

# Do Elected Officials Listen to Constituents on Social Media? Survey Evidence from Local Politicians in the United States\*

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## **Abstract**

Social media has the potential to enable broader participation in government by decreasing the costs of communication with elected officials. However, despite a wave of research about how politicians use social media as a top-down communication tool, we know little about how effective social media is as a tool for bottom-up communication. Are politicians responsive to messages they receive from constituents on social media? To answer this question, we field a survey of local elected officials in the United States. Using a number of standard survey questions and a conjoint survey experiment, we show that elected officials discount communications they receive on social media relative to other communication platforms. At least some of this effect is due to the perception that social media is not conducive to reasoned and civil discourse. Our findings have implications for social activists seeking to influence public policy and for understanding how politicians communicate with their constituents outside of campaign season.

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# 1 Introduction

Social media has created new opportunities for political communication. In turn, this has led to a wave of optimism concerning its potential for constituents to participate and influence democratic politics (Becker, 1998; Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013). However, this potential rests on the assumption that policymakers value and use the information they receive from constituents on social media. And yet, most of the documented evidence on the effectiveness of social media in politics comes from its use by politicians in communicating to constituents (Zeng et al., 2010; Hong and Nadler, 2011; Kavanaugh et al., 2012; Paris and Wan, 2011). For instance, in the United States, Twitter has become the online battlefield for political candidates during election season. In China, the Chinese Communist Party hires millions of party members to spread pro-regime information to stabilize support from society. There is much less evidence concerning the effectiveness of social media as a tool for constituents in communicating to politicians. It is little known how elected officials use social media for day-to-day policymaking.

In this article, we show that, despite policymakers' widespread use of social media for outgoing communication, they significantly discount information they receive from constituents on social media compared to traditional media platforms. This information is further discounted when the message content is subjective or when it impacts fewer citizens. Our results illustrate important limitations in the current use of social media in political communication. More importantly, they provide guidance for how social media platforms might be improved to encourage effective constituent communication to unlock the full positive potential of social media for democratic discourse.

These findings are the results of a series of conjoint experiments conducted via a national survey of municipal and county elected officials across all fifty states in the United States. In this way, this study adds to a small but growing number of studies which leverages national online survey experiments with subnational policymakers to generate causally-identified insights concerning important political phenomena. This methodological approach helps to

overcome common limitations in the study of policymaker behavior, namely (1) data quantity given the small number of national politicians that scholars often rely on and (2) causal inference given the pervasive endogeneity of real-world policymaker behavior data.

In the sections below, we begin by defining two theories on the relationship between social media and constituency communication. We then describe our unique data collection method and the unusual challenges involved in gathering it. We then lay out analysis strategy, give our results, and conclude. We also discuss the far-reaching implications for research areas within the study of political communication and American politics.

## **2 Social Media and Policymaker-Constituent Communication**

The role of social media in policymaker-constituent communication has become a core topic in political science in the last decade. In this study, we distinguish two general types of policymaker-constituent communication based on the direction of information flow. The first type, which we call “top-down”, refers to the type of communication in which the information flows from politicians to constituents. The second type, which we call “bottom-up”, refers to flow of information from constituents to politicians.

### **2.1 Social Media as a Top-Down Communication Approach**

There has been extensive research on top-down communication, with an emerging consensus that social media has become a common and effective tool for politicians across the world to communicate to constituents (Williams and Gulati, 2013; Chi and Yang, 2011; Grimmer, Westwood and Messing, 2014). In the U.S. Congress, social media is used as a strategic communication tool. In an early study, Golbeck, Grimes and Rogers (2010) show that members of Congress largely use Twitter for self-promotion by reporting on their daily activities and by spreading news articles and blog posts. Similarly, 54% of the parliament

members of U.K. use Tweetminster (the equivalent version of Twitter) to influence public opinion. However, these authors noted that most tweets are not in the purpose of improving government transparency but of broadcasting sound bites. Echoing this sentiment, Franco, Grimmer and Lee (2016) find that representatives in the U.S. have a strong capacity to use Facebook to create an audience for certain topics. After analyzing over 2.7 million public posts on elected officials' Facebook pages, they find that representatives use their social media posts to discourage people's attention to national controversial issues. This social media strategy is also used in other regimes. For instance, to distract public attention from controversial issues, the Chinese Communist Party hires millions of party members to write posts to cheerlead pro-regime sentiments (King, Pan and Roberts, 2017).

Politicians' use of social media is particularly salient during election campaigns. As pointed out by Hendricks and Schill (2017), "it is not exaggeration to say that political campaigns today are social media campaigns." One example among the extensive literature of online campaigning is the study by Graham et al. (2013). Through analyzing the content of 416 candidates in the 2010 UK General Election, they find that British politicians mainly used Twitter as a one-way communication platform to spread campaign messages. The 2016 U.S. presidential campaign has put the use of social media to a new level. During the general election period, Clinton's Twitter posted around 1,900 messages and Trump 2,800 messages, driving the news cycle Hendricks and Schill (2017, Part 1).

