

2015

Effective Methods of Constituency Service in Oregon State

Thanh T. Ngo
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/honorstheses>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Ngo, Thanh T., "Effective Methods of Constituency Service in Oregon State" (2015). *University Honors Theses*. Paper 172.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.151>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

**EFFECTIVE METHODS OF
CONSTITUENCY SERVICE IN OREGON
STATE**

by Titi (Thanh) Ngo

Portland State University - May 22, 2015

HONORS THESIS

Dr. Richard Clucas, Advisor

Dr. Amy Fallon, Director

Title: Effective methods of constituency service in Oregon State

Research Question:

Between casework, outreach and providing information, which method do the Oregon Legislature find to be the most effective when it comes to performing constituency service?

Abstract

One would think that casework is the most effective method to reach constituents, however, that was not the case with this research about the Oregon State Legislature. Out of the 90 State Senators and House Representatives, there was a total of 50 surveys conducted and four interviews. The purpose of this research was to determine between casework, outreach and providing information, which method is deemed most effective within the Oregon Legislature when it comes to constituency service. Calculations show that third method, providing information, was the most effective with a solid 63%. These results shows that our legislator still lack in efforts with the other two main methods. There are certainly room for improvement when it comes to bettering the communication between constituents and legislators, even at the local level.

Introduction

. How do legislators serve their people? What is their purpose? What methods do they use to connect with their constituents? We know that the Oregon Legislative Assembly has existed for more than 50 years, with annual sessions following even numbered years since January 2012. Oregon is divided into 60 different districts with a population of approximately 3.97 million. This means that each district contains an average population of about 57,000. At present, there are 90 total legislative members, 30 of which reside in the Senate and the remaining 60 sits in the

House of Representatives. The question is then, how do legislators make sure that they are representing their district as accurately as possible? Simply, legislators must provide constituency service.

This research paper will focus on finding out which method of constituency service does the Oregon Legislature refer to for the most effective constituency service. First, there will be an explanation on the three main types of constituency services that state legislator provides for their district. For research, 30 Senators and 20 Representatives were surveyed at random. Four different senate offices was interviewed and the analysis is that providing information was the most effective method of constituency service.

What is Constituency Service?

What exactly is constituency Service? As defined by Eric Peterson, in *Roles and Duties of a Member of Congress: Brief Overview*, constituency service is “when constituents or local firms or organizations need assistance from the federal government, they contact their Representative or Senators.” (Peterson, 2012, 7) Although Peterson described constituency service at the Federal level, this is primarily the same concept for legislators at the State level. Basically, it is the work that members do on a regular basis to keep in check with constituents and making sure that they are representing their district in the most truthful manner.

Constituency services are highly varied, involving activities to both organizations and individuals including 1) outreach 2) casework 3) providing nominations 4) gathering information and 5) arranging visits or tours to the Capitol or other Washington, DC, venues (Peterson 2012, 7). Generally, the main purposes ,of all services listed above, are to engage with constituents and inform them about current issues examined by lawmakers. However, each area

focus on specific aspects of this general process. The following sections of the paper will focus on three of these services ,that are more relevant to constituency work at the state level, they are a) casework, b) outreach and c) providing information.

Casework

First, casework are most likely at the top priority within the constituency service area. When legislators are working on a case, they are personally providing social service and counseling to their constituents. The process is typically initiated with a direct complaint, question or a concern that a constituent may have for their congressman. Generally, there are two types of casework “the first category encompasses most of what one normally associates with the European ombudsman: specific intervention with agency bureaucracies by congressmen and their staffs on behalf of constituents who seek benefits, ask for preferments or register complaints. The second category refers to helping state and local governments obtain discretionary grants from executive agencies” (Johannes, 1983, 531.)

Second, casework cover a broad range of Statewide issues in Oregon including but not limited to 1) Alcohol and Drugs, 2) Agriculture, 3) Business, 4) Children and Families, 5) Corrections, 6) Education (K-12), 7) Education (Higher), 8) Environment, 9) Health Care, 10) Human Resources, 11) Initiatives, 12) Labor, 13) Land Use, 14) Multi-Cultural Issues, 15) Revenue, 16) Technology, 17)Transportation and 18) Women’s Issues. Typically, constituents would contact the office of their congressman through many forms of communications including email, phone, mail or appointments. Constituents would then explain their dilemma or concern and seek assistance from their legislature’s office. If the Senator, for the example, are unable to

respond to the constituent in a timely manner, then an office staff would take on the responsibility and follow up with the constituent.

