


CONGRESSMEN AS CONSTITUENTS

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This research looks at the work of Richard Fenno Jr., author of “U.S House Members in their Constituencies: An Exploration,” as published in the 1977 *American Political Science Review*. This research seeks to expand upon Fenno’s work by exploring a medium unavailable in the late 1970’s – social media and personal web pages. Through a consideration of Facebook and Twitter, this paper explores how representatives use social media to appear as a part of their respective constituencies. This research also uses social media to further explore Fenno’s argument that politicians polish their image at the expense of Congress.





In his journal published by *The American Political Science Review* in 1977, Richard Fenno Jr. drew a number of conclusions regarding the behaviors of members of the United States Congress. While researchers of his time saw a separation between the representative in Washington and his or her constituency back home, Fenno explored representatives' attempts to appear as a part of the constituency.¹ Fenno's research led him to the conclusion that in order to gain trust and votes to achieve re-election, Congressmen attempt to identify with voters. In pursuit of popularity, congressmen portray themselves as one of their constituents.² They use their backgrounds, policy positions, and committee assignments to identify with voters. Congressmen also tend to, in Fenno's terms, "run for Congress by running against Congress."³ Congressmen, therefore, promote their image while damaging that of Congress. In this way, Fenno argues, members of Congress distance themselves from Washington to appear just like the common American people. This paper will consider if, as Fenno observed in the 1970s, congressmen continue to identify personally with voters and how they accomplish this goal. It will also determine if the practice of slandering Congress to promote one's image persists.

This study will examine the behaviors of a sample of Congressmen to determine if and how they attempt to identify with voters as a part of the constituency while differentiating themselves from Congress as a whole. The sample includes Jim Himes of Connecticut's 4th district, Henry Cuellar of Texas's 28th district, G.K. Butterfield of North Carolina's 1st district, Hal Rogers of Kentucky's 5th district, and Peter Roskam of Illinois' 6th district. This sample offers some demographic and ideological variation among districts and representatives. However, as Fenno said of his 1973 study, no claim

is made that the group selected for this study is ideally balanced in any of these respects.

The study will compare congressional districts with their congressmen. Characteristics of each congressional district will be compiled from the U.S. Census Bureau's "My Congressional District" tool, which provides detailed demographic, social, economic, and housing statistics every year. Each district will be compared with information we collect about their member of Congress from his or her website, congressional proceedings, social media, and other news sources. The comparison will give us an understanding of how Congressmen try to identify with voters and how they distinguish themselves from Congress as a whole.

Fenno conducted his research in an era in which congressmen were more open to inspection by journalists and political scientists. While this study did not have the opportunity to follow members

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of Congress in person, it does have access to a new medium – social media. Through social media, we will observe how members of Congress present themselves to their constituents. In a 2014 speech lampooning big government, Senator Ted Cruz joked, “You know, there's an old saying that politics is Hollywood for ugly people.”⁴ This study will attempt to discover what kind of act our members of Congress put on.

Connecticut's 4th district is represented by Jim Himes. The district, in the southwest corner of the state, is 72% white. Of all households, 68% are

families. Most people are well-educated, as 27% of the population over 25 years old has a bachelor's degree, and 22% have graduate degrees. Constituents work in management, professional services, and related occupations like finance. They are largely successful, as the median household income is high at \$88,279.⁵

District 4 has elected Jim Himes as their congressman since 2009.⁶ He is white, and speaks English in his home, as do 72% of his constituents. Voters are likely impressed by his Harvard and Oxford alma maters. Like 68% of those he represents, Himes lives in a house with his wife and children.⁶ His website emphasizes the similarity between him and his constituents by listing his stances on constituent-relevant subjects like the economy and jobs, financial services, and education. It also lists his committee assignments, which include the Financial Services Committee, where he works to support a thriving economy.⁷ A district of investment bankers is sure to appreciate his position on the Financial Services Committee.

