to H2 and e-mail response time, female legislators responded more quickly to constituent e-mail than male legislators and believed they were coping better with the volume of e-mail received (see Tables 4.6, 4.15 and 4.21). Overall, 5% of male legislators said they do not respond to any form of communication compared to 0% of female legislators. Although not significant at the .05 confidence level, female legislators indicated a greater willingness to respond to known constituent e-mail than male legislators (see Table 4.8) and regarded e-mail as more effective and more important (see Tables 4.10 and 4.13). However, female legislators were less likely to shift their agenda based on constituent e-mail than male legislators (see Table 4.12).

Table 4.21: Gender comparison of e-mail response time

<u>Response Time</u>	<u>Gender</u>	
	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>
<u>Week or more</u>	1 (6%)	7 (14%)
<u>3 days</u>	5 (29%)	17 (34%)
<u>1-2 days</u>	9 (53%)	19 (38%)
<u>Same day</u>	2 (12%)	7 (14%)
	N = 17	N = 50

Note. Numbers represent those legislators responding. Percentage rounded to nearest whole number

Overall, both genders agreed that e-mail has helped them to better serve their constituents (68% male, 60% female).

### **Private Webpage Analysis**

The Google search of legislators' private web pages revealed that 8 of 59 senators and 33 of 118 representatives have a political web page in addition to their state-provided web page. Response to the personal e-mail requesting web page addresses was rather low. Overall, 10 of 49 senators (20%) and 8 of 85 representatives (10%) replied to the e-mail. Of those responding, two representatives and two senators indicated they do maintain a private political web page in addition to the state-provided web page. Thus, the analysis of legislators' private web pages revealed that 10 of 59 senators (17%) and 35 of 118 representatives (30%) maintain an additional political web page. Overall, two representative web pages did not provide an e-mail link, and both respondents were female. The remaining web pages both encouraged constituent communication and provided an e-mail link on the main web page. In addition, all of the e-mail links required visitors to enter his or her mailing address before sending a message, thus allowing the legislator to filter constituent e-mail from non-constituent e-mail. Encouraging communication was defined as providing constituents with postal addresses, telephone numbers and an e-mail address/link on the main web page. Of those legislators who maintained a private web page, 22 or 49%, participated in the 2004 survey.

A gender analysis of private political web pages showed an almost even split within the house with 19 male representatives (55%) and 16 female representatives (45%) maintaining an additional web page. In comparison to the total ratio of female representatives in the house (30%), however, more female representatives provided an additional political web page than male representatives (see table 4.22).

Table 4.22: Comparison of senate and house private political web pages

	<u>Private Web Pages</u>			
	<u>Senate</u>	<u>Overall Population</u>	<u>House</u>	<u>Overall</u>
<u>E-mail Link</u>	10	59	33	118
<u>Male</u>	9(17%)	48(81%)	19(55%)	84(70%)
<u>Female</u>	1(11%)	11(19%)	16(45%)	34(30%)
	N = 10		N = 35	

Note. Percentages within parentheses represent the percentage of total population within each chamber.

The analysis of senate private political web pages showed that one female senator and 9 male senators provided an additional web page, reflecting the overall percentage ratio of male and female senators, 81% and 19% respectively (as seen in tables 4.22 and 4.23 Model 1).

To further test the significance of these findings, Table 4.23 Model 1 regressed legislative private web pages with a set of demographic variables. Legislative private web pages were further analyzed by two variables: geographic location and length in office (incumbent or freshmen). Geographic locations were defined using legislative district

maps prepared by the Center for Governmental Studies at Northern Illinois University.

Building on Model 1, the second model included length in office, geographic location, and a set of demographic variables. These additional variables were not statistically significant (as seen in Table 4.23 Model 2); however, they did produce some interesting findings.

As seen in Model 1 and Model 2, political party, sex, chamber and race were all significant predictors in maintaining an additional political web page. In other words, younger white male democrats were more likely to maintain a private political web page than any other group.

Table 4.23: Regression of Legislative Private Web Pages

Variable	B (t-values)	B (t-values)
<u>Demographics</u>	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>
Party	.0022 (1.781)*	.127 (1.742)*
Sex	-.173 (-2.460)***	-.173 (-2.425)***
Age	-.230 (-2.139)**	-.237 (-2.107)**
General Assembly	.135 (2.017)**	.148 (2.205)**
Race	.229 (2.691)***	.146 (1.550)
<u>Independent Variable</u>		
Length in Office		-.001 (-.261)
Geographic Location		.006 (.747)
Constant	.0086 (.879)	.0083(.780)
R-Square	.092	.118

Note: \*Asterisks denotes significance level of confident \*=.10, \*\*=.05, \*\*\*=.01, \*\*\*\*=.001 (two tailed test). See Appendix B for controlled variable definitions. Dependent variable ranged from low to high.

In regard to the relationship between length in office and likelihood of providing an additional web page, freshman legislators provided 90% of



senate private web pages and 51% of freshmen representatives provided private web pages. As seen in Table 4.23 Model 2, however, length in office did not significantly impact whether a legislator maintained a private web page when regressed against other variables. In fact, the negative relation suggests freshmen legislators were less likely to maintain a private web page. This finding negates assumptions made in the literature review. Also, when regressed against length in office and geographic location, race no longer remained a significant predictor.

Table 4.24: Incumbent and party comparison of private political web pages

	<u>Total Population</u>		<u>Private Web Page</u>			
	<u>S</u>	<u>H</u>	<u>Senate</u>	<u>Overall%</u>	<u>House</u>	<u>Overall %</u>
<u>Democrat</u>	32(55%)	66(56%)	5(50%)	(10%)	12(33%)	(17%)
<u>Republican</u>	27(45%)	52(44%)	5(50%)	(19%)	23(66%)	(42%)
<u>Incumbent</u>	16(27%)	71(61%)	2(10%)	(25%)	17(48%)	(22%)
<u>Male</u>	14(88%)	55(47%)	2(100%)	(69%)	11(62%)	(14%)
<u>Female</u>	2(12%)	16(27%)	0	(12%)	6(38%)	(8%)
<u>Freshman</u>	43(73%)	47(40%)	8(90%)	(15%)	18(52%)	(36%)
<u>Male</u>	33(81%)	28(60%)	6(75%)	(77%)	8(44%)	(15%)
<u>Female</u>	10(19%)	19(40%)	2(25%)	(23%)	10(56%)	(21%)
Senate N=59	House N=118		N = 10		N = 35	

Note. Percentages rounded off to the nearest whole number.

Consistent with incumbent and gender ratios in both chambers, more male incumbent representatives than female incumbent representatives provided a private political web page (see Table 4.24). Freshman gender comparisons, however, showed more female freshman representatives than male representatives provided a private web page (10 and 6

respectively). Only one male senator incumbent provided a private political web page (as seen in table 4.24). A party comparison showed more republican legislators (50% Senate and 66% House) than democrat legislators (50% Senate, 33% House) provided private political web pages.