### **2.1.1 Social Media as a Bottom-Up Communication Approach**

There is a relatively small but growing literature on the bottom-up policymaker-constituent communication approach. Much of this research suggests social media as a promising tool for constituents to make their demands heard (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). For instance, analyzing all tweets received by Congress members over a 15-month period, Barberá et al. (2014) find that after followers of Congress members begin tweeting about a topic, the legislatures also tend to tweet about the same topic. They find that this effect is particularly

pronounced when the followers are ideologically aligned with the member of Congress and when they are in the same geographic location. This finding is consistent with Twitter being a method for constituents to set the agenda.

These dialogues may provide opportunities for the public to collaborate and participate in co-create solutions for government problems (Mergel, 2013; Snead, 2013). For instance, after interviewing social media directors of multiple federal agencies in the U.S., Mergel (2013) pointed out that one of the main functions of using social media is to facilitate civic engagement by encouraging citizens to share their concerns and stories and to provide feedback to the government. Not only in federal agencies, social media has also become a common tool for lower-level, municipal officials. A 2011 survey of local officials conducted by Reddick and Norris (2013) found that two thirds of municipal officials have adopted at least one form of social media. In other regimes, such as China, Bulgaria, Egypt, Pakistan and Singapore, governments have also created online channels for citizens to communicate their complaints and suggestions (Rodan and Jayasuriya, 2007; Gunitsky, 2015; Dimitrov, 2014; Qin, Strömberg and Wu, 2017). Thus, current scholarship draws the reasonable but broad conclusion that social media has become a common tool for constituencies to exercise their voice. And there is a prevailing optimism around using social media to foster constituency communication and to achieve greater representation (Shane, 2004; Shogan, 2010; Wright, 2012; Hofmann et al., 2013) (Shane, 2014; Glaisyer, 2010; Shogan, 2010; Wright, 2012; Hofmann et al., 2013).

Our paper reveals a different picture in the effectiveness of this bottom-up constituent-policymaker communication. We join a small but growing body of research that suggests netizen voices might not be listened to seriously and taken into public policy decision making (Reddick and Norris, 2013; Pan and Chen, 2018; Chen and Aitamurto, 2018). As Reddick and Norris (2013) note, “Although the data from our e-government survey show a high level (two-thirds) of local government adoption of at least one social medium, the great majority of local governments use social media for one-way communication. If local governments

truly want to engage citizens via social media, they will need to learn how to use these media in more interactive ways.” Chen and Aitamurto (2018) find that although there is increasing experimentation with open governance innovations among local governments across the world, many citizen voices are silenced due to the limited capacity of officials to analyze the huge amount of civic data. Therefore, while local governments may welcome the usage of social media for constituency engagement, lack skills on how to make sense of the public participation data (Kavanaugh et al., 2012). Pan and Chen (2018) further show that in China, constituency messages are concealed from upper leaders, especially when the messages are about corruption of local clients. In fact, there is emerging evidence that politicians do not value or use constituency messages that are posted through social media. For instance, Larsson and Kalsnes (2014) study the routine social media activities of Swedish and Norwegian politicians and found that despite the fact that many politicians have social media accounts, they failed to keep up with their usage. The most active users are those that are younger, non-incumbents and outside political hotspots.

Larsson and Kalsnes (2014) identifies a gap in the current literature of studying the role of social media in constituency communication. They write, “While plenty of research has provided important insights into the uses of the Internet by politicians during elections, a relatively scarce amount of work has looked into these uses outside of such parliamentary events.” Therefore, current scholarship has not been able to understand a more permanent role of social media in constituency communication due to their focus on the campaigning season.

Another shortfall in the current literature is a lack of comparative analysis. A key concern for citizens who want to make their voice heard is not merely whether government officials respond to information gathered on social media, but whether social media is an efficacious communication strategy relative to more traditional methods of communication. Even if politicians are responsive to social media, if they are less responsive than they would be to a phone call, for example, then citizens trying to influence policy making would be better

served by picking up the phone.

Our paper examines this possibility. We not only examine to what extent politicians in the United States value and use social media in day to day policymaking, we compare social media usage to the traditional constituency communication methods. We also study the reasons why and what type of constituency messages are more likely to be devalued by politicians.

## **2.2 Outline of Results**

Using a survey and conjoint experiment of nation-wide elected officials in the United States, our data show that while the use of social media as a means of communicating to constituents is common, politicians are less likely to use social media as a means of informing their policy-making. They discount what they hear on social media much more than other forms of communication, such as in-person meetings and phone calls. Only those constituency messages that cite objective evidence and involve a diverse and large group of people can increase the likelihood of local officials valuing their importance in day to day decision-making.

## **3 Data**

We describe here our methodological approach collecting elected officials' attitudes toward using social media and in understanding the effect of constituency messaging on officials' attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. We discuss our data collection process, limitations of this study, and how we organize the data for subsequent analyses.

### **3.1 Sample Selection**

Studying the attitudes of public officials toward social media requires targeting a relevant population of elected officials who have experience dealing with constituent communications.

We leverage two innovations in the study of elected officials' behavior. First, with the increasing availability of online contact information in recent years, it has become possible to implement surveys of elected officials. Second, by focusing on local elected officials (rather than national politicians), we are able to dramatically increase the sample size of the study.

In particular, we leveraged a newly available policymaker survey platform through CivicPulse, which has developed a comprehensive list of publicly available email addresses of elected officials at the municipal, county, and state levels across all fifty U.S. states. From this contact list, we invited a random sample of municipal and county government officials to participate in an online study via email.