While Himes represents a typical District 4 resident, his lifestyle is starkly different from many constituents. In 2015, Himes made just over a million dollars.⁸ The *Greenwich Times* identified Connecticut Democrats as among the richest in Congress, as OpenSecrets.org estimated that Himes is worth \$9 million.⁹ Even so, Governor Dan Malloy came to congressmen's defense. When asked whether members of a wealthy Congress can relate to constituents, Malloy said, "I think the Democratic members identify."¹⁰

Himes also disparages Congress in order to build his own reputation. For example, Himes recently tweeted a self-deprecating joke: "What's the opposite of progress? Congress!"¹¹ On a more serious note, Himes expressed his frustration with Congress in a news release on the anniversary of

the Sandy Hook Massacre, saying, "It is shameful that Congress has failed to take meaningful action to curb this scourge of violence... We must keep pushing Congress to pass common-sense legislation..."¹² In both examples, Himes makes himself seem as though he is different from other congressmen.

Henry Cuellar represents Texas' 28th district, located on the Democratic Mexican border. In this district, 77% of people are Hispanic, and many speak Spanish in their homes.¹³ Agriculture, transportation, and manufacturing are popular industries in this blue-collar district. The median income is \$43,999 and 27% live in poverty. While 70% have graduated high school, just 16% have a bachelor's degree or higher.¹⁴

For over ten years, Democrat Henry Cuellar has represented Texas' 28th district. He is Hispanic and bilingual, like most of his constituents, and serves on the Hispanic Caucus. His upbringing was similar to many constituents, as his parents were migrant farm workers. With five advanced degrees, Cuellar is the most degreed house member and far more educated than his constituents. In order to remedy this difference, Cuellar's website tells his story of washing dishes to afford a Georgetown education. While he is not a farmer, he is a self-described, "staunch advocate" for Texas farms, and, as a member of the Agriculture Committee, has secured drought relief assistance and helped to pass an amendment to address cattle fever ticks.¹⁵ To further identify with constituents, Cuellar holds "office hours."¹⁶ He is pictured among constituents at monthly "office hours" in casual settings with his sleeves rolled up, looking like 'one of the guys.'

Through Facebook and Twitter, Cuellar further promotes his image as a constituent. In his Facebook profile picture, Cuellar, surrounded by school children, sits on the Capitol steps. Several

posts involve students, including a selfie with high schoolers and a picture of Cuellar at a dinner for law students. As a highly educated individual, he connects with voters by encouraging them to reach success through education like he did. To appeal to a bilingual constituency, posts are written in both English and Spanish. Cuellar also identifies with Texas farmers through his Twitter profile picture, in which he poses before a tractor flanked by two farmers in cowboy hats. He tweeted about his recent meetings with the Texas Cattle Feeders back home and the Texas Farm Bureau in D.C. to discuss the importance of agriculture to the economy.

Cuellar distances himself from Congress by disapproving of the institution's response to immigration reform. He recently released an op-ed lashing out against the "partisanship and endless debates" of Congress, citing a need for an ambassador to Mexico.¹⁷ He blames Congress for turning down a potentially bipartisan solution. He is also known for being critical of President Obama in congress-

sional hearings, which is somewhat unusual for the representative of a district that voted democratically in the 2012 election.¹⁸ By critiquing both Congress and Obama, he differentiates himself as more of a constituent than a congressman.