Geographic comparisons revealed that more senators from central Illinois (50%) provided an additional private political web page than other areas of the state. The majority (50%) of representative web pages, however, came from suburban representatives (as seen in table 4.25).

Table 4.25: Geographic breakdown of private political web pages

<u>Geographic Location</u>			<u>Political Web Pages</u>			
<u>Geographic Population</u>						
	<u>Senate</u>	<u>House</u>	<u>Senate</u>	<u>Overall</u>	<u>House</u>	<u>Overall</u>
<u>Suburbs</u>	10	21	3 (30%)	17%	19 (90%)	18%
<u>City</u>	22	44	3 (13%)	38%	3 (7%)	37%
<u>Central</u>	11	21	4 (37%)	18%	4 (19%)	18%
<u>North</u>	12	24	0	20%	8 (33%)	20%
<u>South</u>	4	8	0	7%	1 (13%)	7%
			N = 10		N = 35	

Note. The values represent the total number of private political web pages. Parentheses represent the percentage of legislators who maintain a private web page within specific geographic locations.

Nine of the 22 legislators, who also participated in the 2004 survey, reside in Chicago and six reside in the Chicago suburbs, followed by four in the north, two in central Illinois and one in southern Illinois. Again, legislative district maps prepared by the Center for Governmental Studies at Northern Illinois University defined these geographic locations.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Analysis**

The hypotheses were examined not only in light of quantitative data, but also in regard to supplemental qualitative data. On February 24, 2004, in-depth personal interviews were conducted with five Illinois representatives. The interviews were conducted to enhance survey findings and as a means to reflect representatives overall attitudes toward e-mail communication. Also, legislators were given the opportunity to contribute additional qualitative data via open-ended question within the survey.

According to H1, the more constituent e-mail received on a specific topic the more willing a legislator is to report a shift in his or her agenda to focus on that topic. The quantitative data showed limited support for H1. For instance, when directly asked if increased e-mail communication on a specific topic causes a reported shift in agenda, legislators were split with 35% agreeing and 36% choosing the neutral position. Overall, however, more legislators agreed (35%) than disagreed (29%). In addition, legislators indicated that constituent feedback (45%) and a combination of constituent feedback with personal beliefs (17%) played an important role in setting personal political agendas (see Table 4.3), thus adding credence to the support of H1. Correlations and regressions also suggest

that those legislators who set their agendas based on constituent feedback and perceived e-mail as an important communication tool were more likely to shift their agendas based on increased amounts of e-mail than other legislators (see Table 4.4). E-mail volume, however, was negatively related with reported shifts in agendas. In other words, by itself, the volume of constituent e-mail received did not correlate to a reported shift in agendas by legislators.

Similar to representative responses, several senators attributed lack of origin as the main reason they disregarded e-mail. According to a male senate incumbent of 12 years, "E-mail is less reliable because you can not tell who lives in your district," he said. Another senator stated, "I hate e-mail. Garbage in and garbage out. Don't know if it's from within or outside my district" (12-year male incumbent). Among some other concerns, one representative stated that lack of constituent identification via e-mail caused him to abandon this form of communication. "We stopped using e-mail for constituents several years ago because much of it was casual, time consuming to respond to, and we couldn't determine if a constituent sent it."

Therefore, similar to the 2000 findings support for H1 resided in the origin of e-mail communication. The geographic location of e-mail is highly significant to whether legislators will respond. As stated in the literature review, modern technology allows legislators to distinguish constituent e-

mail from non-constituent e-mail, but that technology must be used to be effective. Interestingly, the majority (95%) of legislators who devalued e-mail communication indicated that they do not use e-mail filtering systems. Qualitative data indicated that not all legislators, however, were aware of e-mail advances. In fact, legislative interviews seemed to indicate a lack of awareness of advances in e-mail technology by legislators. Overall, however, 52% of legislators responding had already begun filtering e-mail.

In addition, several legislators who did not use a filtering system indicated that spamming has made them leery of e-mail communication. "Many times the e-mails on a hot issue are a form type similar to a form letter. These e-mails usually come from many outside the district and come in mass," she said. "It is very difficult to respond to these and after a while, is similar to spam. This may work against those who are trying to support an issue since it gets annoying" (black freshman female representative, personal interview, February 24, 2004). Another legislator concurred, stating: "Spamming falsely uses constituent names and address so a filter system won't help. The system becomes clogged with e-mail from non-constituents" (white male incumbent representative, personal interview, February 24, 2004).

Besides the geographic origin of e-mail, qualitative data indicated that some legislators disregarded e-mail communication based on its ease of

access (casual nature) and lack of sincerity. A male republican representative who has served for more than 18 years said, "E-mail is a whim. There's not enough thought behind it and it's too easy to send any thought that crosses a person's mind" (personal interview, February 24, 2004). Concurring with his colleague, another representative stated, "Some constituents only want to use e-mail as a buffer and avoid talking and actually discussing issues. It's too easy to write flame mail" (10-year male incumbent republican representative, personal interview, February 24, 2004). And still another legislator said, "I believe people who are truly concerned about an issue write personal letters, call, or meet face-to-face" (male representative over 50, personal interview, February 24, 2004).

The majority of respondents, however, regarded e-mail as a viable form of communication and recognized the fact that constituents were increasingly using e-mail to communicate. In fact, 72% of legislators indicated that constituents were increasingly using e-mail to communicate. Qualitative data also supported this conclusion. One representative stated, "E-mail has grown dramatically and I receive many more e-mails than I do letters." And still another incumbent representative indicated that he received 11-25 e-mails a day, "but this volume is increasing very rapidly." Legislators' also indicated they were using e-mail to maintain an open line of communication with constituents. One representative summarized this sentiment by saying, "E-mail helps me

provide a better service to my constituents and it keeps me more in touch" (white female incumbent, personal interview, February 24, 2004). Therefore, these findings indicate a stronger acceptance and a shift to a more positive attitude and perception toward e-mail communication by legislators.

Aggregate panel comparisons showed the most support for H1. Overall, these legislators indicated that in 2004 they were more inclined to report a shift in their agenda as a result of increased constituent e-mail than they were in the 2000 survey. Confirmed by a significant t-test and regression, this finding further supports H1 (see Table 4.17). Again, based on the premise of increased constituent communication via e-mail, a significant t-test showed that panel legislators were receiving more constituent e-mail in 2004 than they received in 2000, thus lending support to H1 (see Table 4.17).