We randomly sampled 9,000 elected local-level officials and solicited their participation in an online survey via email between November 27 and December 13, 2017. In all, 651 people completed at least half of the survey, for a response rate of 7.2%.

Respondents were evenly distributed geographically, with all states but Delaware represented. The modal respondent is a member of a city or town council (299 respondents). Other common positions are county board members (132 respondents) and mayors (98 respondents). Nearly 70% of the respondents are men and the average age 59.5 years old. The partisan breakdown is as follows: 40% are Democrats (including leaners), 50% are Republicans (including leaners), and 10% are independents. Table 1 includes several descriptive statistics about the demographics of the sample. The counties in which the respondents are located tend to be similar in terms of education level, smaller, and more rural than the counties of the target universe as a whole. respondents tend to be located in counties that are average in terms of education compared to the target universe. In the rest of the paper, we report unweighted statistics.

This unique sample of local elected is substantively relevant. There are many more government officials at the local level than at the state and federal level, making it of practical importance to understand how responsive they are to their constituents. Moreover, local governments have fewer constituents and fewer resources for gauging public opinion as a



<b>Party</b>	
Democrat	40.4%
Independent/Other	9.4%
Republican	50.2%
<b>Age</b>	
Mean	59.5
Standard Deviation	11.7
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	69.3%
Female	30.7%
<b>Education</b>	
No bachelor’s degree	22.1%
Bachelor’s degree	39.2%
Graduate degree	38.7%

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the sample. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

whole. Therefore, we might expect local government to be a “most likely” case for social media being able to influence officials’ decision-making.

### 3.2 Measuring Responses to Constituent Communications

Prior research on officials’ use of social media typically studies social media in isolation. However, a relevant question for our purposes is, how does constituent communication on social media compare to offline communication? To answer this question, we must directly compare the evaluations of messages received on social media versus those received through traditional means. Our survey was designed specifically for this purpose.

We undertake two measurement strategies to understand the role the medium plays in the influence of communications to elected officials. First, we asked respondents directly what the most effective way to communicate to them is. In particular, we ask them: “Imagine you have not already arrived at a firm decision on an issue. How useful would each of the following communication strategies be for influencing your decision? Very useful; somewhat useful; not at all useful.” We then listed a number of ways of contacting elected officials, including

direct messages on social media, public comments on social media, in-person meetings, and phone calls, among others. This question provides a baseline comparative measure of the perceptions that public officials have toward social media.

Next, to measure the comparative prevalence of social media use by public officials, we ask two questions. We distinguish between communication to constituents and communication from constituents.

The first question asks, “Now, we’d like to know how you hear from constituents. We’ll ask about both private and public forms of communication. Here, we list ways in which constituents might communicate with you publicly. In the last month, how often have your received information in this way?” The response options included private and public messages on social media, op-ed articles, emails, and phone calls, among others.

The second question asks: “In the past month, how often have you communicated to constituents in this way?” The options included public and private meetings, phone calls, and social media, among others. Given that the possible modes of communication vary between whether officials are communicating to constituents and hearing from constituents, the two questions differ in the responses.

These questions give us a descriptive sense of how elected officials use social media. However, there are numerous factors that vary across different communication media. For instance, in-person or phone conversations may be more conducive to respectful discourse than social media. In that case, it is not the medium per se that would make officials dislike social media but the quality or the type of information transmitted from the constituency.

To disentangle the different mechanisms by which officials find communications from constituents to be useful and influential, we conduct a conjoint survey experiment (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014). Each respondent was asked about three hypothetical scenarios that local elected officials could plausibly encounter. The first scenario pertained to a property tax increase, the second to the development of a public park, the third to approving the construction of a new retail property. For each scenario, we generated two sets of com-

munications that the official might receive from constituents, and asked officials to evaluate how informative and influential they would find each communication. The communication profiles specified:

- The medium of communication, either “social media” or “visit in office.”
- The number of people communicating via this medium: 5 people, 15 people, or 30 people.
- The identity of the constituents. The levels were randomized to include presumptive opponents of the proposal, presumptive supporters, or both. For example, for the retail development scenario, the levels were “business owners,” “homeowners,” and “business owners and homeowners.”
- The tenor of the message — either arguments based on personal narratives, arguments based on studies and statistics, or ad hominem attacks questioning the motives of the other side.

An example of the prompt is given in Figure 1, and the full text and description of the conjoint is available in the Appendix.

We hypothesize that arguments made by a large, diverse group of people that cite objective statistics will be the most influential, while ad hominem attacks from a small number of interested parties will be less influential. The medium of communication factor will allow us to assess how receptive elected officials are to social media, holding fixed the number, identity, and message of the constituents.

The outcome variables are responses to the following questions:

- “How influential would each of these constituent communications be in forming your opinion?”
- “How informative would each of these constituent communications be in forming your opinion?”

Suppose that you have to take a stance on whether to support or oppose the development of a public park on a plot of land currently being used for a public parking lot. Below are two different messages you receive from constituents. Please look at the information and then answer the questions that follow.

	<b>Communication 1</b>	<b>Communication 2</b>
<b>Type of communication</b>	Visit in office	Social media
<b>Number of constituents</b>	30 people	30 people
<b>Type of constituents</b>	Business owners	Neighborhood residents
<b>Type of argument</b>	Arguments citing economic studies about the importance of convenient parking access for successful businesses	Arguments citing economic studies about the importance of convenient parking access for successful businesses
<b>Policy position</b>	Oppose	Oppose

Figure 1: An example of one of the conjoint prompts. Each of the levels except for “policy position” are randomized.