Democrat G. K. Butterfield has represented North Carolina's 1st District since 2004. The district is quite diverse, as 53% is black and 8% is Latino. Those who do not work in healthcare or social services, which are dominant fields across most congressional districts, are involved in blue collar, sales, or office occupations. The median income is just \$33,955, and 25% live in poverty. While 19% do have a bachelor's degree or higher, 12% did not finish high school.¹⁹

Congressman Butterfield's background identifies him as a constituent. As the son of black parents involved in the local civil rights movement, he is familiar with his constituents' struggle for equality. His biography describes his North Carolina upbringing as having taught him values of hard work and responsibility, which is important to a constituency that is 93% native to the state. Butterfield bridges the education gap between himself and his voters by explaining that he studied law so that he could protect people's rights. He is also Baptist, which is the largest religious denomination in North Carolina.²⁰ Furthermore, Butterfield is a part of his district's sizeable veteran population and has served on the House Armed Services Committee. His website lists priorities like growing the economy, ending poverty, and expanding voting rights which would likely be important to District 1. As the chairman of the Black Caucus, Butterfield supports black constituents through anti-poverty programs, economic development and job creation, protecting voting rights, advocating for the appointment of blacks to judgeships, senior administration positions, and corporate leadership



Congressman Henry Cuellar converses with cowboys. Taken from [twitter.com](#).

positions. As a member of the Energy and Commerce committee, Butterfield has helped to reduce energy rates in poor minority communities.²¹

While his website explains how Butterfield meets constituents' needs, his Facebook attempts to show how he is like them. Even though Butterfield had a modest upbringing, he is now making significantly more than most of his constituents. To remedy this difference, Butterfield posts pictures of himself among those he represents – whether it's out on a field with hard-hatted workers, smiling alongside current military men and women, or sitting with schoolchildren on the capitol steps, Butterfield wants voters to know that he gives constituents face time.

Butterfield attempts to separate himself from the 'pack of wolves' that is Congress. His Twitter blasted republicans for missing the deadline to enact a budget. Tweets Butterfield, "This fails the most basic expectations of governance. Hardworking Americans deserve a Congress that invests in their future, not one that can't even be bothered to pass a budget."²² Butterfield also employs the hashtag #doyourjob in reference to the Senate's refusal to hold a hearing on Obama's Supreme Court nomination.²³

House republican Hal Rogers has represented Kentucky's 5th district for over 30 years. Over 97% of constituents are white, and the vast majority are native to the area. In this Appalachian district, poverty is high at 29%, and over half the population has only a high school degree. Industry sectors include mining, manufacturing and agriculture.²⁴ The district struggles with a declining economy and rising drug addiction.²⁵

Like his constituents, Rogers grew up in this poor, rural section of Kentucky and was educated in public schools. His website lists local issues like job creation, fighting illegal drug use, and preserv-

ing the natural resources of Appalachia. As Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, Rogers advocates for his district's coal industry through the budget process, and his website shares several articles stressing the loss of mining jobs in the region. There is also a link to SOAR, (Shaping Our Appalachian Region) which strives to improve lives of the people Rogers grew up with and continues to represent.²⁶

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Rogers comes off as old-fashioned, and his largely unpopular Facebook page is impersonal. Always dressed in a suit and tie, Rogers' smile often looks forced. We do, however, see him showing off his veteran status by posing with current service members. His most frequent posts are shared from the Republican's House Committee on Appropriations page. He posted the release of the 2017 Agricultural Appropriations Bill, which would interest local farmers, as well as the Bill of Military Construction and Veteran's Affairs legislation, which would concern his military constituency. Rogers uses Facebook to highlight his role in fighting his district's drug problem. We see him speaking at the National Rx Drug Abuse Summit, and a post advertising drug disposal information in a national "take back" day. His page has also liked several rural and economic development foundations that serve to benefit constituents.²⁷

On Facebook, Rogers expressed his approval of the Supreme Court's decision to block an EPA car-

bon rule for coal-fired power plants, saying, “The president’s job-killing environmental agenda is unconstitutional and out of touch”.²⁸ This statement is in keeping with his opposition to Obama’s “war on coal.” As the Chairman of the Appropriations Committee and a member of the majority party, he is less critical of Congress. After upholding a continuing resolution in 2011, Rogers stated, “I am proud that the House has returned to a regular and fair democratic process, and look forward to continuing this effort throughout the Appropriations process this year”.²⁹