Supporting Rogers' theory, overall younger legislators were significantly more willing to report a shift in their agenda based on increased constituent e-mails than older legislators (see Table 4.4). The literature review also implied that younger legislators would be more inclined to adopt and implement developing technology more quickly than older legislators. This supposition was also supported. The data showed that younger legislators have implemented an e-mail filtering system more than older legislators (63% and 40% respectively). Furthermore, younger

legislators ranked all forms of mediated communication higher than older legislators (see Table 4.19). Although not significant at the .05 confidence level, younger legislators also integrated e-mail into their communication routine more than older legislators. In other words, younger legislators responded to constituent e-mail via e-mail more than older legislators (85% and 68% respectively, see Table 4.20). What becomes difficult to explain, however, is that both age groups ranked e-mail as being more effective than television, radio, website, and newspapers. Overall, these findings signify an increased acceptance and use of e-mail by legislators.

There was support for H2, which predicted that the instantaneous nature of e-mail would cause legislators to respond more quickly to constituent e-mail than constituent postal mail. Based on responses, legislators respond more quickly to constituent e-mail than constituent postal mail (see Tables 4.5 and 4.6). In addition, a significant correlation exists among legislators who believe constituents communicating via e-mail expect quicker responses with legislators who respond to e-mail via e-mail and with those legislators who believe e-mail is a more timely form of communication. Supporting this finding is the fact that legislators responding to constituent e-mails via e-mail respond more quickly than legislators who use other means of communication (see Table 4.7). The data also indicated that legislators believed e-mail was an effective



means of communicating (see Table 4.10), which implies a willingness to recognize and respond to constituent e-mail.

Although most legislators (68%) believed that constituents communicating via e-mail expect a quicker response, a regression showed that it did not lead legislators to respond more quickly (see Table 4.6). Instead, legislators' perceptions and attitudes seemed to be the driving force behind response time to constituent e-mail, not constituent expectations.

Similar to the 2000 study, although legislators agreed that they respond more quickly to e-mail than postal mail, some expressed concerns regarding the instantaneous nature of e-mail. "The instant nature of e-mail communication, even if filtered, demands an immediate response," said an incumbent representative. "Politics wasn't designed to be an instant process. We need time to think, to organize and to form an intelligent opinion" (white incumbent male, personal interview, February 24, 2004). Another male legislator concurred. "Even if a form letter is sent, people want direct contact and a direct answer. It just doesn't work that way," he said. "The Internet speeds the political process and this process needs time" (male incumbent representative, personal interview, February 24, 2004).

Despite these negative comments, legislators were using advances in e-mail technology to both proactively send e-mails to their constituents

and to send e-mail acknowledgements that include a statement indicating a future response after further research. This shift in e-mail acknowledgements is highly significant considering the fact that legislators in the 2000 survey expressed concerns over the immediacy of e-mail communication. Legislators stated that the time required in responding to constituent questions often depended on the nature of the question. Legislators feared that constituents might feel as if they were being ignored if they did not respond immediately to e-mails. Through advances in e-mail technology, this issue becomes moot as legislators can send an instant acknowledgement reassuring constituents that they will fully answer questions after further research. Qualitative data also confirmed this observation. "We send out an immediate e-mail acknowledgement of receipt of their e-mail letter and follow up with something more substantive" (10 year female incumbent representative).

As with H1, legislators' attitude and perceptions of the instantaneous nature of e-mail depended on whether legislators implemented e-mail filtering systems, especially in regard to e-mail overload. For instance, according to a representative who does not use a filtering system: "There are too many e-mails to respond to in a timely manner. I almost need a full time person just to screen e-mails!!!" Still another representative noted: "Too many to respond in a timely manner when you only have one staff member." The feeling of being overwhelmed also stemmed from a desire

to personally respond to constituent e-mails. "Typically, I like to personally respond to constituent e-mails, but at times I feel a bit overwhelmed" (freshman female representative, personal interview, February 24, 2004). Overall, however, despite a significant increase in constituent e-mail communication (see Table 4.16), a good number of legislators (40%) indicated they were handling the volume of e-mail reasonably well, followed closely by very well (35%).

Similar to H1, spamming also seemed to have a negative impact on legislators' qualitative responses to H2. In fact, one freshmen representative, who does not use an e-mail filtering system, indicated that because of spamming he is considering discontinuing the use of e-mail communication. "I'm thinking of shutting down my e-mail. Too much spam and outside of district contact makes it impossible to respond to in-district constituents in a timely fashion."

Qualitative findings revealed that the content of constituent e-mails did not seem to affect whether legislators respond. Despite the content, those legislators who positively perceive e-mail as a viable form of communication were more likely to respond to constituent e-mails than those legislators with a negative perception of e-mail. "E-mail is both effective and important in communicating with my constituents," said one female legislator who filters e-mails. "I try to personally respond to constituent e-mail just like I would any other form of communication"

(white freshman female representative, personal interview, February 24, 2004). While another legislator who does not filter e-mails said, "I'm old school and not very computer savvy. I try to avoid computers and rarely respond to e-mail communication" (incumbent male representative, personal interview, February 24, 2004).

Hypothesis three, which predicted that legislators were more likely to respond to e-mail when they know it comes from a constituent, also was supported. According to the data, legislators overwhelmingly agreed that e-mails known to originate from constituents receive a response. In fact, a correlation and a regression confirmed a significant relation between legislators who tend to respond to traditional forms of constituent communication with those legislators who agreed they respond to constituent e-mail, thus indicating legislators' acceptance of e-mail communication (see Table 4.8). In fact, when directly asked, 90% of legislators agreed they would respond to e-mail if they knew it came from a constituent. The form of communication did not seem to matter, but rather who sent it. Legislators were adamant about responding only to constituents and admitted to ignoring the rest. A response by one female representative encapsulated this attitude: "No matter what, I do not respond to e-mails outside of my district" (incumbent female representative). Concurring with this ideology, another representative

noted: "Of course, I regard e-mail as important, but I only respond to constituents" (incumbent female representative).

The data also supported H4, which predicted that legislators with more experience using e-mail would be more likely to view electronic mail as an effective means of communicating with constituents and move from Rogers' step 4 (implementation) to step 5 (confirmation). Experience in using e-mail was determined by legislators' use of e-mail both privately and professionally along with length of maintaining an e-mail account. Significant correlations and regressions supported this assumption, in that legislators who use e-mail both privately and professionally and who have had an e-mail account for more than 3 years believe e-mail is an effective means of communicating (see Table 4.10). Qualitative data from both chambers seemed to reinforce these findings, especially in regard to lack of e-mail use correlating to a negative perception of e-mail as a political tool of communication. According to one senator, "I do not have e-mail, so how can it be effective? Besides, I do not type and I do not have the resources to effectively use e-mail" (12-year male incumbent). Another representative blamed lack of training for e-mail's ineffectiveness. "I need to be better trained using and retrieving e-mail before it becomes useful" (incumbent male representative).