There are four response options for each question, from “not influential/informative” to “very influential/informative.”

Each respondent was presented with each of the scenarios, and two randomly generated communication profiles corresponding to that scenario.

### 3.3 Analysis Strategy

The outcome variables for the conjoint are the survey responses, recoded to range from 1 to 4, where 4 indicates “very influential/informative.” We collapse the three scenarios together for analysis, so that the levels of the “message” factor are “objective studies,” “personal stories,” or “questioning motives.” The levels of the “identity” factor are “natural allies,” “natural opponents,” and “both allies and opponents.”

To estimate the causal effect of each of these levels, we estimate a linear regression of the form:

$$Y_{it} = \text{Medium}_{ij}\beta_{\text{medium}} + \text{Number}_{ij}\beta_{\text{number}} + \text{Identity}_{ij}\beta_{\text{identity}} + \text{Message}_{ij}\beta_{\text{message}} + \eta_i + \epsilon_{ij}, \quad (1)$$

where each variable name is a vector of indicators for the levels,  $i = 1, \dots, N$  indexes respondents and  $j = 1, 2$  indexes communication profiles. The  $\beta$ 's represent the average component marginal effects of the levels.  $\eta_i$  are respondent fixed effects. We estimate the model via OLS and cluster the standard errors at the level of the respondent. Due to random assignment of the levels, OLS provides unbiased estimates of the causal effect of each feature.

## 4 Results

We now present evidence from the survey and conjoint experiment on (1) attitudes toward constituency messages from social media compared to that from other constituency communication channels, (2) the effect of constituency message on attitudes and behavioral outcomes, and (3) reasons explaining these attitudes and behaviors.

### 4.1 Discounting Constituents' Messages on Social Media

To measure the what extent to which elected officials value social media for constituency communication, we asked in our survey how useful each communication method is in influencing their decision making on public issues. Figure 2 plots the percentage of officials who believe rate various communication methods as “very useful” in informing their decision making. As we see, a majority of officials regard face to face meeting (including in-person meetings and public meetings) as useful to their decision making. In contrast, only 10% to 20% officials value constituency messages on social media as useful to their decision making on public issues.

This attitude of discounting social media is reflected in how they use social media as a way of communicating to constituencies. We asked respondents how many times, in the last month, they have *received information from* constituents via various communication channels and how often they have *communicated to* constituents via various communication channels. Figure 3 shows the distribution of responses. The left-hand side shows that among our

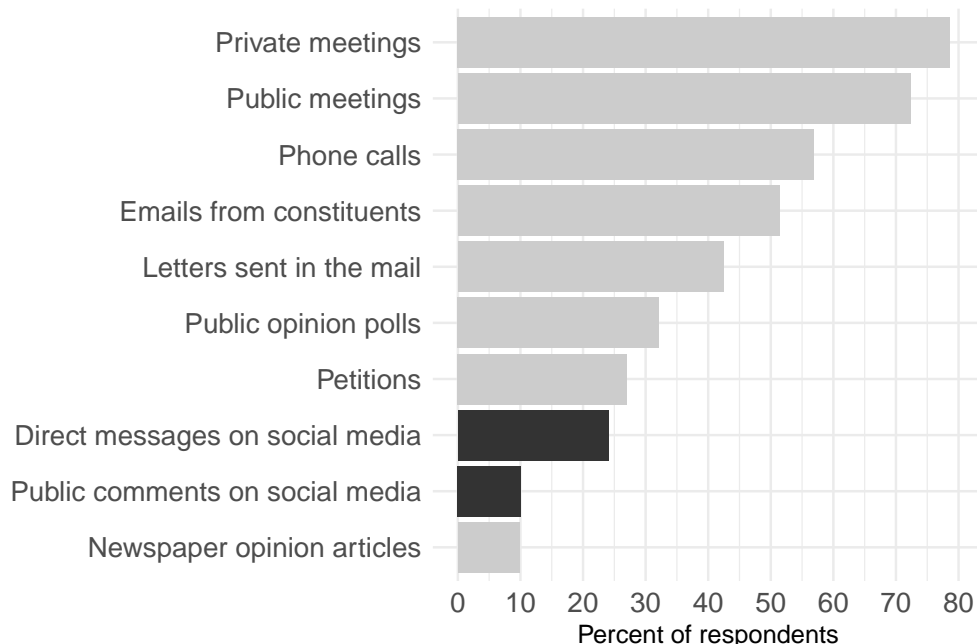


Figure 2: Percent of respondents who find each communication strategy “very useful” in coming to decisions on public issues. Respondents are much less likely to list messages they receive on social media as useful than other methods of communicating.

respondents, there is similar percentage of officials receiving constituency messages between face to face meetings and social media. However, when choosing what ways to communicate to constituents, as shown by the right histogram, there is a significant discrepancy among our respondents in choosing between face to face meeting method and social media method. Over 80% percent of officials use face to face meetings to communicate to constituency and this number drops down by 20% when it comes to using social media to communicate to constituencies.

