ABSTRACT

To date, research on e-government has devoted relatively little attention to how legislators use the Internet to enhance the representative function. In this paper, we seek to explain statistically the variation in the quality of Web sites among members of the US Congress. The dependent variable for the preliminary analysis is an ordered categorical rating of the quality of each member’s Web site on a 5-point grading scale ranging from A to F. The model specification is derived from the political science literature on Congress, including measures of electoral situation, the local situation, and the intra-institutional situation. The cross sectional findings suggest that shorter tenure and closer electoral margin both independently contribute to successful innovation; members appear to adopt new technologies when constituents are connected to the Internet; and members representing districts of lower socio-economic status tend to have better quality Web sites.

Keywords: Congress – United States; digital government; representation; statistical models; Web site quality measures

INTRODUCTION

As Richard Fenno demonstrated in his landmark work, Home Style: House Members in Their Districts, Members of Congress tend to be very good at interacting with constituents face-to-face. Digital interaction, however, is inherently new terrain for many members, and any new activity entails uncertainty and risk. Furthermore, implementing and making effective use of innovations require new knowledge and new operating procedures. As a consequence, adoption of Web technologies is neither automatic nor effortless. As Dawes and her colleagues (1999) write, “Throughout our history, developments in technology have emerged much faster than the evolution of organizational forms” (p. 21).

However, communication between legislators and constituents is fundamental to effective democratic representation, and devising the institutional means for citizen/legislator communication stands as one of the core and persistent problems in the practice of democracy. A legislator needs in-
formation about the preferences, ideals, norms, and beliefs of his or her constituents in order to do the job well. Similarly, citizens need information about the actions and decisions of their representatives in order to maintain appropriate accountability. But, as national problems become more complex and as the political process grows more and more dominated by experts and organized groups, it is becoming more difficult for interested citizens to understand the meaning of government action, much less to find an effective voice in the process.

Recent developments in interactive information technology create new possibilities for establishing communication links between citizens and their representatives. The widespread adoption and use of Web-based technologies among citizens creates the potential for greater citizen participation in and knowledge and trust of their government. Web technologies allow citizens access to the government, irrespective of their geographic proximity to the seat of government and increasingly irrespective of their wealth and educational level (Thurber & Campbell, 2003). When citizens have better knowledge of the hard choices that Congress often has to make, and of the rationale that legislators have for making them, many citizens may reinvest their trust in government (Bianco, 1994). Wisely used, the Internet can reconnect citizens and Congress in very meaningful ways.

A recent study by the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF, 2003) found that, over the past few years, many representatives in the U.S. Congress have greatly improved the quality of their official Web sites in a variety of ways, but there is still a large disparity among the offices; some have yet to take full advantage of the capabilities for communication that the Internet has to offer (CMF, 2003). As we show in the next section, we can explain this cross sectional variation in the quality of members’ Web sites using standard static analytical approaches that can be found in the political science literature on congressional behavior. This static analysis uncovers the political and institutional correlates of Web technology adoption for members and gives an outline of the incentive structure for adoption.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS: CORRELATES OF MEMBERS’ ADOPTION DECISIONS

In this section, we present a study of the political and organizational correlates of the adoption of Web innovations by members of Congress. In many ways, the House of Representatives is a unique laboratory for understanding the effective use of information technologies in the public sector. Congressional offices function as 440 small, functionally identical, public organizations with a set of policy and procedural outputs (Salisbury & Shepsle, 1981). This enables a large N statistical study of innovation adoption, in essence to test standard political science expectations that the behaviors of members of Congress can be explained by recent electoral experience, district characteristics, and institutional resources (Fenno, 1978). The statistical study yields a static portrait of the incentives for the adoption of Web-based innovations.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable for our analysis is a rating of the quality of each member’s Web site, as measured by the
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