

Is The Truth in the Mail?

The Relationship Between Public Opinion and Constituent Mail to the Senate

Do senators really read their mail? Should they? In this paper I examine how mail is received, logged, and regarded in the senate. I also examine the relationship between constituent mail and public opinion as measured by opinion polls. Although data is almost nonexistent, I attempt to compare the preferences expressed in constituent mail on two nationally debated issues to those measured by polling agencies in an effort to determine whether constituent mail to the senate should be regarded as an effective measure of public opinion. I then consider why data on this question was so difficult to obtain and what effect the recent anthrax attacks on the senate have had upon senate mail procedures. I conclude by examining in depth future areas of research.

Introduction

“Write your senator” is an oft-quoted and generally accepted dictum. Many Americans attempt to connect with their representatives in Congress by sitting down to write letters. While their letters vary enormously in both length and style, from the short and pithy to the long and rambling, from the humorous to the unbalanced and insane, at some level these authors share the common belief that their letters will affect outcomes in Washington – for why else would they take the time to write? While many correspondents acknowledge that they do not believe that their individual letters will substantially affect the vote of any particular senator, they nonetheless tend to believe that senators will use constituent mail to gauge public opinion, and may make decisions on positions accordingly. “No observer truly believes that issue mail controls legislative output,” writes political scientist Stephen Frantzich, “nor does anyone believe that congressional decision making goes on isolated from the input of constituent letters.” (Frantzich, 1986, p. 77) Still, despite the fact that millions of Americans write their representatives each year, the connection between constituent mail and legislative action remains unclear.

Whether letter-writing constituents believe that their representatives are “listening” or not, however, they rarely ask whether they *should* be listening. As many authors have observed

and demonstrated, a minority of Americans write to their representatives in Congress, or perhaps even know who those representatives *are*. (Putnam, 2000; Frantzich, 1996; Dexter, 1956) At the same time, however, it is generally accepted that senators or their staffs scrutinize the mail carefully and weigh what their constituents are trying to say. Given that the Americans who choose to write letters are by definition unusual on the political scene, is there any reason to assume that their views are representative of the American public? Might it not be the case that by reading and tallying these letters, senators and senate staffers are simply exposing themselves to the views of extremists and issue activists, and are thus trying to decide between extremes rather than trying to accede to the wishes of a silent majority? “It is true that many Congressmen and Senators run counter to the mail in obedience to the dictates of conscience, party, or committee,” Lewis Anthony Dexter observed in 1956. “But they frequently appear to think they are controverting something very significant.” (Dexter, 1956, p. 17) Is the mail significant? If so, should it be? Does it make sense for senators to spend their valuable resources on sorting, reading, tallying, and responding to mail? What information does constituent mail give to a senator that he or she otherwise would not have received?

Intentions and Methodology

In setting out on this project, I intended to examine how senators view and utilize constituent mail and, regardless, whether that mail is truly representative of public opinion. In order to make this determination, I attempted to examine and compare the constituent mail response to the confirmation hearings for Senator John Ashcroft as Attorney General and the debate over the Republican tax cut with national opinion polling data on the same two issues. By contrasting the debate over the confirmation hearings, which were over fairly quickly, with the debate over the tax cut, which raged (and continues to rage) relatively unchecked for months, I

had hoped to be able to determine whether constituent mail is more or less reflective of public opinion over longer periods of time. I also hoped to be able to address the question of whether constituent mail might be reflective of the national *mood* (Stimson, 1991), regardless of whether it actually represents public opinion on particular issues.

In researching this paper I contacted the offices of twenty senators (thirteen Democrats and seven Republicans). In an attempt to compare the procedures of more experienced senators with those of newly-elected senators, I selected for my sample pool the leadership of both parties, the most senior member from each party, and all eleven senators of the freshman class.¹ Unfortunately, data on constituent mail proved enormously difficult to obtain.² From this sample pool I was able to hold substantive conversations with staff members for ten senators; of all the staffers I spoke to, only one (a member of Senator Stabenow's (D-MI) staff) was both willing and able to provide specific statistical data on mail tallies.³

As a result of this lack of specific data, it has proven impossible to reach any definite and specific conclusions on the questions of whether constituent mail represents public opinion or public mood. The available data, however, apocryphal as it is, has made it possible to begin to describe how current senators handle and utilize the mail, and to speculate on whether differences exist between freshmen senators and the more senior members of the senate leadership. It has also been possible to lay out the theoretical groundwork for future

¹ See Appendix 1 for a list of contacted senators.

² See the conclusions for speculation on why this data proved so difficult to obtain.

³ The woman who answered the phone in Minority Leader Lott's office insisted that the mail was not tallied, that no one knew how the mail in the office was processed, that she could not give her name, and that she could not transfer the call to someone else who might be able to answer some questions about the senator's mail. Administrative Assistant Rebecca Clemens in Senator Thurmond's office was more forthcoming, but is one of several staff members who have been on the job for under a month, as much of Senator Thurmond's staff reportedly moved on to other positions. All other contacted staff members were able to provide relatively detailed answers to the survey questions (see Appendix 2).

examinations of the relationship between congressional mail and national mood. Further studies should prove relatively simple provided that more data becomes available.