For almost 10 years, Congressman Doug Lamborn has represented Colorado’s 5th district. Nicknamed the “Evangelical Vatican,” this conservative district is home to a concentrated number of Evangelists and is 80% white. The median household income is \$56,789, and 34% have a bachelor’s degree or higher. Large industry sectors include military, tech, and tourism.³⁰

Lamborn presents his similarities with constituents on his official website. Like most of those he represents, he is a white evangelical Christian. In his biography he explains the “service-before-self” values he learned from his WWII vet father and his son’s military officer career, appealing to veterans. He appeals to family values of evangelical Christians by including a photo of himself with his wife, children, and grandchildren in a local national park, which appeals to those in the tourism industry. His biography also lists his adult children’s accomplishments, further convincing voters of his family values. Lamborn lists his committee positions which serve the interests of his constituents, including the Armed Services Committee and the VA Committee. As the Chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee’s Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources, Lamborn works to best develop public lands— a portion of which are

located in District 5.³¹

In support of Evangelicals and veterans, Lamborn posts a Hill article on his opposition to the removal of bibles from VA facilities. Lamborn also shares an amendment he added to the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act which secures NORTHCOM in its District 5 location. He is seen meeting with constituents both in person and through a radio Town Hall meeting. Lamborn posts in support of 2nd Amendment rights, and pictures show him practicing with targets at a local shooting range. Appealing to the religious, he posted about eternal life on Easter, as well as a picture of him reading from the Bible on the national day of prayer. Many ominous photos of President Obama are shared in opposition to his “tyrannical” administration to appeal to a population that voted republican in both elections.³²

Lamborn’s Facebook posts are critical of Congress and express frustration with Congress’ inability to pass a budget. It is clear that he is not only annoyed with Congress, but with liberal republicans who “accept exorbitant spending levels”.³³ He is also outraged at a food bill Congress rushed through and passed with only a 40 minute debate and no possibility for amendments. He complains, “Backdoor deals and sped-through legislation are not a responsible way to represent the American people”.³⁴ Lamborn is both critical of Congress and praised for being unlike them. Lamborn was awarded the True Blue Award for his perfect voting record in defense of faith, family, and freedom. Lamborn successfully differentiates himself from the pack and receives praise and support as a result.

Peter Roskam is serving his 5th term representing Illinois’ wealthy and white District 6. Constituents are highly educated, and 51% have a bachelor degree or higher. Popular industry sectors are pro-

professional, scientific, and management, and the median household income is \$88,574. Poverty is low at 6%.³⁵

Congressman Peter Roskam shows his similarities with constituents through his website biography. He begins by introducing himself as a “Chicagoland native” who lives in the district with his wife and kids. Like his educated constituents, Roskam graduated from the University of Illinois and later the IIT of Chicago-Kent College of Law. With his J.D., he started a practice and represented his fellow district members in both Illinois House and Senate. His website lists issues such as government oversight, taxes, and foreign affairs. As a member of the House Ways and Means committee, Roskam is able to watch the spending and operations of tax-writing and healthcare programs within federal government, which would appeal to his right-wing constituency.³⁶



Peter Roskam is heavily involved in foreign affairs and national issues, rather than local ones. In order to compensate, Roskam’s Facebook presents an effort to show him among his constituents. We see him sitting down with the Illinois Farm Bureau, reading to children at a local elementary school, and schmoozing with the upper class at an Algonquin Township Republican’s Red Carpet Gala. Identifying with local voters, we find pictures of him speaking at a volunteer fire department, sharing breakfast with local manufacturers, and shaking hands with veterans at the American Legion. And proving himself as a “Chicagoland Native,” Roskam’s page features a photo of himself digging into a deep-dish pizza with an article expressing his nostalgia for “authentic tastes of home on Capitol Hill.”³⁷ Attempts to identify are, thus, evident.

