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You've Got Politics

E-mail and Political Communication in Silicon Valley

by Elsa Chen

Introduction

The use of electronic mail has grown explosively in the past decade. A recent study estimated that about 117 million American adults use e-mail and that over 30 billion e-mail messages are transmitted each day.[1] E-mail surpassed postal mail in prevalence several years ago. An estimated 4 trillion e-mail messages were transmitted in 1998, compared with about 101 billion pieces of paper mail.[2] Forty-two percent of adults check e-mail daily. The average business employee sends 20 e-mail messages and receives 30 e-mails a day.[3] Nearly every political office has a Web site and e-mail address.

During times of tight budgets for the public sector, e-mail has been recognized as a potential way for political offices to cut mail and telephone costs, increase the breadth of political communication, and reach highly specific audiences instantaneously. In addition, the postal-based anthrax attacks in 2001 and more recent incidents in early 2004 in which the toxin ricin was suspected in letters sent to the Senate and White House have demonstrated the vulnerability of the mail system, and could lead to a preference for e-mail and other means of communication, particularly during times when the mail system is disrupted.[4]

This paper explores the ways in which e-mail is currently used to promote political communication, awareness, or action between citizens and public officials. After a brief review of the use of the Internet in politics on a national scale, it presents the results of a study of e-mail use among local public officials in Santa Clara County, California. This region has a reputation for technological sophistication. Internet use in California is higher (65% of adults at the end of 2002) than in the nation as a whole (59%).[5]   One might expect the public officials serving a relatively highly Internet-literate and computer-savvy population to make frequent and effective use of e-mail technology in their communications. The survey of these public officials found that e-mail use was, in fact, a part of their regular routine, but that e-mail ranks behind other, more traditional, methods of communication in its prevalence of use and perceived importance.

An Internet Age in Politics?

At the end of the 20th century, many observers predicted that the Presidential elections of 2000 would launch an "Internet age" in politics. Indeed, many candidates in 2000 began to incorporate e-mail, along with Web sites and online advertising, into their campaigns. Steve Forbes used e-mail to forward a newspaper column that described George W. Bush as a "reformed playboy" to 42,000 people, and John McCain's campaign sent daily updates to 30,000 supporters.[6] Al Gore's campaign used an e-mail chain letter to raise tens of thousands of dollars.[7] At the local level in the Bay Area, the 1999 write-in campaign that led San Francisco City and County Supervisor Tom Ammiano to a runoff against incumbent Mayor Willie Brown owed its success in large part to e-mail "word of mouth."[8]

Just a few years later, e-mail has been used far more extensively for campaigning and fundraising by several candidates in the 2004 presidential race and other elections. Howard Dean's campaign reportedly compiled a database of over 600,000 e-mail addresses, while the George W. Bush campaign's e-mail list contains 6 million addresses.[9] Dean's early success in the 2004 Democratic primaries was widely credited to his campaign's skill at using the Internet, particularly for fundraising. After nearly depleting his $41 million war chest in the first few weeks of the primary season, Dean sent an e-mail message to 640,000 supporters who had registered on his campaign Web site, asking for contributions and setting a goal of raising $700,000 in the next twelve days. The result, according to Dean's Web site, was an intake of $475,000 in campaign contributions over the next 15 hours.[10] Just before the New Hampshire primaries, John Kerry collected over $365,000 in a single day after sending an e-mail message to donors, and the campaigns of fellow Democrats John Edwards and Wesley Clark also have used e-mail to rally supporters and encourage them to contribute.[11]

Furthermore, in addition to fundraising, e-mail has been recognized as a powerful tool for political mobilization. After serving as an initial point of contact between campaigns (such as Dean's) and supporters, it generates a "ripple effect" extending beyond those directly contacted by e-mail, which can be translated into grassroots action and attendance at campaign rallies.[12] Arnold Schwarzenegger's 2003 campaign for governor in the California recall election reportedly used e-mail to encourage supporters to post lawn signs, put bumper stickers on their cars, attend events, deliver brochures, make phone calls, and forward e-mails to their friends.[13] The liberal online organization, MoveOn.org, which originated in Silicon Valley in 1998 as a response to the Clinton impeachment proceedings, now has an e-mail subscriber list of 1.4 million addresses. The organization has used its e-mail network to raise funds for Democratic candidates, lobby Congress on several issues, fight Republican redistricting efforts in Texas, and organize opposition to the Iraq war and President Bush.[14]