To further test elected officials’ discounting of constituency message from social media, we fixed the communication method and varied whether this method is delivered via social media channel or in-person. We ask in the survey how useful elected officials perceive petitions to be when the signatures are collected online versus when they are collected in person. Table 2 compares the percentage of officials who regard online petitions useful with those that regard in-person petitions useful. Here, again, we find that officials devalue constituent communications that come via social media: 43.5% of officials perceive in-person petitions

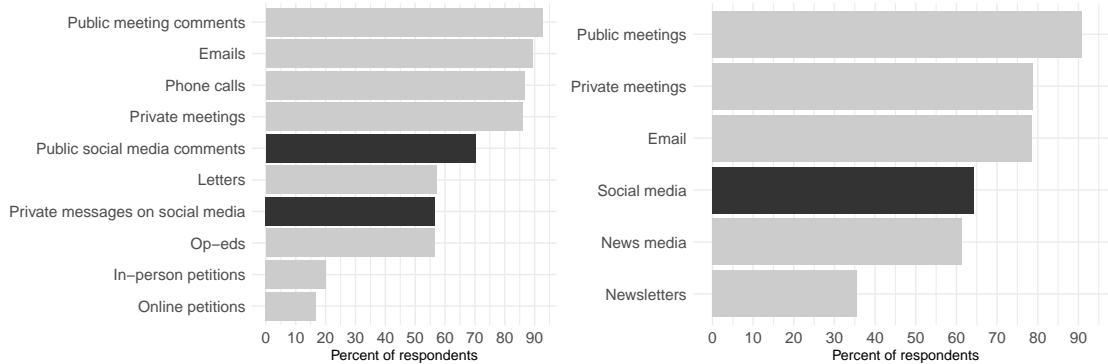


Figure 3: Prevalence of communication method. The left-hand side shows the percentage of respondents who hear from constituents at least once a month via each communication medium. The right-hand side shows the percentage of respondents who communicate to constituents at least once a month using each medium.

Perception	In-person signatures	Online signatures
Very useful	11.5%	4.5%
Somewhat useful	32%	21.6%
Not very useful	20.7%	26.8%
Not at all useful	35.7%	47.1%

Table 2: Distribution of responses to the question of how useful petitions are in forming respondents’ views when the signatures are collected in person (center column) or online (right column).

useful in their decision making while this number drops by half when the petition is online.

## 4.2 Type of Constituency Messages Discounted Most

Evidence from the survey suggests that overall, constituency messages from social media are viewed less useful in elected officials’ decision-making on public issues. However, it cannot inform us on the types of constituency messages that are discounted more than others. We disentangle this puzzle in our conjoint experiment by varying the type of constituency message on a number of fixed public issues and asking our respondents their attitude and political behavior toward different types of constituency messages. We showed our respondents constituency messages that vary in the number of constituents affected by a certain policy issue, the level of disagreement for a certain policy issue, and the types of evidence cited in