Constituent Mail: Existent Literature

Relatively little has been written on constituent mail (with the exception of survey-response mail) to the Congress as a whole, and even less has been written about the mail specifically addressed to the Senate. Much of what has been written dates back many years (Dexter, 1956; Lowell, 1960; Sussmann, 1956), and has lost much of its relevance in the modern technological age. Several other authors have sought to analyze constituent mail in order to discern correspondent opinion on particular issues. Brown University Professor Darrell M. West, for instance, gathered data on letters sent to congressmen in the early 1980s regarding President Reagan's economic plan for an article on "Activists and Economic Policymaking in Congress." (West, *American Journal of Political Science*, 1998) Such authors tend to be concerned with trying to establish a causal link between expressed constituent opinion and legislative action. With rare exceptions (Verba and Brady, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1970), authors have ignored the question of whether constituent mail is representative of wider public opinion.

The most comprehensive treatment of the role of constituent mail in Congress is United States Naval Academy Professor Stephen Frantzich's *Write Your Congressman: Constituent Communications and Representation*. (Frantzich, 1986) In this work Frantzich describes in detail the volume and types of mail that congressional representatives receive, explains how the mail is sorted, and ultimately focuses on how responses are crafted and sent. While Frantzich devotes most of his book to mail in the House of Representatives, he does try to describe how mail is handled in the Senate as well. Frantzich is most concerned with how senators and

representatives *reply* to constituent mail; he is far less concerned with how they analyze and interpret the mail that they receive. For Frantzich, the most important information flows from the representative to the constituent through the mailroom. The mail that constituents themselves send can almost be likened to sonar – each letter is a random pulse designed more to elicit a response than to carry information itself. In light of the time and resources that senators and senate staffers devote to simply reading the mail, this approach obscures a vital element of a larger model.

Constituent Mail to the Senate

Is Anyone Listening?

“It seems reasonable,” wrote political scientist Darrell West in 1988, “to study letter writers as a linkage mechanism between districts and representatives.” (West, 1988, p. 665 ft. 3) Although West was describing the situation in the House of Representatives, his comments apply to the situation in the Senate as well. Senators receive an enormous amount of mail, and devote a great deal of their time and resources toward sorting, reading, and answering it. Many senators clearly believe that this mail ties them closely to their constituencies. “The mood of West Virginians has a lot to do with his insight into things,” says Press Secretary Tom Gavin of Senator Byrd (D-WV). “He’ll listen to what his people want to say.” (Byrd Press Secretary Tom Gavin, 12/10/2001) There is thus apocryphal evidence that some senators, at least, care about what their constituents write. At the same time, however, some of the same staffers whose job it is to read and respond to constituent mail see letter-writing as a pointless activity. “I work for a United States senator,” declared one staffer. “I would never write a letter to express my opinion.” (Bill Sweeny, Director of Information for Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), 12/10/2001)

Which is the more accurate picture? That of the senator carefully reading every letter before settling upon a course of action, or that of the senate staff tearing through the correspondence at such high speed that it matters not at all whether the message was penned in the first place? The truth appears to lie somewhere in the middle: some senators, such as Senator Stabenow and Senator Byrd, along with their senate staffs carefully read constituent mail in order to understand how their constituents are thinking. These senators attempt to personally read and sign as much of the mail as possible in order to try to carry on a true dialogue between the voters and their representative. Although they do not necessarily decide on policy positions based on the mail alone, these senators and their staffs are more voluble about expressing an interest in establishing and maintaining a two-way flow of information. Other senators hold responding to constituent mail in slightly lower regard, as simply another responsibility or as an opportunity to foster good will in their home communities. In these offices, senate staffers read the mail for the sake of the constituents, rather than for the sake of the senator. Addressing letters to these senators seems something of a waste of time for constituents wishing to affect policy decisions and to frame issues in Washington.

Ultimately, however, constituent mail must be measured against other forms of constituent communication. It is easier to send an email or lift up a phone than it is to write and mail a personal letter. Without exception senate staffers noted that they pay more attention to personal letters than they do to emails. Access to the United States postal service, moreover, is universal, while not every citizen has equal access to computers. Those senators who focus on constituent opinion as a necessary source of information thus tend to regard the mail as being somehow more democratic and representative. (In general, the more difficult a method of communication, the more attention it draws in Congress.) Those senators who regard constituent

communication primarily as an indication of the existence of an aware voter hold email and phone communications in the same regard as letter communication. Ultimately, then, as Lewis Anthony Dexter wrote in 1956, “In the importance attached to it both by Congressman [*sic*] and by business constituents, mail outweighs every other form of communication.” (Dexter, 1956, p. 16)

The Nature and Volume of Senate Mail

The amount and type of mail a senator receives varies enormously, and depends upon what state that senator is from and what issues are of immediate concern in the news. All senators nonetheless receive a tremendous quantity of mail. “The volume of mail,” remembered Senator Joseph Clark (D-PA), “as well as the importance attached to it both by members of Congress and constituents, is what strikes the new legislator first, last and always.” (Clark, 1964, p. 58) Even Senator Clark’s own recollections are hopelessly outdated, as the amount of mail addressed to the senate has steadily increased since the end of the Second World War. By now, the volume of mail received in the Senate has achieved mammoth proportions. (In 1988 the Senate as a whole logged 50 million pieces of incoming mail – a massive increase from twenty years before. (Davidson, 1990, p. 35))