Data showed 43% of legislators personally respond to constituent e-mails, thus increasing their experience and use of e-mail. Based on this

premise, a cross-tabulation was run, which showed that 46 of 52 legislators who witnessed an increase in the amount of e-mails received agreed that e-mail is an effective means of communication. In fact, a Chi Square confirmed a significant difference between the amount of e-mail received and this issue (see Table 4.9).

Supporting the assumption behind H4 is the fact that the majority (55%) of legislators have had an e-mail account for more than 3 years and that the majority of legislators agreed e-mail is an effective means of communicating with constituents (see Table 4.10). Finally, a significant correlation between legislators who have had an e-mail account for more than 3 years with predicted future reliance on e-mail to communicate with constituents indirectly implies support in e-mails' effectiveness.

Panel comparisons also supported H4. Legislators were increasingly using e-mail both professionally and privately and as a means to communicate with constituents. In fact, independent sample t-tests confirmed a significant difference in panel legislators' perception of e-mail as an important political tool and their overall use of e-mail both privately and professionally (see Table 4.19). Overall, panel legislators have significantly increased their use of e-mail both privately and professionally. One panel legislator summarized his feelings by saying, "I view e-mail as a legitimate form of communication. Let's face it, more and more people are using it including constituents" (incumbent male

representative, personal interview, February 24, 2004). Supporting this change in perception, an independent sample t-test showed a significant shift in legislators' perception of e-mails' effectiveness between the 2004 and 2000 surveys (see Table 4.18). In other words, panel legislators overwhelmingly agreed that e-mail has become an effective tool of communication. Furthermore, a significant correlation between e-mail's effectiveness with increased use of e-mail privately and professionally supports this supposition and indicates a positive shift in panel legislators' perception of e-mail.

These findings indicate that legislators who have had e-mail training and those legislators who believe they have the skills to best use e-mail regard e-mail as an important political tool. That is, improved technology along with training positively correlated to an increased belief in e-mail as an important political tool by legislators and therefore resulted in an increased use of e-mail. All of these factors helped contribute to the support of H4.

The answers to RQ1 were interesting, but not surprising. Legislators' perception of the importance of e-mail in communicating politically increased by 31-point% from the 2000 survey (overall 41% in 2000 and 72% in 2004). Data indicated that improved e-mail filtering systems positively impacted the overall perception of e-mail communication. In the 2000 study, legislators exhibited a negative perception of e-mail, which was

partially attributed to e-mail overload. In fact, several legislators specifically conveyed a sense of being overwhelmed by e-mail and the added pressure to respond instantaneously. For instance, one legislator noted that e-mail is “just one more avenue that I have to stay up with, and it implies a need for me to respond more rapidly. Impossible!” While another legislator said, “E-mail could be an invaluable tool. But we recognize that the additional work load generated primarily from out-of-district sources would dictate at least one more full time person, if not two.” Although some legislators in the 2004 survey complained about e-mail overload, the majority of respondents said they were dealing very well with the volume of e-mails received. More importantly, of those legislators who complained, 100% do not use an e-mail filtering systems. In addition, based on responses, 70% of legislators agreed that increases in e-mail resources (advanced technology) helped them to best use e-mail. Supporting this finding was a significant correlation that showed a relationship between perceiving e-mail as an important political tool with increased e-mail resources. This correlation could explain the 31-point% increase in legislators’ perception of e-mail as an important political tool from the 2000 survey.

Aggregate panel comparisons also showed increased positive perceptions of the importance of e-mail in political communication, as well as an increased use of e-mail both professionally and privately (see



Table 4.18). In addition, there were significant panel differences in legislators' perception of e-mail's effectiveness, e-mail response time, and constituent e-mail's effect on legislative agendas. Slightly over 70% of legislators indicated they have the resources and skills to best make use of e-mail communication. By itself, this percentage might not seem important, but when compared to remarks made in the 2000 survey, its meaning becomes stronger.

The data also revealed a 10% increase in the number of legislators who reported a shift in their agenda based on increased constituent e-mail. In addition, 5% of legislators indicated that e-mail feedback influenced them more than any other form of communication. During the 2000 survey, not a single legislator chose e-mail feedback as the most influential form of communication. Although this 5% increase is marginal, it signals a change in acceptance of e-mail communication by legislators. In fact, 63% of legislators agreed that e-mail has helped to provide a better service to their constituents. Not surprisingly, there was a positive relationship between legislators who believed that e-mail helped provide a better service to constituents with those legislators who regarded e-mail as an important political tool (see Table 4.13).

These observations were confirmed in an interview with a female freshman representative. According to this representative, e-mail allows her to communicate more efficiently, in that she's able to notify

constituents immediately of legislative changes while at the same time encourage constituent feedback. "E-mail is both effective and important in communicating with my constituents," she said. "I tend to use e-mail to notify constituents of new votes taken and bills I'm working on" (freshman female representative, personal interview, February 24, 2004).

Increases in e-mail technology, especially the ability to distinguish constituent e-mail from non-constituent e-mail, had a positive impact on legislators' willingness to respond to e-mails. As stated earlier, in the 2000 survey legislators questioned whether e-mails were truly sent by constituents and therefore were somewhat leery in responding. By the 2004 survey, 52% of legislators were using some sort of filtering system (26% disagreed and 22% chose neutral), which could alleviate this problem. Furthermore, 86% of legislators in the 2004 survey agreed they respond to e-mails and, more importantly, 72% said they respond via e-mail. By themselves, these percentages indicate a positive switch in legislators' perceptions of e-mail communication from devaluing e-mail communication to actually using it to respond. In addition, legislators who respond via e-mail both agreed that they were coping well with the increased volume of e-mails received and that e-mail is an effective means of communicating (see Table 4.15). A highly significant relationship between legislators who use e-mail filters and a belief in e-mail's effectiveness in communicating supports these suppositions.

## **Private Web Pages**

Analysis of legislative private web pages revealed some interesting findings, especially in regard to gender differences within the House. Although the data showed that roughly the same number of male and female representatives provided an additional political web page, when compared to the total ratio of female representatives in the House, a greater proportion of female representatives provided an additional web page than male representatives (see Table 4.22). Freshmen comparisons also showed that more female freshmen representatives than male freshmen representatives provided a private web page (see Table 4.23). Perhaps the reason for this imbalance lies in Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation theory. The 2000 study showed females lagging behind male legislators in communicating via e-mail. Rogers states that because of a lack of competitiveness "girls are hesitant to compete with boys for access to computers" (1986, p 179), thus giving males a greater advantage over females. In fact, the 2000 study showed that female legislators were intimidated more by e-mail communication than male legislators.