These examples indicate that effective use of e-mail communication has tremendous potential as a means for candidates and political officials to reach out and motivate huge populations of citizens and even to inspire political coordination and action throughout communities. E-mail has enabled constituents, lobbying organizations, business interests, and others to send communications to public officials quickly, easily, cheaply, and in high volume. However, the ease and convenience of the medium for e-mail senders has led to some headaches for recipients. A 2001 study found that the volume of e-mail sent to members of Congress had skyrocketed from 10 million messages in 1998 to 48 million in 2000. Many Congressional offices could not process that volume in a timely or efficient manner.[15]

On the other hand, a 2002 nationwide survey of mayors and city council members found that excessive e-mail volume was much less likely to be a problem at the local level of government. The Internet and e-mail are used quite extensively at the local level to communicate with constituents, and 86% of local officials online reported that the amount of e-mail they receive is still manageable.[16] This is probably due largely to the fact that local officials serve smaller populations than federal officials and are also less likely than members of Congress or other federal officials to receive messages from individuals outside their constituencies. While e-mail is used by most local officials, the study found that these officials prefer phone calls, letters, and meetings or visits over e-mail, and e-mail also ranked behind these three more traditional methods with regard to the weight carried by each means of communication.[17] This perception may reflect a "disconnect" between e-mail senders and e-mail recipients with regard to the perceived importance of e-mailed messages; a 1999 study found that 93% of the senders of e-mail messages felt that Congressional offices should consider their e-mails as important as messages sent via more traditional means.[18]

How Wired is Santa Clara County Government?

The Survey Sample

We sent an online survey to city council members and other city-level public officials in San Jose (estimated population 900,443) and Santa Clara (estimated population 101,867), as well as county-level elected officials for Santa Clara County and the state legislators representing the Santa Clara area. The survey consisted of 25 multiple-choice questions, and was designed to take less than 30 minutes to complete. All of the offices were contacted initially with an e-mail message that included a clickable link to the on-line survey. Follow-up telephone calls were made to non-responders. Thirty-five of the 60 offices (58%) contacted completed the online survey. In comparison to the 25% response rate for a

similar national survey conducted recently for the Pew Internet and American Life project, this response rate was relatively high. The higher response rate may be due in part to this project's affiliation with a university in the area served by the surveyed officials, many of whom were either alumni or had employed students or graduates of Santa Clara University. This suggests that while e-mail sent to public offices from unfamiliar citizens may be ignored, e-mail from acquaintances or friends receives more favorable attention.

While the response rate was actually quite high, there were some difficulties in securing responses. Some staff members claimed that their city governments had a policy against responding to surveys (although in each case, other officials from the same city did respond). When asked by telephone who would be the best person in the office to answer questions about their e-mail usage, several were either unable or unwilling to provide an appropriate contact person.

Fortunately, the offices that did respond provided interesting data. Nearly all of the offices have "official" business e-mail accounts. A "central" e-mail address for the office (in addition to the personal accounts for individual employees) exists for 77% of the offices. Nearly all (94.3%) respondents said that their offices had a Web site that allows the public to write to the office directly using Web forms or an e-mail link. When asked who checks the office's e-mail address, only 8.6% of the respondents stated that it was the public official himself or herself.

E-mail importance and use

The survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of various methods of communication to their office, on a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 10 (absolutely essential). E-mail was given the highest rating of "10" by 62.9% of respondents, in comparison to telephone (74.3%) and to in-person meetings (68.8%). The methods that were least often rated "absolutely essential" were postal mail (48.6%) and fax (31.4%). Telephone communication had the highest average rating for importance (9.40), followed by meetings (9.14), e-mail (9.06), mail (8.57), and fax (7.40). The ranking of importance was the same for the large offices (over 50 employees) and small ones (10 or fewer employees), though the smallest offices (5 or fewer employees) ranked in-person meetings slightly higher than e-mail (8.90 vs. 8.70).