In pursuing this study, I found that senate staffers were quite reluctant – either unwilling or unable – to say how much mail their principals receive in a given period. Those who were willing to either reveal or estimate the volume of mail that comes into their offices on a regular basis often gave wildly varying numbers (see Table 1). Senator Bill Nelson’s (D-FL) staff, for

instance, logs between 200 and 1500 letters a day, while fellow Democrat and freshman Senator Mark Dayton (D-MN) receives only 50 issue letters per day.⁴

<i>Senator</i>	<i>Party-State</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Mail (Per Day)</i>	<i>Email (Per Day)</i>
Byrd, Robert	D-WV	President Pro Tempore	“Varies”	
Corzine, Jon	D-NJ	Freshman	500	
Craig, Larry	R-ID	Chairman, Republican Policy Committee		
Dayton, Mark	D-MN	Freshman	50	
Ensign, John	R-NV	Freshman	“Not much”	
Lott, Trent	R-MS	Minority Leader	“A real lot”	
Nelson, Bill	D-FL	Freshman	200 – 1500	20,000
Reid, Harry	D-NV	Majority Whip	50 – 2000	“Thousands”
Santorum, Rick	R-PA	Chairman, Republican Conference	“Hundreds”	100
Stabenow, Debbie	D-MI	Freshman	1000	
Thurmond, Strom	R-SC	Senior Republican	2000	

Table 1: Volume of Mail Received By Individual Senators

The composition and nature of incoming constituent mail similarly varies wildly from senate office to senate office. One of the most significant distinctions staffers make in sorting the mail is whether or not letters originate from inside the states represented by their principals. Members of the senate leadership, including Senators Reid (D-NV), Santorum (R-PA), and Byrd (D-WV), receive a large number of letters from individuals who do not live in their states. Senator Byrd’s staff estimates that fully one-third of all issue letters addressed to his office are from constituents of other senators. Typically, these senators’ staffs pass the letters on to the appropriate senator, or simply discard and discount them. Freshman senators, such as Senator Stabenow (D-MI), don’t even bother having out-of-state letters delivered from the senate mailroom.

Another crucial distinction that senate staffers make in sorting the mail is between mail from individuals and mail (or email and faxes) from pressure groups. Interest groups often work to try to convince their members to contact senators and congressmen in an attempt to impress

⁴ Figures for volume of mail received represent constituent issue mail only. Casework correspondence was not

legislators with a show of potential electoral force. Encouraging members to write politicians is an enormously popular tactic. According to a 1986 study by Kay Lehman Schlozman and John T. Tierney, 84% of interest groups said that they have tried to inspire letter-writing campaigns. (Davidson, 1990, p. 284) Again, how much mail senators receive from interest groups depends upon their position within the senate and their home state. Senator Stabenow (D-MI) receives a great deal of mass mail from unions, while Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) receives much of his mass mail from the AARP. Senator Ensign (R-NV), a freshman, small-state senator in the minority party, receives very little interest group mail at all.

It is unclear how seriously senators and senate staffers take mass mailings. They are often very easy to identify – occasionally individuals will even include the original sheets urging them to write in the envelope – and are so largely discounted. At the same time, however, these mass mailings do indicate some level of support within the senator’s constituency. “Legislators understand that lobby groups orchestrate this ‘spontaneous’ outpouring of mail,” explain Tierney and Schlozman, “but don’t wholly disregard it.” (Tierney and Schlozman, 1989 p. 212)

“Members have to care about this [mass] mail,” Davidson agrees.

The congressman has to care that *somebody* out there in his district has enough power to get hundreds of people to sit down and write a postcard or a letter – because if the guy can get them to go do *that*, he might be able to influence them in other ways. So, a member has no choice but to pay attention. It’s suicide if he doesn’t. (Davidson, 1990, p. 288)

This opinion, that mass mailings matter, is not universally accepted. According to one senate staffer interviewed in 1956, “If you put faith in that sort of thing (stimulated mail) you’re lost. We can tell the day and hour when somebody or other starts those calls or doorbells ringing [to get people to write]; so what?” (Dexter, 1956, p. 17) Indeed, of the senators contacted for this survey, only one (Stabenow) even bothers to have her staff read and respond to all of the

considered as part of this study.

mass mail. Even though 67% of her mail comes from interest groups, Senator Stabenow places as many resources behind cataloguing that mail as she does for any other sort. “Regardless of how they contact us,” her director of information explains, “they are really trying to let us know how they are feeling and thinking.” Senator Stabenow’s staff is well aware that they are in a distinct minority in regarding interest group mail as the equal of more personal and individual letters – but as they explain, “She feels that listening to her constituents is her primary responsibility as a senator.” (Stabenow Director of Information Bill Sweeny, 12/10/2001)

Once the out-of-state mail and the interest group mail is separated out, relatively little remains. By putting aside the mass mailings and the letters from non-constituents, senate staffers are able to reduce the task of reading the mail to a manageable level. As Senator Clark remembers, though, ““That remaining 10 or 20 percent of the mail . . . takes as much or more time than all the rest put together.” (Clark, 1964, p. 59) The letters that remain are often important, whether because of what they say or who they are from, and often each one requires time and attention before a response can be sent. Some of the letters might even be brought to the senators themselves for personal attention, and others will certainly be handed over to the legislative assistants for consideration.