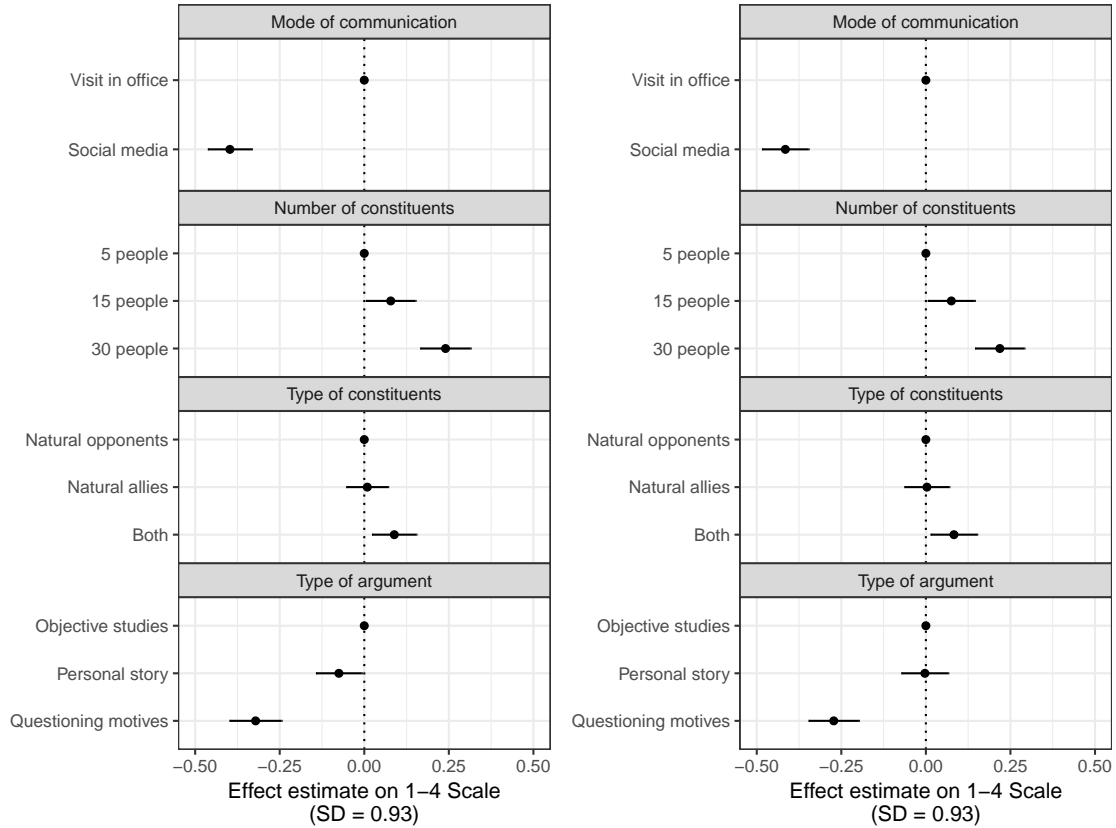


Figure 4: This figure shows the average marginal component effect of various features of hypothetical messages from constituents. The left-hand side shows results for outcome variable of whether the officials are likely to find the constituent message informative. The right-hand side shows results for the outcome variable of how influential the message is likely to be. The figure shows that messages received on social media are viewed as less informative and less likely to be influential than in-person communication. Points show OLS coefficient estimates and bars show robust 95% confidence intervals calculated with clustered standard errors.

the message. Figure 3 shows the average marginal component effect of each treatment. It suggests that when a constituency message is a story that affects a larger group of people in the society, involves multiple stakeholders, and cite objective evidence, it is more likely to be perceived as informative by elected officials. Elected officials also reveal that they are more likely to take this type of constituency message into account when making decisions, as seen the right-hand side of Figure 4.

The regression results, presented in Table 3, show the effect size of various message types on our two outcome variables: to what extent elected officials perceive a type of constituency



	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Informative	Influential
	(1)	(2)
Mode of Communication: Social Media	-0.397*** (0.033)	-0.415*** (0.035)
Number of Constituents: 15 people	0.078** (0.037)	0.075** (0.035)
Number of Constituents: 30 People	0.240*** (0.038)	0.219*** (0.037)
Type of Constituents: Natural allies	0.009 (0.032)	0.003 (0.034)
Type of Constituents: Both	0.089*** (0.033)	0.083** (0.035)
Type of Argument: Personal story	-0.075** (0.035)	-0.003 (0.035)
Type of Argument: Questioning motives	-0.321*** (0.039)	-0.272*** (0.038)
Constant	2.076*** (0.047)	2.743*** (0.048)
Respondent FE	✓	✓
Conjoint topic indicator	✓	✓
Observations	3,382	3,382
R <sup>2</sup>	0.557	0.568
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.465	0.479

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Table 3: Average marginal component effects of each treatment. Robust standard errors, clustered by respondent, are reported in parentheses. Each set of coefficients is the difference from the baseline category for that factor. The baseline categories are as follows. Mode of communication - Visit in office; Number of constituents - 15 people; Type of constituents - Natural opponents of the proposal; Type of argument - Citing studies and statistics.

message from social media as informative and to what extent elected officials would use a type of constituency message in their decision-making. Echoing with the findings from figure 3 and 4, we observe that (1) if a message tells the story that involves a larger group of people in the society, it increases the likelihood of being regarded as informative and thus being considered in policy-making by over 20%, (2) if a message tells the story that involves multiple stakeholders, it increases the likelihood by over 7% and (3) if a message

cites objective studies as evidence, it increases the likelihood by over 30% compared to a message that uses moral blames and by 8% compared to a message that uses personal story.

### 4.3 Reasons for Discounting Social Media

Evidence from both the survey and conjoint experiment indicates that constituency messages from social media, especially those that are as less objective are much more likely to be discounted and not used in political decision making. To further unpack this finding, we asked elected officials about several potential barriers to using social media for effective communication with constituents. Figure 5 shows the percentage of elected officials that agree with each statement. The top barrier to communicating with constituents on social media is that there are too many posts and comments to keep with. This finding echoes with current scholarly work which note that civic data overload brought by the internet age has posed new challenge to politicians in analyzing and processing citizen participation information.

Closely following the top-cited barrier is uncertainty over whether commenters on social media actually live in the area that respondents represent. The anonymity of social media makes it more difficult to verify the identity of commenters. Given that elected officials are likely to be most responsive to comments that originate from people who are directly influenced by their decisions, the anonymity common in social media may reduce its value. If officials believe that some of the people they hear from on social media are not constituents, it may cause them to substantially discount everything they hear on social media.<sup>1</sup>

The next most important barrier is the perception that social media comments tend to be rude. This perception is further confirmed when we asked local officials to compare the quality of constituency message from social media versus in-person visits. Figure 6 shows that elected officials perceive messages from in-person visits to be much more well-informed,

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<sup>1</sup>Some social media platforms have attempted to address this problem. Facebook has a “constituent” badge option that allows users to enter their address and select their representatives. Then, when interacting with their elected representatives, a badge verifying that they are constituents appears next to their name.