Since laggards need more time to adapt and integrate new technology, it is not surprising that by the 2004 survey, female legislators were increasingly using e-mail to communicate. Both the 2004 quantitative and qualitative data indicated an increase in confidence among female legislators' use of mediated communication. In fact, one

female representative encouraged this researcher to “check out my web page. It’s fantastic!” This shift in female use also resembles Pew Center findings, in which women age 20 to 50 were more likely to use the Internet than men (A Nation Online, 2002).

Current findings also revealed that female representatives were using e-mail and web pages to answer anticipated constituent questions, thus alleviating some of their workload. One legislator summarized this issue by saying: “I find I can answer a lot of constituent questions ahead of time by posting information on my web page” (freshman female legislator, personal interview, February 24, 2004). Despite this increased confidence, not all female legislators have embraced e-mail communication. In fact, female representatives maintained the only two legislative private web pages that did not provide an e-mail link. In addition, a regression revealed a negative relation between length in office and maintaining a private web page (see Table 4.23), albeit the relation was not significant at the .05 confidence level. In other words, freshmen legislators were less likely to maintain a private web page than incumbent legislators.

However, a chamber analysis of private web pages showed overall freshmen legislators provided 90% of senate private web pages compared to 51% provided by freshmen representatives. However, since 27% of the Senate and 60% of the House were comprised of incumbent legislators this finding was not surprising. According to Fenno (1978),

Therefore, it is logical that the majority of Senate and Representative private web pages were produced and maintained by freshmen legislators. Although statistically insignificant, this finding further supports Fenno's supposition.

The geographic differences, however, were surprising, especially in regard to the Senate. Traditionally, research attributed the digital divide to any of the following factors: income, education level, race, household type and geography. In other words, those with more education, higher salary and who live in the suburbs tend to use the Internet more than those with less education, lower salary and who live in rural areas.

Geographic data provided by the Center for Government Studies at Northern Illinois University (2005) indicated that Chicago and the Chicago suburbs constitutes Illinois' highest income and largest population areas. Since the Chicago suburbs are traditionally more affluent than rural parts of the state, it was not surprising the data showed 90% of suburban representatives maintain an additional private web page. What was surprising, however, was that only 20% of suburban senators maintain a private web page. Overall, suburban representatives provided the majority of representative private web pages, while the majority of senate private web pages came from senators from central Illinois (see Table 4.25). According to the Illinois index of income (Center for Government Studies, Northern Illinois University 2005), central Illinois, especially the

counties surrounding the state capital, comprise the second largest geographic income area within the state and could explain this conundrum.

Party comparisons showed more democrats than republicans maintain a private web page (see Tables 4.23 and 4.24). This finding contradicts prior research. Political Web researchers Hill and Hughes found that “conservative Web sites are larger, flashier, and more visible on the World Wide Web than are either liberal or left-wing sites” (1998, p 153). Although this might be the case at the federal level, it does not translate to the state level.

Overall, 10 of 59 senators (20%) and 35 of 118 representatives (30%) provided an additional private web page. Because the state provides legislators with a web page, these low percentages were not surprising. Interestingly though, of the 45 legislators with private web pages, 22 also participated in the 2004 survey, thus indicating an added interest in mediated communication.

During the in-depth personal interviews, it was discovered that legislators provide personal e-mail accounts in addition to the state-provided e-mail account to their constituents. Legislators also indicated that instead of emphasizing web pages, they included personal e-mail addresses on legislative letterheads as well as on promotional material (including flyers, pencils, hats, etc.). According to an outsourced Illinois

web page “kidsroe” (a non-for-profit educational organization), 71% of representative and 51% of senators provide an additional e-mail address to their constituents. “Kidsroe” is a not-for-profit educational organization that works in conjunction with the state of Illinois to provide legislative information to Illinois schools.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As in all studies, there are limitations, and acceptance of these suppositions should remain within these limitations. Although the relatively high response rate to the survey (43%) was thought to be a fair representation of the total population, the survey was limited to the state of Illinois and, therefore, conclusions regarding other states should be avoided.

The survey was developed to make it easy for legislators to respond and fully complete. Although the majority of the survey was comprised of close-ended questions, numerous opportunities were provided for legislators to further expand their responses. Furthermore, the researcher achieved additional quantitative data through in-depth personal interviews, which helped strengthen the survey results. Analysis of privately maintained personal political web pages also enriched quantitative data, while further enhancing the overall findings.

Above all, this survey is timely in that it addresses only the attitudes and feelings of legislators during the completion of the survey. However,

aggregate panel comparisons allowed the researcher to further gauge shifts or changes in legislators' attitude and perceptions regarding mediated communication. In addition, analysis of private web pages actively gauged how legislators were implementing new forms of political communication.

Obviously, technology is changing at rapid speed and along with those changes is the possibility for attitudes to change. Many factors play into whether changing technology is accepted. As the findings indicate, legislators who use filtering systems embrace and regard e-mail as an important political tool of communication.

It is true that the results of this study could be considered only a "snapshot" of a particular moment within the evolving mediated communications impact on state legislators' perceptions and attitudes. Given these limitations, though, it is believed that this study is a fair and accurate reflection of the opinions and attitudes of Illinois state legislators toward the political use of e-mail.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have important implications for state legislators. Politicians are now faced with a new form of political communication, which the public has embraced. In fact, numerous legislators reported an increase in constituent e-mails (This increase was statistically significant.). Legislators were receiving as much e-mail per day as postal mail.



Furthermore, it is quite possible that in the near future constituent e-mail will far exceed constituent postal mail. Therefore, legislators who disregard e-mail will eliminate communication with an increasing portion of their constituent base.

Consequently, these findings highlight the increasing importance for legislators to become familiar with computer-mediated communication. Through advances in e-mail technology that distinguish constituent e-mail from non-constituent e-mail, legislators no longer have the luxury of dismissing e-mail communication based on lack of geographic origin.

As stated earlier, some legislators devalued e-mail based on its content. Complaints regarding e-mail content took three main forms: flame mail, spam mail, and casual nature. Overall, spam e-mail created the most concern and fueled some legislators' dislike of e-mail. Although spam-mail is a legitimate problem, it is easily detected and can be eliminated via e-mail filtering systems.

Qualitative data indicated that older legislators tend to disregard e-mail based on its casual content more than younger legislators. E-mail was considered whimsical, insincere and lacking thought. Older legislators also indicated that because of e-mail's easy access, which allowed constituents to convey any little thought that crossed their minds, they tend to disregard the sincerity of e-mail's content. Some research supports this negative perception of mediated communication. Galston

(2003) believes the lack of verbal cues allows individuals to communicate more impulsively. Based on this perception, one elder legislator noted that constituents who are truly concerned about an issue communicate via traditional media (personal letters, phone calls or face-to-face). This negative perception, again, reiterates Rogers' diffusion theory in that older legislators resist innovations more than younger legislators.