Processing and Handling Constituent Mail

Once the mail has been delivered to senate offices, senate staffers face the mammoth task of sorting and responding to the correspondence. The senators themselves are clearly unable to handle this workload, or even to take the time to manage other staff members responding to the mail, and so often put the responsibility for working with the mail entirely in the hands of a senior staffer. In Senator Stabenow’s office, the responsibility for the mail falls to the director of information, while Senators Byrd and Reid both employ directors of correspondence. In Senator

Ensign's office, however, the task of handling the mail falls to the senator's office manger. "We all deal with the mail," his office manager explains. "We're pretty unusual in that we don't have enough mail to justify a full-time employee." (Ensign Office Manger Kathy Marder, December 10, 2001)

Senate staffers were (understandably, in the light of the anthrax-laced letters sent to some of their offices) deeply concerned about answering questions regarding how mail is sorted, opened, and cataloged. It is nonetheless possible to determine from their responses the rough outline of how various senatorial staffs handle correspondence. The senate receives mail from the United States postal service, and then sorts mail out to mailrooms that are committed to handling the correspondence of individual senators. Once the employees in those mailrooms have removed excess and unwanted correspondence (Senator Stabenow's mail staff, for instance, removes all out-of-state letters), the mail is sent to the offices of individual senators. The mail is delivered to senate offices twice a day, and immediately all members of the staff pitch in to open and respond to the numerous communications.

Senators could not begin to handle this excessive volume of mail without significant staff assistance. As the number of letters delivered to the senate has increased, the size of senate staffs has increased. While there are many reasons for this staff increase, it is in large part due to the fact that senators need support in opening and replying to letters. The increase in staff size is startling: while in 1947 there were 590 personal employees in the Senate, by 1981 there were almost 4,000. This number has remained roughly constant for almost twenty years, with a small spike in 1997 and a serious dip in 1989. In 1999 there were 4,272 personal employees in the Senate. (Ornstein, et al, 2000, Table 5-1) The majority of these staffers are immediately put to work opening, reading, and answering mail. Even those hired for some special expertise were

not and often are not exempted from mail-reading duty. “Of the twenty-five or so people on my staff,” remembers Senator Clark (D-PA), “each and every one of them is concerned with the mail in one phase or another . . .” (Clark, 1964, p. 58) Only rarely do senators keep a close eye on the mail as it moves in and out of their offices; it is simply too voluminous for them to keep track of it. Senator Byrd is one exception to this rule, probably in part due to his long tenure in the senate. “Senator Byrd sees every piece of mail before its gets sent out,” explains the senator’s Press Secretary. “He’s been doing this for over fifty years . . .” (Byrd Press Secretary Tom Gavin, December 10, 2001)

What happens to the mail after it has been sorted and responded to depends once again on what state the senator is from and what issues are of immediate importance. In some cases, senators have already designated institutions to receive their papers (as Senator Mack (D-FL) had designated the University of Florida), and senate staffers send the mail to those institutions to be disposed of or archived. In other cases, senators send all of their mail to Federal archives in Maryland, or else (in the case of small-state senators), keep all of the mail on file in their offices or in electronic form. Some senator staffs, however, judging that attempting to archive the huge volume of mail they receive would be absurd, simply discard all of their letters as soon as they respond to them.

Tallying Constituent Mail

For the purposes of this study, I was most interested in determining whether senate staffs kept a running tally of policy preferences as expressed through the mail and, if so, how they went about keeping those tallies. Of the eleven senators from whom I received some sort of reply, I found that over 70% attempt to keep tallies of the mail (see Table 2). Of those senators who do keep tallies, almost all use a software program called “Internet Quorum” that allows them to

tally, sort, and analyze data by issue codes. Some senate offices do use a program called “Capital Correspondence” as well, which seems equally flexible. As might be expected, though there appears to be little difference between the two programs, I found vociferous advocates for each among my sample.

<i>Senator</i>	<i>Party-State</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Tally</i>
Byrd, Robert	D-WV	President Pro Tempore	Yes
Corzine, Jon	D-NJ	Freshman	Yes
Craig, Larry	R-ID	Chairman, Republican Policy Committee	Yes
Dayton, Mark	D-MN	Freshman	Yes
Ensign, John	R-NV	Freshman	Yes
Lott, Trent	R-MS	Minority Leader	No(?)
Nelson, Bill	D-FL	Freshman	Yes
Reid, Harry	D-NV	Majority Whip	No
Santorum, Rick	R-PA	Chairman, Republican Conference	No
Stabenow, Debbie	D-MI	Freshman	Yes
Thurmond, Strom	R-SC	Senior Republican	No

Table 2: Senators Who Keep Tallies of Constituent Mail

The results of this survey were interesting. All of the freshman senators who responded keep tallies; all of those who do not keep tallies are members of the senate leadership (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). While the numbers within the sample are too low to make a definitive statement about how freshman senators view the mail and the importance of keeping accurate records of constituent interest as compared to how senior senators view the importance of tracking the same data, it seems clear that more senior senators have a more relaxed attitude towards the mail that they receive. While this might be a response to the fact that the senate leadership receives an enormous volume of mail, or a response to a feeling on the part of these senators that their seats are safe, this observation fits nicely with those made by others in the past. “[Perhaps] because they have seen the same sort of thing before and know it doesn’t mean much politically,” observed Lewis Anthony Dexter, “many older Congressmen, it seems to me, manifested a fundamental easy-goingness and willingness to disregard the mail which was less common among younger men.” (Dexter, 1956, 17-18)