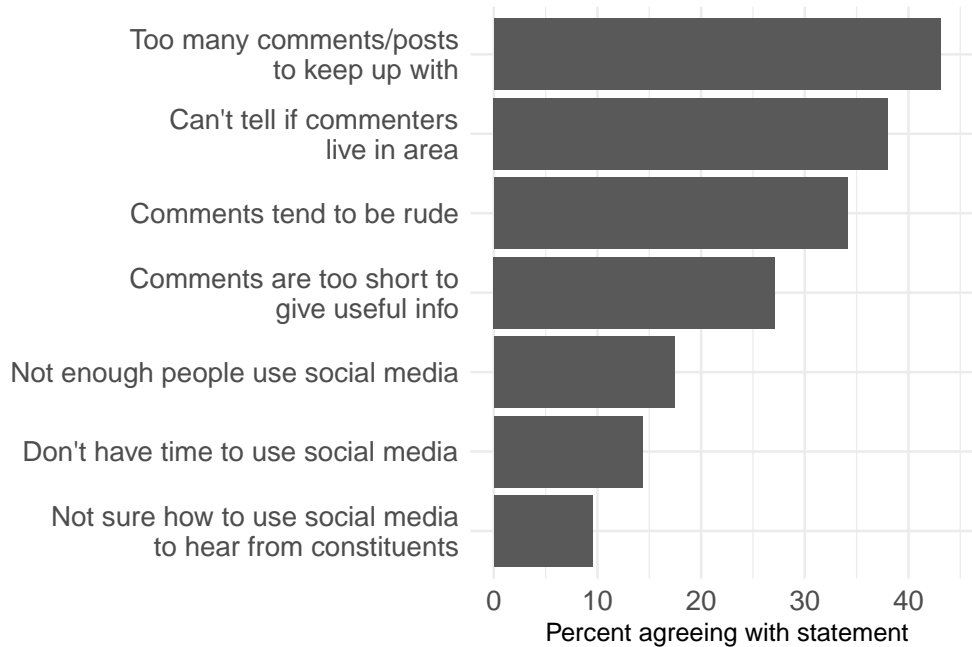


Figure 5: Percent of respondents who agree with each statement regarding barriers to communicating with constituents on social media.

objective, and respectful.

Indeed, as many local officials pointed out in open-ended survey responses, the quality of information from social media is their major concern and makes them discount constituency messages from social media. Below are typical quotes from local officials:

For me personally, petitions, public comments on social media, and newspaper opinion articles are not very effective at influencing me because they seem to appeal to those who want to yell or be rude and question the motives of anyone who opposes their viewpoint. . . . I'm far more influenced when someone approaches me directly either in person, on the phone, or in an email since they are taking the time to directly communicate. It's far easier to have a constructive dialogue and collaborative effort to find solutions with these approaches. (Councilmember)

Communication that takes some individual effort is more effective than just a signature (petition) or forwarding/responding to an email or social media post.

Social media makes to easy to be bullies. It's to easy to hide behind a key board and be rude to people that they would never be that way face to face. (Councilmember)

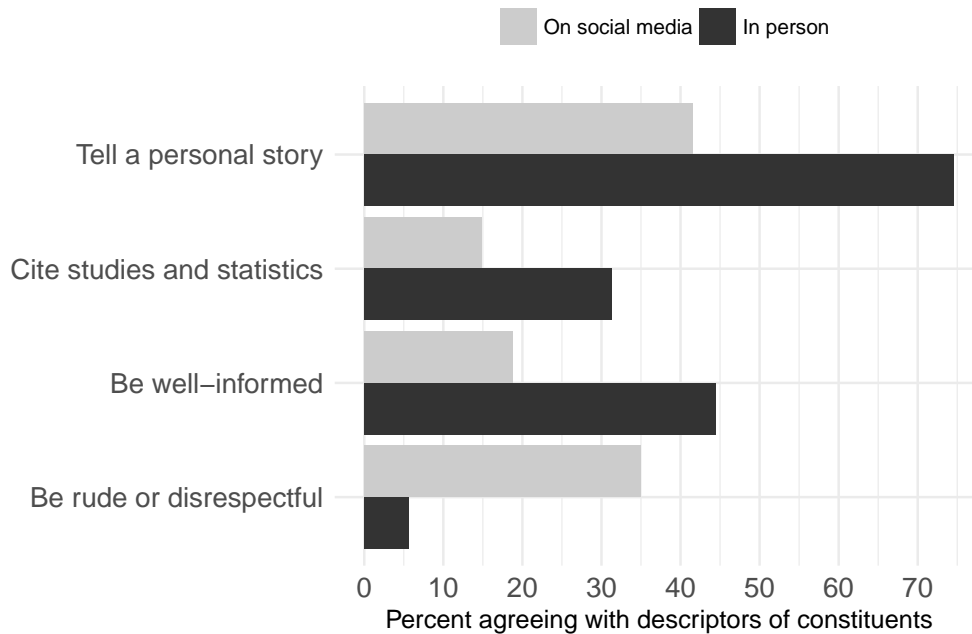


Figure 6: Percent of respondents agreeing that people who contact them exhibit the following characteristics and behavior.

Overall, respondents tended to view social media as less conducive to productive discourse than in-person communications. As a result, they tend to discount the messages they hear on social media when forming policy opinions.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

The new data and methods we offer reveal that although there is an increasing use of social media by politicians across the world to engage constituencies, compared to traditional methods of constituency communications, constituency messages from social media are devalued and are less likely to be incorporated into public policy-making. The value of constituency message from social media is further limited by its quality and impact scale. These results shed light on whether social media has expanded the opportunity for citizen voices to be heard or in fact just creates a platform for more voices to be expressed, without having a substantive impact on the operations of government. Our evidence suggests the latter and

thus the promise of social media in elevating citizen voices is much limited than expected.