When asked how frequently their offices initiate business communications with various methods, respondents reported that e-mail and telephone contacts were made with the highest frequency. E-mail contact was initiated more than 50 times a day by 25.7% of the offices, and 10 to 50 times a day by 48.6% of the offices. Phone contact was initiated more than 50 times a day by 34.3% of the offices, and 10 to 50 times a day by 37.1% of the offices. Postal and in-person meetings were initiated less frequently. Fax was the least important method of communication. When asked to whom their employees send e-mail, the most frequently selected response was "co-workers and employees," chosen by 97.1% (all but one) of the respondents. "Other public offices, candidates, or officials" receive e-mail from 91.4% of the respondents, and 85.7% of the offices send e-mail to constituents. E-mail is most commonly used for distribution of information (97.1%), arrangement of appointments (97.1%), and constituent casework (82.9%), and much less frequently used for lobbying (17.1%) and other purposes, including fundraising, responding to "blanket e-mails or letters," and forwarding messages.

Awareness of the public's distaste for e-mail spam has probably influenced many offices' decisions about using e-mail to communicate with many people at once. "Broadcast" e-mail messages with multiple recipients are reportedly sent by only 68.6% of offices. Most (85.7%) of the responding offices keep e-mail databases, but the sources for the contact information in these databases vary. Individual requests to be included on an e-mail list ("opt-ins") were reported as the source by 31% of the offices, while 20% of offices cull addresses from received messages, and 17% have databases that try to include all constituents or clients. Although "purchased lists" was an option for this question, none of the offices selected this answer, perhaps reflecting a healthy fear of being perceived as a "spammer."

E-mail types and responses

As expected, most offices in the study receive far more communication than they initiate, and more e-mail messages are received than any other type of messages. When asked what types of e-mail messages their offices receive, respondents were most likely to select "messages from other public offices and officials" (94.3%), "informational messages, such as news and listserv postings" (91.4%), and constituent or client requests for casework (91.4%). These categories were closely followed by requests, petitions, or other letters from individuals who are not constituents (82.9%) and letters from professional lobbyists or interest groups (77.1%). About half of the offices report that they receive job applications by e-mail. Surprisingly, only 40% of the respondents

report that they receive junk mail.

Only a few of the offices (25.7%) surveyed report that they respond to all of the e-mail that they receive "from constituents, clients, or other members of the public." A larger proportion of offices (28.6%) report that none of their e-mail, regardless of how "legitimate," gets a response. The rest report that they reply to some e-mail. Contrary to expectations, the proportion of e-mail that received a response was not significantly correlated with the amount of e-mail received by the office.

The offices were asked "how [they] usually respond when a letter from a constituent, client, or other member of the public is received via e-mail." Not surprisingly, replies to e-mail are most commonly given by e-mail (71.4%). Some offices reported using a combination of methods (postal, telephone, e-mail) to reply, or that the method they choose depends on who the sender is. Because e-mail senders often do not include their postal addresses, phone numbers, or sometimes even their full names in their electronic messages, offices whose primary method of response is mail or telephone may have difficulty replying to e-mail.

E-mail problems and issues

The survey of public officials also gave respondents an opportunity to answer the open-ended question, "What are the mail problems/issues, if any, that your office has encountered with e-mail use?" The responses to this question shed light on the reasons that e-mail use is not more prevalent and that e-mail communication is not taken more seriously than it is.

Incorrect, nonexistent, or out-of-date e-mail addresses are a major problem with e-mail communication. In offices where the standard protocol is to respond to e-mail with postal mail or some other method, messages that do not contain the sender's complete postal address or other contact information impede response. Misdirected incoming mail is also a problem. The volume of e-mail, coupled with the senders' expectations for a quick response, result in time pressure for offices whose staff are expected to send replies.

A county information systems administrator, to whom the survey had been forwarded by a public official's office, enumerated several legal and technical concerns, including legal liability related to the "ease and informality" of e-mail use, employees' "non-business use" of e-mail, "cost of maintenance, back-ups, and restores," "retention of e-mail, disk space and legal liability," and problems with "document management."