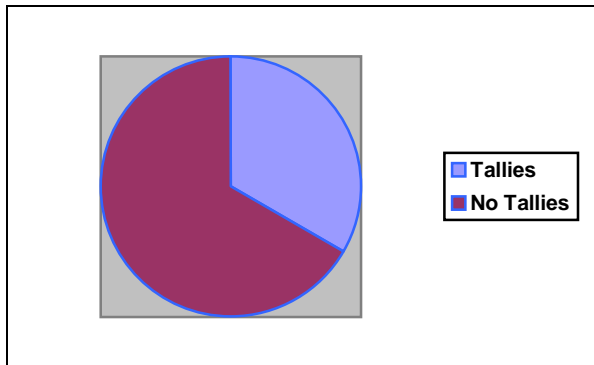


Figure 3: Percentage of Senior Senators Who Keep Tallies of Constituent Mail

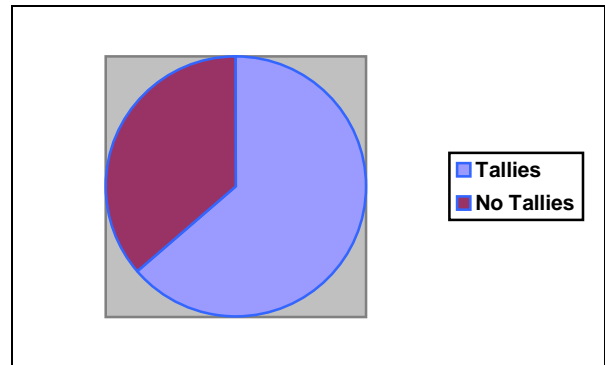


Figure 4: Percentage of All Senators Who Keep Tallies of Constituent Mail

Congressional Mail After September 11th

Although I started this project after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers in New York on September 11, 2001, the senate had not yet begun to receive letters containing anthrax when I began asking senate staffers for information about constituent mail. In the seven weeks since the anthrax exposure became public the Senate has not received any of the mail that continues to be written and sent by anxious constituents. Although senate aides have now been trained on how to safely open letters (*Congressional Quarterly Weekly*, November 17, 2001, p. 2725), senate staffers are still not sure how they will handle the backlog of mail that has built up in the decontamination facilities. “We’re going to go through everything,” explains Senator Rick Santorum’s (R-PA) Director of Correspondence. “We just won’t have as much of a holiday.” (Santorum Director of Correspondence Liz Stephens, December 10, 2001) Senator Reid’s (D-NV) staff is less certain of how they will respond, but are considering simply sending a newsletter to every individual who wrote without regard for the contents of any particular letter.

More importantly, while the long-term effects of the attack on the Senate are not yet apparent, it is clear that the handling of congressional mail will change forever. House

Administration Committee Chairman Bob Ney (R-OH) is reportedly considering hiring a private company to open all of the House's mail, scan all letters onto computers, and then send the correspondence to members' offices directly. (*Congressional Quarterly Weekly*, November 17, 2001, p. 2725) The Senate is still unsure how it will handle the situation. Perhaps more importantly, senate staff members are uncertain what effect being cut off from mail for two months will have. "The public will understand," explains Senator Stabenow's director of information.

Mail As A Measure of Public Opinion

Many politicians accept the fact that issue mail is not directly representative of public opinion. "In our experience," explains Senator Stabenow's (D-MI) director of information, "mail is not an indicator of public opinion . . . The mail seems to be written by people on the extremes." (Bill Sweeny, Director of Information for Senator Stabenow (D-MI), 12/10/2001)

Former Pennsylvania Senator Joseph Clark was similarly open in 1964. "How much attention do I pay to my legislative mail? Some, but not much," he explained.

It is useful as an indication of how certain groups of constituents feels, but to rely on it is an accurate guide to opinion would be folly. On the whole, mail is more trouble than it is worth as a reflection of public opinion. Public sentiment can be more accurately checked by reading the newspapers, talking or corresponding with political and leadership groups and conducting or following public opinion polls. (Clark, 1964, p. 60-61)

Frantzich too agrees: "It is a well known fact that constituents who communicate with Congressional offices are far from a random sample of the population." (Frantzich, 1986, p. 81) The question is thus raised: should constituent mail to the senate be read in any way to determine policy preference?

Ashcroft Confirmation Hearings

Available data on the Ashcroft confirmation hearings is very slim. One Gallup Poll from January 16, 2001 found that the majority of those who had an opinion on Ashcroft felt that he should be confirmed (see Figure 5). Unfortunately, absolutely no data was available from any of the senators I contacted regarding policy preferences in the constituent mail, and so any sort of comparison is impossible.⁵