The promise of social media — and new political communication technology more generally (e.g., White and Trump, 2016; Grossman, Platas and Rodden, 2018) — is that it enables cheap communication. The hope is that allowing a diverse set of voices to be heard will improve responsiveness, representation, and accountability. On the other hand, our findings suggest due to the way policymakers perceive information gleaned on social media, it may not be enough to alleviate existing inequalities in engagement with local government (Fischel, 2001). For example, Einstein, Palmer and Glick (2018) find that people who attend planning and zoning meetings are older and more likely to be homeowners or longtime residents than the community as a whole. While theoretically social media could alleviate this bias, we find that local policymakers are especially responsive to these in-person forms of communication.

More research could be conducted on the implications of our findings. For instance, how social media platforms might be improved to encourage better quality democratic discourse so that politicians can find them informative and valuable in their policy-making. Another implication is how to incentivize elected officials to tap into the value of constituency messages and increase their responsiveness in online communication.

More generally, beyond the findings of this article, the data collected represent a new way to study political communication and different dimensions of American politics more broadly. For the study of political communication, our conjoint experiment introduces how we can design and encourage constituency message that are valuable to politicians in public policy-making. By examining various types of constituency messages, our approach indicates that it is important to identify the appropriate type of political discourse which can make its way to decision makers in policy-making. Understanding how elected officials process constituent communications is important for designing platforms to encourage engagement in the policy-making process.

In the context of American politics, our data provides an important window to under-

stand politician behavior beyond election season. While many of the studies focus on how elites use social media during political campaigns, our article centers on politicians' day-to-day behavior. Taking this approach, we are able to reveal new findings which temper the optimism about the promises of social media to empower citizens in policy making.

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## A Conjoint Details

We presented three hypothetical local political scenarios to each respondent, in a randomized order. Respondents were asked to imagine that they had not yet made up their mind on a decision they faced. They were then told that they received two messages from constituents on this issue, and were asked to assess how *informative* each message is and how *influential* it is in shaping their thinking. To assess the relative importance of different features of the messages, we randomly varied several factors:

- Mode of communication
  - Visit in office
  - Social media
- Number of constituents
  - 5 people
  - 15 people
  - 30 people
- Type of constituent (levels varied by scenario)
  - Natural allies of the proposal
  - Natural opponents of the proposal
  - Both
- Type of message (levels varied by scenario)
  - Questioning motives of other side
  - Personal story about the impact of the proposal
  - Arguments citing objective studies

The levels of the type of constituent and type of communication were customized to each scenario, depending on the content. Exact wording and levels are below. The messages were further customized based on whether the messages were in support of or opposed to the proposal.

Respondents saw the following block of introductory text:

Next, we are going to describe a series of hypothetical local policy debates. For each scenario, you will be provided two different messages you receive from your constituents. We recognize that these scenarios are abstracted from the particular details, and that may not all be relevant to your particular position or locality. Nonetheless, we appreciate your playing along to inform us how you value different kinds of information.

## A.1 Park Scenario

Intro text:

- “Suppose that you have to take a stance on whether to support or oppose the development of a public park on a plot of land currently being used for a public parking lot. Below are two different messages you receive from constituents. Please look at the information and then answer the questions that follow.

Identity of constituents:

- “Business owners”
- “Neighborhood residents”
- “Both business owners and neighborhood residents”

Type of argument (supporting proposal):

- Arguments citing economic studies about the positive benefits of public spaces
- Personal stories about the importance of giving kids somewhere to play and exercise
- Arguments that the opponents of the park only care about profits and not the community

Type of argument (opposing proposal):

- Arguments citing economic studies about the importance of convenient parking access for successful businesses
- Arguments that the park will attract loitering and make the neighborhood feel unsafe
- Arguments that the proponents of the park want to hurt the nearby businesses

## A.2 Property Tax Scenario

Intro text:

- Suppose that you have to take a stance on whether to support or oppose a property tax increase in your local area of 0.5% to improve funding for a pre-K (pre-Kindergarten) public school program. Below are two different messages you receive from constituents. Please look at the information and then answer the questions that follow.

Identity of constituent:

- Senior citizens
- Parents of schoolchildren
- Senior citizens and parents of schoolchildren

Type of argument (supporting proposal):

- Personal stories about the impact of good education on getting out of poverty
- Arguments citing studies on the importance of early childhood education for long-run success
- Arguments questioning why opponents care more about wealthy homeowners than schoolchildren

Type of argument (opposing proposal):

- Personal stories about the difficulty of paying high property taxes in this economy
- Arguments citing economic studies about how high property taxes hurt local job creation
- Arguments questioning whether the tax increase is just a ploy by teachers unions for higher pay

### **A.3 Retail Development Proposal**

Intro text:

- “Suppose that you have to take a stance on whether to support or oppose the development of a new retail property on a block near an existing residential area. Below are two different messages you receive from constituents. Please look at the information and then answer the questions that follow.”

Identity of constituents:

- Homeowners
- Business owners
- Business owners and homeowners

Type of argument (supporting proposal):

- Argument citing economic studies on the positive effects of business development for the community
- Personal stories about how more nearby stores would increase residents’ quality of life
- Arguments that opponents of the development care more about keeping the neighborhood the same than the economic well-being of the town as a whole

Type of argument (opposing proposal):

- Arguments citing studies that retail development increases traffic, making it dangerous for kids
- Personal stories about how a retail store would disrupt the tight-knit neighborhood community
- Arguments that the developers only care about profits and not the community