Some legislators also believed that e-mail was a more aggressive medium of communication. Early computer research supports this claim. According to Keisler, Siegal and McGuire (1984) people communicate more freely and creatively when using computers than they would face-to-face. This freedom includes "flaming" or extreme, aggressive language. One legislator summarized this belief by saying, "Some constituents only want to use e-mail as a buffer and avoid talking and actually discussing issues. It's too easy to write flame mail" (10-year male incumbent republican representative, personal interview, February 24, 2004).

Yet, despite the perception of older legislators, most legislators believe e-mail is an effective and important political tool of communication. In fact, e-mail has become a viable communication tool and in some instances has replaced traditional forms of communication. Of those

legislators responding, 5% chose constituent e-mail as the most influential medium of communication.

### **Future Research**

An important consideration for future study is a detailed analysis of constituent use of computer-mediated communication. Since this study was limited to legislators' perceptions and attitudes, it is important to analyze public perceptions and overall use of computer-mediated communication. Current findings show that legislators perceive a greater increase in constituent use of e-mail to communicate. The content of constituent e-mail, however, is still unclear. Therefore, a comparison between the content of constituent e-mail and media coverage would reveal whether the role of agenda setting has truly shifted. In addition, the demographic make-up of constituents who use e-mail to communicate at the state level is still unknown. Consequently, future studies should include demographic breakdowns, which gauge the education level, age, gender, and geographic location of those constituents who use e-mail to communicate.

Legislators indicated variations in the level of training and the availability of resources to best utilize e-mail. Although the present study incorporated e-mail training and availability of e-mail resources, it failed to gauge the different levels of these variables and its impact on legislators' perception of e-mail communication. Therefore, future studies

should gauge these variations to see exactly how they are impacting legislators' perceptions and overall use of e-mail as a political tool of communication.

Furthermore, future research should analyze the impact of legislative style on the overall use and perception of e-mail. That is, do legislators who consider themselves as trustees embrace e-mail communication more than delegates? Based on previous research, the political character of legislators impacts or determines how legislators' use and treat mediated communication.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **CONCLUSION**

This study sought to investigate and measure both the overall effect of constituent e-mail on political communication at a state level, as well as measure changes in state legislators' perceptions and attitudes toward mediated communication. Based on research, the study had four hypotheses and one research question. The more e-mail received on a specific topic, the more likely a politician is to shift his or her agenda to focus on that topic (H1), the instantaneous nature of e-mail will cause legislators to respond faster to e-mail than postal mail (H2), legislators will respond to known constituent e-mail as opposed to non-constituent e-mail (H3), and the more experience in using e-mail, the more likely legislators will view e-mail as an effective means of communication (H4). The research question dealt with overall changes in legislators' perception of e-mail as a political tool of communication.

Data showed support for hypothesis two through four with limited support for H1. In regard to H1, 76% of legislators reported a significant increase in the amount of constituent e-mail received in the past year. Furthermore, legislators were receiving an equal amount of e-mail and postal mail. In fact, in some cases legislators were actually receiving more e-mail than postal mail. Although this increase may not seem important, it adds credence to H1. That is, if constituents were not increasingly

communicating via e-mail then the likelihood of this medium impacting legislators agenda would be minimal at best. The study also gauged the overall impact of constituent feedback on legislators' agendas. Again, if most legislators functioned as delegates, who set their agenda without regard to constituent opinion, then the form of constituent communication would not matter. The findings on this particular question were somewhat split with 41% of legislators choosing personal beliefs and 37% choosing constituent feedback. However, 17% chose a combination of both constituent feedback and personal beliefs thus, the majority of legislators were influenced by constituent feedback. This proposition held true when regressed with other variables (see Table 4.4).

Overall, data comparisons between the 2000 survey and the 2004 survey revealed a 30% increase in reported shifts in agendas caused by increased constituent e-mails. Furthermore, panel comparisons also showed that increased constituent e-mails significantly impacted legislators' agendas, which led to reported shifts reflecting these e-mails.

Volume of constituent e-mail by itself, however, was negatively related to reported shifts in agendas. Instead, perceptions of e-mail importance positively correlated to reported shifts in agendas. In addition, legislators who overall were influenced by constituent feedback were significantly more willing to report a shift in agendas based on constituent e-mail. In other words, the data revealed that constituent e-mail's impact on

legislators' agenda depended on legislators' attitude toward e-mail communication and not the volume of constituent e-mail received.

Researchers have espoused that shared values have the greatest impact when evaluating constituent communication (Squire, 1993; Fenno, 1978; Hedund et al., 1972). According to the findings, this shared value extends to, or correlates to, the value placed on different types of communication. One elder legislator solidified this finding by stating, "I'm old school and not very computer savvy. I try to avoid computers and rarely respond to e-mail communication" (incumbent male representative, personal interview, February 24, 2004). This legislator's opinion, however, was not the norm. In fact, overall legislators significantly regarded e-mail as an important political tool of communication. In other words, constituent e-mail had a greater impact on those legislators who placed a higher value on e-mail communication.

Perceptions of e-mail communication also greatly affected legislators' response time (H2). In fact, despite constituent expectation, the data showed that legislators' perception and attitude of e-mail's importance determined the speed of response. E-mail, though, was the communication of choice for those legislators who responded within two days. In addition, there was a positive relationship between legislators who filter e-mail and quicker response time (see Table 4.6, Model 2). In essence, this finding indicated that filtering systems, which include auto

response systems, allowed legislators to respond more quickly to e-mail than other forms of communication. Education and office held were reliable predictors for e-mail response time and evaluation of e-mail's effectiveness as a political tool of communication.

Legislators' perceptions of e-mail were more positive in the 2004 survey. Some legislators even felt that e-mail opened new avenues of communication, which allowed constituents to voice opinions that might otherwise go unsaid. This ideology follows that of researchers Kamarck and Nye. "It is possible that, once there, candidates will be able to engage in direct conversations with voters-conversations that change the role of traditional intermediaries such as the press and make the democratic process more deliberative" (1999, p. 122). According to one legislator, this is exactly what has happened. "E-mail helps me provide a better service to my constituents and it keeps me more in touch" (white female incumbent, personal interview, February 24, 2004).

As in the 2000 study, the geographic location of e-mail's origination greatly affected the overall impact of e-mail on legislators' agendas and perceptions. Through personal interviews, Illinois legislators conveyed that they base their agendas on issues that either happened within their districts or on issues that affect their district. Because legislators were not able to distinguish constituent e-mail from non-constituent e-mail in the 2000 survey, H1 was not supported. However, advances in e-mail



technology, specifically filtering systems, alleviated this problem. More than half of the legislators in the 2004 survey had begun to filter their e-mails. Therefore, a possible explanation for the current positive shift in perceptions, which led to the support of the hypotheses, lies in advances in e-mail technology.