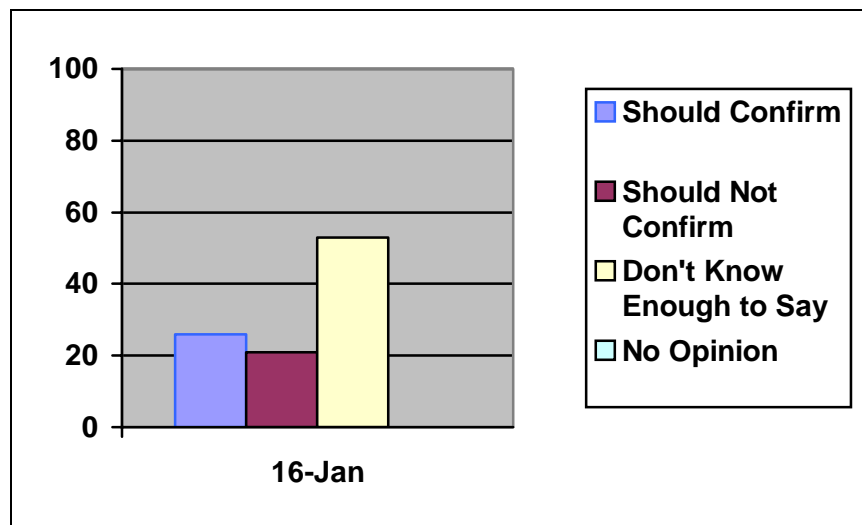


Figure 5: Public Opinion on Ashcroft Nomination from Polling Data

The Republican Tax Cut

Available data on the Republican tax cut was similarly slim, though there was substantially more available than on the Ashcroft nomination. As the debate over the tax cut lasted for many months, polling data from was available regarding public opinion through many stages of the process (Figure 6). Once again, however, it was almost impossible to generate data regarding the preferences expressed in constituent mail, as only one senator's staff proved

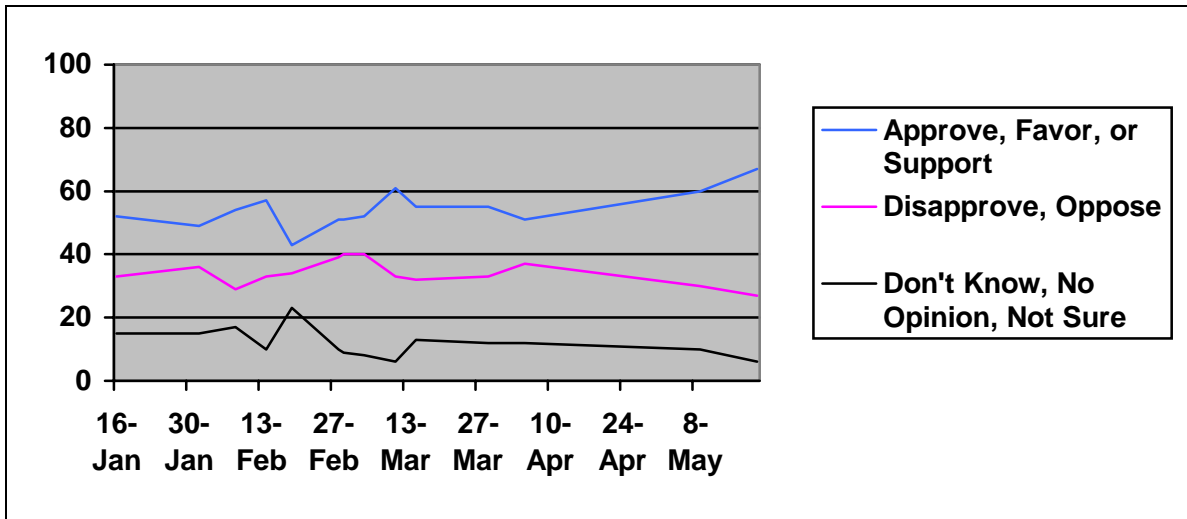


Figure 6: Public Opinion on Tax Cut from Polling Data

willing to respond to a request for more information. As that data demonstrates, however, (Figures 7 and 8), there is very little correlation between the opinions expressed by Senator Stabenow’s constituency and by the preferences expressed to polling agencies. More detailed analyses were again impossible given the lack of data.

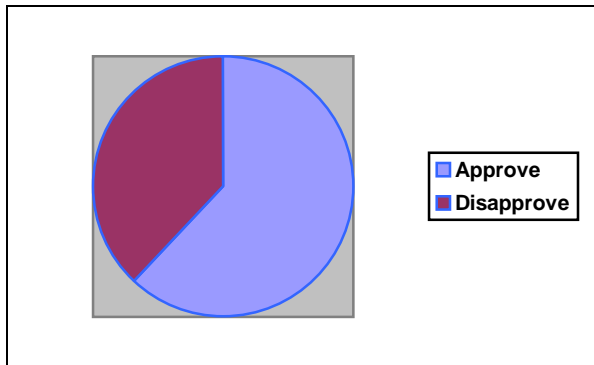


Figure: Cumulative Tally on Tax Cut from Stabenow (D-MI) Constituent Mail (December, 2001)

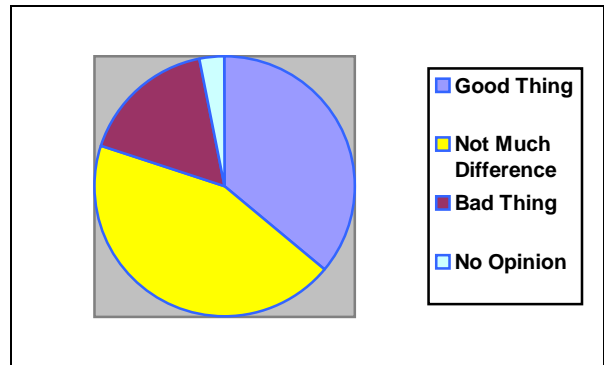


Figure: Opinion on Tax Cut Gallup Poll, August 16-19, 2001

⁵ See Appendix 3 for a list of senators and their votes.

