Chapter VII

Measuring and Explaining the Quality of Web Sites in the (Virtual) House of Representatives

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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 chapter, we develop a general method to evaluate the quality of legislative Web sites and apply the method to the Web sites of members of the U.S. House of Representatives. We use a dichotomous latent variable model that combines a measurement model with a structural model to explain the variation in the quality of Web sites. We find the correlates of high quality Web sites include shorter tenure in office and closer electoral margin; the percentage of constituents who are connected to the Internet; and higher socio-economic status of the district. We propose this latent variable measurement approach as a general method for estimating the quality of Web sites for e-government research.
Introduction

As Richard Fenno demonstrates 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 requires new knowledge and new operating procedures. As a consequence, adoption of Web technologies is neither automatic nor effortless. As Dawes, Bloniarz, and Kelly (1999, p. 21) write, “Throughout our history, developments in technology have emerged much faster than the evolution of organizational forms.”

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 information about the preferences, ideals, norms, and beliefs of her constituents in order to do her job well. Similarly, citizens need information about the actions and decisions of their representative 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 very 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 representative. Bianco (1994) has shown that when citizens have better knowledge of the hard choices Congress often has to make, and the rationale legislators have for making them, many citizens may reinvest their trust in government. 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 (Chadwick, 2006; Hamlett, 2002; Shane, Muhlberger, & Cavalier, 2004). Web technologies in principle 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). Wisely used, the Internet may re-connect citizens and Congress in very meaningful ways.

Much of the scholarly research on e-government throws a cautionary light, however, on strong assertions of techno-optimism. Studies of politics and the Internet, for example, suggest the impact of the Internet has been to reinforce existing tendencies of citizens (Norris, 2002), and to create a “winner take all” system of information dissemination to citizens (Hindman, 2004). Further, e-government rarely reaches its theoretical potential, in large part because of the constraints of existing processes in government (Fountain, 2001; West, 2005). A recent study by the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF, 2003) found that over the past few years many
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