Roskam, as an influential member of Congress, does not make a habit of critiquing the institution. Instead, he uses the system to his advantage. By

gaining support of Congress, Roskam’s anti-BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) legislation was signed by Speaker Ryan in February.³⁸ In a Wall Street Journal op-ed piece, Roskam highlighted Congress’ strengths and potential for bipartisanship, saying “Members of Congress from both parties agree that preserving Israel’s economic stability is a strategic imperative for the U.S.”³⁹ Rather than trying to distinguish himself, Roskam seeks to work with Congress to achieve policy goals which will ultimately make him more popular with constituents.

It is reasonable to conclude from this study that congressmen’s attempt to identify personally with voters, as observed by Richard Fenno Jr., prevails today. After studying 6 constituents and their congressmen, it is clear that representatives identify with their district in diverse ways. While Henry Cuellar’s selfie with students may be a far cry from Hal Roger’s stiff pose with veterans, both congressman had the same goal – to identify with voters. It is also observed that representatives attempt to make up for differences they have with their constituents by highlighting their similarities. Discrepancies between constituents and their representatives are potentially swept under the rug by Congressmen, as information proving their similarity was, to the researcher, more readily available than facts proving otherwise.



There is variation in congressmen’s willingness to build their reputation at the expense of Congress’. Fenno believed that members of Congress “run for Congress by running against Congress,” but this study found that this is not always the case in 2016. The liberal George Butterfield often finds himself at odds with a republican congress and more likely to separate himself as an individual. In a similar way, the tea-party supporter, Doug Lamborn stands apart from a Congress that



is simply not liberal enough for his constituents' taste. Even so, members like Hal Rogers and Peter Roskam, who use the institution to accomplish policy goals, are slower to criticize. The degree of variation with which members of Congress try to separate themselves from Congress does not disprove Fenno's study; it simply complicates it. It will be interesting to see, as Congress becomes more polarized, how this trend progresses in the coming years.

ENDNOTES

- ¹Fenno, Richard. "U.S. House Members in Their Constituencies: An Exploration." (883)
- ²Ibid. (889)
- ³Ibid. (914)
- ⁴ICYMI: Sen. Cruz: It's Time to Break the Washington Cartel." U.S. Senator for Texas Ted Cruz. 24 June 2015. Web. 23 April 2016.
- ⁵"My Congressional District." The United States Census Bureau. 2014. Web. 23 April 2016.
- ⁶"About Jim." Congressman Jim Himes. n.p. n.d. Web. 23 April 2016.
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- ⁸"Rep. Jim Himes (D-Connecticut, 4th) – Staff Salary Data." Legistorm. Web. 23 April 2016.
- ⁹Giroux, Greg. "Targeted House Incumbents Armed with Cash." Roll Call 2 Feb 2010. Proquest Political Science. Web. 23 April 2016.
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- ¹⁵"Quick Facts about Henry Cuellar." United States Congressman Henry Cuellar Representing the 28th District of Texas. n.p. n.d. Web. 23 April 2016.
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- ¹⁹Ibid.
- ²⁰Ibid.
- ²¹"Full Biography." Congressman G.K. Butterfield Representing North Carolina's First District. n.p. n.d. Web. 23 April 2016.
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- ²³Ibid.
- ²⁴Ibid.
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- ²⁸Ibid.



²⁹House Appropriations Committee News Release.” Congressional Documents and Publications. 2011. Factiva. Web. 23 April 2016.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹“About Doug.” U.S. Congressman Doug Lamborn. n.p. n.d. Web. 23 April 2016.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶“About Doug.” U.S. Congressman Doug Lamborn. n.p. n.d. Web. 23 April 2016.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸“Roskam’s Anti-BDS Provisions Signed by Speaker Ryan; Rep. Peter J. Roskam (R-IL) News Release. Congressional Documents and Publications. 23 February 2016. Factiva. Web. 23 April 2016.

³⁹Ibid.