Final Thoughts

Why Was Data Difficult to Obtain?

While it is not clear why data on constituent mail to the senate was so difficult to obtain, there is apocryphal data to suggest that several factors are involved. In part, of course, such data was difficult to come by because some senators have made the conscious decision not to keep accurate tallies of the mail they receive. This failure on the part of some senate staffs to tally their mail may be partially ascribed to the simple volume of mail received in certain offices. One very flustered staff member in Senator Lott's (R-MS) office explained that she didn't think anyone could keep track of all the letters they receive. "We get," she added before hanging up the phone, "a real lot of mail." (Anonymous staff member in Senator Lott's (R-MS) office, December 7, 2001)

A more interesting reason for why the staffs of freshman senators have been hesitant to release data on mail tallies from early in the current senate term is related to problems they encountered in obtaining software systems to catalogue and archive their correspondence. All freshmen senators use either the "Capital Correspondence" or "Internet Quorum" software programs to sort and tally incoming mail. Both programs are approved for use by the senate, but because of delays over contract negotiations with the software providers, these programs were not available for use by the freshmen senators until March. Serving senators were unaffected, as they continued to use the systems that they already had in place, but the offices of the freshmen senators remained disorganized for several months. "We were trying to tally everything by hand," recalls one of Senator Stabenow's (D-MI) staff members. "We didn't really keep accurate count of the mail, and things got a little confused." (Stabenow Director of Information Bill Sweeny, December 10, 2001)

While this delay in making software available accounts for why some senate staff members might be hesitant to release mail tallies through March 2001, it does not explain why those same staff members refuse to release tallies from later in the year (such as those regarding the debate over the May tax cut vote). When these data were requested, senate staff members almost invariably became suspicious and defensive. “The senator is very old school,” explained Senator Byrd’s (D-WV) press secretary. “It’s not our policy [to give specific information on tallies].” (Byrd Press Secretary Tom Gavin, December 10, 2001) “I don’t think I’d feel comfortable giving you that information,” echoed an assistant to freshman Senator Mark Dayton (D-MN). (Dayton Assistant Katie Pass, December 10, 2001) Senator Jon Corzine’s (D-NJ) press secretary similarly refused to release the data – though he did explain that the tallies were inaccessible, as the senator’s staff lacked access to the Hart Senate Building, which is still closed for decontamination – and repeatedly inquired whether this data was being sought in order to embarrass the senator. (Corzine Press Secretary David Walls, December 6, 2001) .

The hesitation and suspicion on the part of these senate staffers regarding possible motives for seeking this data seems to be based upon a fear that the publication of the mail tallies concerning either the Ashcroft nomination or the tax cut will demonstrate that the senators in question voted against the majority opinion as expressed by the mail. These issues are perhaps too recent and too emotionally charged to be considered as objective topics of research. Writing in 1988 on the ease he had in collecting data on constituent mail on President Reagan’s economic plans of the early 1980s, political scientist Darrell West explained that he felt that he had not encountered any difficulty in collecting data because the data he was seeking was no longer emotionally charged. “The distance of time facilitated data collection,” he explained, “as the

tallies were less sensitive in 1984 or 1985 than they were at the time of the actual votes.” (West, 1988, p. 665)

The fourth, and most unusual, reason for why data on this topic was difficult to obtain, is of course because senate staffers are in a heightened state of alert after the October anthrax mail attacks on Senator Thomas Daschle’s (D-SD) office and the discovery of anthrax spores in the mailrooms of both the House and the Senate. Concern in the post September 11th world over any questions regarding Senate mail procedures is well founded, though decidedly inconvenient for political science researchers. Although I began this project before the anthrax attacks, senate staffers immediately began to refuse to answer any questions about the senate mail, and are still hostile two months later.

Whatever the reasons for why data on constituent issue mail to the senate was enormously difficult to obtain for this project, it seems clear that data *is* available, and that further data for this project will become available once senate staffers have returned to their normal procedures. While collecting older data (though indeed preferable, as including older data in the sample would allow me to create a time series and so consider the question of whether constituent mail is representative of the national mood) has its own set of difficulties, in order for this project to proceed any further I will have to look beyond recent, emotionally-charged data.

Further Research

In this paper I attempted to determine whether senate mail is representative either of public opinion on specific issues or of the national mood. This attempt was a failure, largely because little or no data on constituent mail to the senate was available. Where does that leave this project? There are, it seems, many possible avenues left to explore. First, there is the still present question of whether constituent mail is *ever* reflective of national opinion. To reach this

conclusion, it might be necessary to pick events that are not so partisan and hotly contested as the Ashcroft confirmation hearings and the debate over the tax cut, and to then attempt the same comparison. Another comparison might include data from regional and state polls to determine whether constituent mail is reflective of local opinion. Still a far more interesting and involved endeavor would be to move beyond individual issues and to determine whether constituent mail to the senate is reflective of the national *mood*. In other words, while it might be useless for senators to pour over constituent letters to try to decide how to vote on a particular issue, it might be enormously worthwhile to read that mail in order to determine its general tone. Regardless, this project remains in every sense of the words a “work in progress.”