Consistent with Rogers' theory, legislators who shifted their agendas were typically younger. Also reflecting Rogers' theory was the fact that 43% of younger legislators filter e-mail compared to only 17% of older legislators. In addition, younger legislators rated all forms of media communication more effective, with e-mail as the most effective (see Table 4.20). What becomes hard to explain, however, is the fact that older legislators also rated e-mail more effective than any other form of mediated communication. Perhaps legislators feel they have more control over e-mail than other forms of communication.

It is true that not all legislators have embraced e-mail communication, but this percentage is fading. Factors like spamming, non-constituent e-mail and form e-mails negatively impacted legislators' overall perception of the importance of e-mail communication. These factors, however, also negatively impact legislative perceptions of other forms of communication. What makes e-mail different is the ability to filter these negative factors, thus overcoming these obstacles of acceptance.

Interestingly, the majority (95%) of legislators who devalued e-mail communication indicated that they do not use e-mail filtering systems.

Through the Internet, more constituents are becoming involved in the political process, even at the state level as witnessed by the significant increase in the amount of e-mail Illinois legislators received. Traditional agenda-setting theories argue the media influence what the public and politicians believe is important. In other words, the media set the political agenda as well as the public agenda. Current findings, however, indicate a possible shift in the agenda-setting role. The data showed legislators were willing to shift agendas based on constituent e-mail. If the media still influence what the public thought was important then shifts in legislators' agendas would not be necessary.

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## APPENDIX A

### 2004 POLITICAL COMMUNICATION SURVEY

**Please respond by putting an X in the space that most reflects your feeling (only one response per question). There are 36 questions and it should take no more than 10-15 minutes.**

1. In general, how long does it take your office to respond to constituent postal mail?

☐ Same Day ☐ 1-2 Days ☐ 3 Days-Week ☐ Week or More

2. In general, how long does it take your office to respond to constituent e-mail?

☐ Same Day ☐ 1-2 Days ☐ 3 Days-Week ☐ Week or More

3. On the average, how much postal mail does your office receive from constituents a day?

☐ 1- 10 ☐ 11-25 ☐ 26-50 ☐ 51 an up

4. On the average, how much e-mail from constituents does your office receive a day?

☐ 1- 10 ☐ 11-25 ☐ 26-50 ☐ 51 an up

5. I have had an e-mail address for

☐ Less than a year ☐ 1-2 years

☐ More than 3 years ☐ I do not have an e-mail account

6. In the last year, the amount of constituent e-mail my office received:

☐ Increased Significantly ☐ Declined Significantly

☐ Increased Marginally ☐ Declined Marginally ☐ No Change

7. How likely are you to respond to any and all forms of constituent feedback?

(Very likely)

[1]

[2]

[3]

[4]

[5]

(Very Unlikely)

[6]

[7]

8. I communicate with e-mail both professionally and in my private life

(Strongly Agree)

[1]

[2]

[3]

[4]

[5]

(Strongly Disagree)

[6]

[7]

9. I regard e-mail as an important political tool of communication.  
 (Strongly Agree) (Strongly Disagree)  
 [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]
10. Through e-mail I can communicate with my constituents in a timelier manner than other forms of communication.  
 (Strongly Agree) (Strongly Disagree)  
 [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]
11. Using e-mail is an effective way to communicate with my constituents.  
 (Strongly Agree) (Strongly Disagree)  
 [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]
12. My constituents are increasingly using e-mail to communicate.  
 (Strongly Agree) (Strongly Disagree)  
 [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]
13. In general, how often do you shift your position on an issue or change your legislative agenda?  
 (Very Frequently) (Very Infrequently)  
 [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]
14. I feel constituents communicating via e-mail expect a quicker response than constituents using other forms of communication.  
 (Strongly Agree) (Strongly Disagree)  
 [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]
15. Strong constituent feedback on an issue causes me to shift my position on that issue  
 or change my legislative priorities or agenda.  
 (Strongly Agree) (Strongly Disagree)  
 [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]
16. I respond more to e-mail when I know they come from constituents.  
 (Strongly Agree) (Strongly Disagree)  
 [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]
17. The more constituent feedback I receive on a certain position via e-mail, the more likely I am to support that position or change my legislative priorities or agenda.  
 (Strongly Agree) (Strongly Disagree)  
 [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]

18. Typically, I respond to constituent e-mail via:

☐ Postal Mail

☐ Personalized E-mail Response

☐ Automated E-mail Response

☐ I don't respond to e-mails

19. What *factor* most influences your own political agenda? (In other words, how do you decide to support a particular position?)

☐ Personal Beliefs & Convictions ☐ Constituent Input/Feedback

☐ Media ☐ Legislative Party or Agenda ☐ Other (please explain)

20. How effective do you believe the following mediums are in communicating your message to your constituents?

Postal Mail

(Highly Effective)

[1]

[2]

[3]

[4]

[5]

(Not at All Effective)

[6]

[7]

Web Page

(Highly Effective)

[1]

[2]

[3]

[4]

[5]

(Not at All Effective)

[6]

[7]

Newspaper

(Highly Effective)

[1]

[2]

[3]

[4]

[5]

(Not at All Effective)

[6]

[7]

Television

(Highly Effective)

[1]

[2]

[3]

[4]

[5]

(Not at All Effective)

[6]

[7]

Radio

(Highly Effective)

[1]

[2]

[3]

[4]

[5]

(Not at All Effective)

[6]

[7]

E-mail

(Highly Effective)

[1]

[2]

[3]

[4]

[5]

(Not at All Effective)

[6]

[7]

21. What type of constituent *feedback* most influences your political agenda?

☐ E-mail ☐ Postal Mail ☐ Telephone ☐ Face to Face

22. Do you have a web page? (if yes proceed to question 23, if no skip to question 25)

☐ Yes ☐ No

23. I use a filter system to distinguish constituent e-mail from non-constituent e-mail.

(Strongly Agree)

[1]

[2]

[3]

[4]

[5]

(Strongly Disagree)

[6]

[7]

24. I feel using my web page is an effective means of communicating.

(Strongly Agree)

(Strongly Disagree)

[1]

[2]

[3]

[4]

[5]

[6]

[7]

25. In the future my office will become more reliant on the Internet (especially e-mail) as a means to communicate.

(Strongly Agree)

(Strongly Disagree)

[1]

[2]

[3]

[4]

[5]

[6]

[7]