In addition, the ease of sending e-mail may lead people to send messages about relatively unimportant matters, thereby undermining the credibility of this method of communication on the whole. One respondent complained of "people emailing with simple questions they should have figured out by reading the Web site," while another found that "vague questions" were hard to answer. A city councilmember's staffer stated: "E-mail does not convey indicators like tone of voice, emotion, etc. Sometimes this is a good thing, but sometimes the message may not get across in the intended fashion."

When asked what improvements they would like to see to their e-mail communication, the responses were consistent with the perceived concerns and issues discussed above. Many respondents were frustrated by the content of the e-mail messages their offices received. The most desired improvement by respondents was a reduction in the amount of junk mail or spam (54.3%), followed by a reduction in the amount of unimportant or misdirected mail (37.1%). Increased network security, including virus protection and firewall security, and standardization of office procedures for handling e-mail communication were each selected by 34.3% of respondents. Equipment-related needs, such as hardware (17.1%), Internet speed or capacity (17.1%), or more user-friendly software (14.1%) were cited relatively less frequently.

Conclusions and Proposals

E-mail is widely used, but it is not a substitute for other types of communication. In particular, e-mail may have limited use as an initial point of contact between political officials and citizens due to several factors, including the fear of spam, and mistrust or discounting of messages from unknown senders. In addition, the tendency of e-mail messages to be more informal, brief, or seemingly impersonal than other forms of communication generates the potential for misinterpretation by e-mail recipients. This can work to the disadvantage of both public officials and citizens who try to initiate political communication by e-mail. On the other hand, e-mail may serve as a highly convenient, efficient, and inexpensive way to communicate once a relationship has already been established. For example, once channels of communication have been opened by in-person meetings or telephone conversations, e-mail may be a good way to

maintain contact.

One of the reasons for the relative lack of respect accorded to e-mail is the high volume of vague, frivolous, and junk messages that are transmitted via e-mail. No one appreciates spam, and both political officials and citizens need to be cautious in order to avoid being perceived as "spammers." Public officials must limit broadcast messages to recipients who have clearly opted to receive messages, for example by signing up on the official's Web page to receive news and announcements. Citizens should be aware that e-mail form-letters or petitions usually do not receive much attention or carry much influence.

Even the most carefully composed, original e-mail message may not get a serious reading, much less a reply. Letters are preferred for their formality and perceived seriousness; phone calls and visits have the benefit of a personal touch. The only method of political communication that is consistently less effective than e-mail is fax. Issue advocates or constituents with concerns or requests are more likely to get responses if they write letters, make phone calls, or pay visits to their local official's office than if they send e-mail messages.

E-mail usage is associated, legitimately, with several problems and risks, such as computer viruses, sabotage, tampering, lies, and liability concerns. Technical limitations, legal liability issues, and costs may also limit e-mail use. However, the survey found that these concerns were not among the most prevalent reasons that e-mail is not used more often. More important are negative perceptions regarding the content and importance of e-mail messages and the lack of systematic procedures and staffing within offices to filter, read, forward, and respond to e-mail messages.

It is important to consider the less obvious risks and costs that may be incurred, on a broader societal scale, if e-mail messages continue to be considered relatively unimportant or unworthy of serious responses by a significant proportion of public officeholders. For many Americans, e-mail has become an important method of communication. Given a choice between phone, postal mail, and e-mail, many young people reach for the keyboard (or even the cell-phone keypad for instant messaging) first, and often exclusively. Thus, by de-prioritizing e-mail in comparison to more traditional media, political officials run the risk of ignoring or alienating a segment of the public that is already increasingly disconnected with politics. Furthermore, many politically-interested computer users have been turning to online advocacy and protest organizations, such as MoveOn.org, which are receptive to e-mail and effective at mobilizing their supporters with it. In order to engage the citizenry more fully and effectively and to promote democracy and active political discourse, public officeholders should make serious efforts to figure out how to make electronic communication an integral part of their political lives.

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