Conclusion

When advising a new senator how to get reelected, Speaker Bankhead (D-AL) explained, “Members get re-elected term after term without substantial opposition [because they] give close and prompt attention to mail. Votes and speeches may make you well known and give you a reputation, but it’s the way you handle your mail that determines your re-election.” (Speaker Bankhead, cited in Dexter, 1956, p, 18) It is clear that many senators lay great emphasis on the importance of reading and responding to the mail they receive from constituents, and that younger, less secure senators are perhaps more scrupulous in keeping track of their mail than are older, more secure senators. It is equally clear that such mail is not always (if it is ever) representative of national public opinion. It remains unknown, however, whether constituent mail to the senate is ever representative of national opinion, or whether it is representative of state or local opinion, or even national mood. Senators will probably continue to regard the mailbag as a major conduit of information flowing between voters and their representatives in Congress, and may continue to read the mail in order to understand how their constituents are

thinking. While it is important for the strength of the American system that elected representatives continually try to foster ties with constituents, and while responding to letters is surely one method of fostering those ties, it is ironic to think that all of the senators and all of the staffers may be spending their time doing exactly the right thing – but for exactly the wrong reasons.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Contacted Senators

<i>Senator</i>	<i>Party-State</i>	<i>Position</i>
Allen, George	R-VA	Freshman
Byrd, Robert	D-WV	Senior D
Cantwell, Maria	D-WA	Freshman
Carnahan, Jean	D-MO	Freshman
Carper, Thomas	D-DE	Freshman
Clinton, Hillary	D-NY	Freshman
Corzine, Jon	D-NJ	Freshman
Craig, Larry	R-ID	Chairman, Republican Policy Committee
Daschle, Thomas	D-SD	Majority Leader
Dayton, Mark	D-MN	Freshman
Dorgan, Byrd	D-ND	Chairman, Democratic Policy Committee
Ensign, John	R-NV	Freshman
Lott, Trent	R-MS	Minority Leader
Nelson, Ben	D-NE	Freshman
Nelson, Bill	D-FL	Freshman
Nickles, Don	R-OK	Minority Whip
Reid, Harry	D-NV	Majority Whip
Santorum, Rick	R-PA	Chairman, Republican Conference
Stabenow, Debbie	D-MI	Freshman
Thurmond, Strom	R-SC	Senior R

Appendix 2: Questions for Senate Staffers

General Questions

Amount and Type of Mail

1. *Can you tell me approximately how much mail the senator receives in a day? In a week? In a year?*
2. *Can you describe the mail that the senator receives? What is it like? What percentage of the mail is from out-of-state? In-state? How much of the mail is generated from mass mailings?*
3. *How often do you see letters from state or party officials? Personal friends? Business leaders?*

The Mail Sorting and Reading Process

4. *What happens with the mail when it comes in? Who opens it? Who reads it?*
5. *Is there a running tally of policy preferences? Does the senator ever see letters himself/herself?*
6. *How the mail disposed of? How would you go about checking it if you wanted to sample opinion?*

Issue-Specific Information

John Ashcroft Nomination

7. *Can you tell me approximately how many letters the senator received concerning the confirmation vote for Attorney General John Ashcroft?*
8. *Can you tell as well as you are able what percentage, or how many, of those letters urged the senator to approve the nomination? How many urged the senator not to approve the nomination?*
9. *Did the senator examine any polls regarding constituent opinion on the nomination? Which ones? What did they say?*
10. *What was the senator's vote on the nomination?*

Republican Tax Cut

11. *Can you tell me approximately how many letters the senator received concerning the tax cut passed earlier in the year by the senate?*
12. *Can you tell as well as you are able what percentage, or how many, of those letters urged the senator to vote for the tax cut?*
13. *Did the senator examine any polls regarding constituent opinion on the tax cut? Which ones? What did they say?*
14. *What was the senator's vote on the nomination?*

General Sampling

15. *Does the senator or the staff examine polling data? From what sources? How often? Does the senator commission polls himself/herself?*
16. *Of polls and constituent letters, which are more important for the senator in trying to assess public opinion?*

Appendix 3: Senators and their Votes

<i>Senator</i>	<i>Party-State</i>	<i>Ashcroft</i>	<i>Tax Cut</i>
Allen, George	R-VA	Yea	Yea
Byrd, Robert	D-WV	Yea	Nay
Cantwell, Maria	D-WA	Nay	Nay
Carnahan, Jean	D-MO	Nay	Yea
Carper, Thomas	D-DE	Nay	Nay
Clinton, Hillary	D-NY	Nay	Nay
Corzine, Jon	D-NJ	Nay	Nay
Craig, Larry	R-ID	Yea	Yea
Daschle, Thomas	D-SD	Nay	Nay
Dayton, Mark	D-MN	Nay	Nay
Dorgan, Byrd	D-ND	Yea	Nay
Ensign, John	R-NV	Yea	Yea
Lott, Trent	R-MS	Yea	Yea
Nelson, Ben	D-NE	Yea	Yea
Nelson, Bill	D-FL	Nay	Nay
Nickles, Don	R-OK	Yea	Yea
Reid, Harry	D-NV	Nay	Nay
Santorum, Rick	R-PA	Yea	Yea
Stabenow, Debbie	D-MI	Nay	Nay
Thurmond, Strom	R-SC	Yea	Yea