26. How well do you feel that you are coping with the volume of e-mail you receive?

\_\_\_ Very Well

\_\_\_ Reasonably Well

\_\_\_ Adequately

\_\_\_ Not Very Well

\_\_\_ Badly – being swamped

27. Do you have the resources and skills to make best use of e-mail?

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ No

\_\_\_ Not Sure

28. Have you or your staff received any training on how to use e-mail effectively?

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ No

\_\_\_ Not Sure

29. Who in your office responds to the majority of constituent e-mail?

\_\_\_ You

\_\_\_ Staff

30. Has e-mail helped you provide a better service to constituents?

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ No

\_\_\_ Not Sure

31. Do you proactively send e-mails to constituents (if yes, please specify)

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ No

\_\_\_ Not Sure

32. What party do you represent?

\_\_\_ Democrat

\_\_\_ Republican

\_\_\_ Other

33. Education Completed.

\_\_\_ Less Than High School

\_\_\_ High School Degree

\_\_\_ Some College

\_\_\_ 4yr College Degree

\_\_\_ Some Graduate Level

\_\_\_ Graduate Degree (including Law Degree)

**For the remaining questions please write the appropriate response**

34. What year were you born?

35. What district do you represent?

36. How long have you held that office?

**Thank you for your help and co-operation in this project. Your input and opinion is important. Please feel free to use the space below to make any additional comments. If you have any further questions about the research, feel free to contact me at 225/296-5674 or [msheff2@lsu.edu](mailto:msheff2@lsu.edu).**

**Additional comments:**

## NOTIFICATION LETTER

Dear Senator:

I'm writing to ask your help with an important research project at Louisiana State University. This is a follow-up study concerning the impact of the Internet on the political communication process. Specifically, I want to study how state legislators use e-mail and how it affects his or her legislative agenda. The original study was conducted in Illinois four years ago and contributed greatly to gauging e-mails impact on political communication, but additional information is still needed.

I realize how important your time is, therefore, I have limited the survey to 34 short questions, which should take only 10 minutes or so to answer. Your identity and your answers will remain strictly confidential. The information gathered will only be used aggregately, never identifying the individual with any of the answers. By returning the questionnaire, you are consenting to be a part of this project.

If you have questions or comments about this project, please feel free to contact me for more information. You may also contact Dr. Kirby Goidel, Co-Director of Public Policy Research Lab and Director of the Manship School's Public Policy Research Center at Louisiana State University, or Dr. Lou Day, professor of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University; both are directing my research in this area.

The study findings could have enormous implications for state legislators. It will take some time to gather and assess the data from the questionnaire, but I would be happy to send you the findings when they become available. Again, if you have any questions regarding this project, you may contact me at any time.

Many thanks for taking part in this project.

Sincerely,

Mary Lou Sheffer  
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## APPENDIX B VARIABLE DEFINITIONS

Variable	Description
Party	0= republican; 1 = democrat
Education	Six-point scale representing number of years of formal education completed, ranging from 1 (less than high school) to 6 (graduate degree).
Age	0 = 49 and under; 1 = 50 and above
Gender	1 = female; 2 = male
Race	1 = white; 0 = all other respondents
General Assembly	1 = senator; 2 = representative
Constituent Feedback	Seven-point scale of overall constituent feedback impacting agenda, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).
E-mail Feedback/Agenda Shifts	Seven-point scale of overall constituent feedback impacting agenda, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).
E-mail Important	Seven-point scale of strength of e-mail as a political tool of communication, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).
E-mail Volume	Five-point scale of volume of e-mail received within the last year, 1 = declined significantly; 2 = declined marginally; 3 = no change; 4 = increased marginally; 5 = increased significantly.



E-mail Timeliness	Seven-point scale of e-mail timeliness over other forms of communication, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).
E-mail Effectiveness	Seven-point scale of strength of e-mail as an effective tool of communication, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).
E-mail Characteristics	Seven-point scale of combined strength of e-mail as an effective tool, importance, and timeliness; ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).
Constituents Expect Quicker Response	Seven-point scale representing respondents' perception of constituent expectation of legislators response time to e-mail, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).
Constituent E-mail Use	Seven-point scale representing respondents' perception of increase use of e-mail by constituents, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).
Coping with E-mail	Five-point scale representing respondents' Perception of coping with the volume of e-mail received, ranging from 1 (badly being swamped) to 5 (very well).
Filter System	1 = yes; 0 = no
Postal Response Time	1 = week or more; 2 = 3 to 6 days; 3 = 1 to 2 days; 4 = same day.
E-mail Response Time	1 = week or more; 2 = 3 to 6 days; 3 = 1 to 2 days; 4 = same day.
Daily Postal Mail Received	1 = 1-10; 2 = 11-25; 3 = 26-50; 4 = 51 and up.
Daily E-mail Received	1 = 1-10; 2 = 11-25; 3 = 26-50; 4 = 51 and up.

Respond All Forms of Constituent Feedback

1 = likely; 0 = unlikely

Respond to Known Constituent E-mail

Seven-point scale representing the likelihood of response to known constituent e-mail, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Use of E-mail Privately and Professionally

Seven-point scale representing the use of e-mail, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Future Reliance on E-mail

Seven-point scale predicting the future reliance on e-mail, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Resources to Best Use E-mail

0 = not sure; 1 = no; 2 = yes.

E-mail Training

0 = not sure; 1 = no; 2 = yes.

E-mail Provide Better Service

Seven-point scale representing the degree to which e-mail has helped to provide a better service to constituents, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Length of Using E-mail

Three-point scale representing the number of years respondent maintained an e-mail account, 1 = less than a year; 2 = 1 to 2 years; 3 = more than 3 years.

Length in Office

1 = freshmen; 0 = incumbent.

Geographic Location

1 = suburbs; 0 = all other respondents.

Year

1 = 2004 respondents; 0 = 2000 respondents

Factor Influencing Agenda

1 = constituent feedback as most influential factor in setting agenda; 0 = all other respondents (personal belief, legislative agenda, and media).

## **VITA**

Mary Lou Sheffer's three key research interests are state legislative communication via e-mail, sports broadcasting, and religious broadcasting. She has taught introduction and advanced television production, television directing, sports broadcasting writing and production, broadcast news writing, and media writing.

Prior to joining the academic ranks, she worked for 10 years in television broadcasting. While working in the television broadcast industry, she was a director (half-hour newscast and sports programs, telethons, and special events), news and sports videographer, commercial writer-videographer-editor, and news one-man-band reporter. In addition, she is a freelance producer-videographer-editor. As a freelancer, she created award-winning videos for the School of Agriculture, Oklahoma State University, and recently shot and edited a training video for Homeland Security.

She received both her Bachelor of Arts degree and Master of Arts degree from Southern Illinois University, in 1989 and 2000 respectively. In May 2005, she will be the second female recipient of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in mass communication and public policy from The Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University.