Third, caseworks are important as it shows the efforts of a congressmen and how dedicated they are to serving their district. The outcomes that suggest high success rates on casework are measured by several variables including a) amount of time spent on a specific case, b) number of different devices used to stimulate casework, c) number of staff members working on a case, and lastly d) percentages of casework handled monthly in a state or district office. In return for all of their time and efforts, Senators or representatives are often benefited with reputable recognition. Benefits that results from doing high amounts of casework includes a) proves legislator is highly committed, b) build trusts with constituents and c) increases the percentage of successful casework resolutions (Johannes, 1983, 531-534). As a general rule, the more successes in casework leads to more satisfied constituents, which means higher chances for the member to get re-elected in future sessions.

Outreach

If a congressman is not receiving high loads of casework, this may suggest that their office lacks outreach. Outreach is the act of actively seeking opinions of constituents, finding out the common issues or problems that should be addressed during the session.

State legislators have multiple options to achieve outreach, suggested methods include a) setting up town halls, b) mailing surveys, c) posting opinion polls on media, d) visiting constituents and touring the district, e) attend special events and holiday activities, f) attend job fairs, g) form an advisory committee and h) for Senators- establish a district office (National Democratic Institute, 2008, 23-38).

In a way, outreach work will help guide and frame issues that the legislator should prioritize throughout the session. Many State legislators in Oregon often send out newsletter to constituents and almost a majority has facebook pages in which they can quickly connect with constituents. If a legislator wants to do effective outreach, then it is crucial that they take the following suggested actions such as a) defining goals prior to public forums or town halls, b) alert constituents about outreach services in advance, c) contact media and press releases, d) posting flyers and e) request access to local radio or tv station(s). (National Democratic Institute, 2008, 11-21)

Diversifying communications strategy allows more citizens to learn about the legislator's activity and increases constituent engagement. When constituents feel more engaged and attended to, they will feel more empowered. Just as with outreach, constituents will establish a bond with their congressman as more interactions take place. This bond would then result in a trust and guarantees a higher chance of the legislature staying in office for sessions to come. Not only that, outreach work can be seen as even greater efforts than casework, since it is now the congressman reaching out to their constituents and the constituents having to put in little to no efforts in return for the service. As a result both casework and outreach play vital roles in achieving recognition effectively through the work of constituency service.

Providing Information

The last method of constituency service that legislators often perform is gathering information. This process involves the office of the representative or senator gathering the information or providing updates that constituents had originally requested, whether through casework or outreach. It is so important that "Some states have encouraged agencies to develop

specialized information and referral programs to meet specific needs” (National Governors Association, 2014, 3). The purpose of this work is to educate constituents on relevant policies that would affect their lives or that are highly valuable to them.

There are unlimited ways to approach this process and some of them include a) connecting with lobbyists or interest groups, b) office/ party newsletters, c) news release or conferences, d) media updates and e) town hall meetings/ all types of public forums. (National Democratic Institute, 2008, 14-19) According to Peterson, “In addition to its legislative responsibilities, Congress is responsible for seeing that the laws are administered according to congressional intent” (Peterson, 2012, 8). State legislators are exposed to numerous bills and interest groups at the State Capitol, this means they are highly resourceful and should be able to update their constituents with current issues.

Similarly to accomplishing casework and performing outreach, providing crucial and honest information to constituents prove that they are highly committed to their work. Another benefit is that if any bills that they had proposed were successfully passed on either floors, this would be an appropriate time in which legislators could credit themselves through the public eye. However, the main purpose of providing information is to truly provide constituents with progress reports on how well their congressman are representing them or advocating for them.

Overall, if constituents are more well informed, then they are more likely to appreciate the efforts of their congressman and hence would more likely to cast favorable votes when the time of election approaches.

Methods/ Data

In order to assess which of the method listed above seems to be the most frequently used by legislators, specifically in the Senate side, the survey below was sent out.

Survey:

CONSTITUENCY SERVICE METHODS SURVEY 2015					
1) On a scale of 1- 5 how often do you perform the following constituency service in your office? (1= Not at all, 5= All the time) Please circle one.					
Casework	1	2	3	4	5
Outreach	1	2	3	4	5
Providing Information	1	2	3	4	5
2) On a scale of 1-5 how important/ relevant do you feel the following constituency are? (1= Not important, 5= Very Important) Please circle one.					
Casework	1	2	3	4	5
Outreach	1	2	3	4	5
Providing Information	1	2	3	4	5

The design of this survey is to assess realistically how effective these methods are to the Oregon State Legislator in comparison to each other. In general, the Constituency Service Methods Survey is asking 1) how often state offices perform casework, outreach and providing information as well as 2) how important are these services deemed by the office. The scale is from one to five and it was explained to the offices that 1= Not at all , 2=Rarely/ Somewhat, 3=Neutral, 4=Most of the time/ Important and 5= All the time/ Very important. The survey is very short and straightforward as to be considerate of the staff’s busy schedule. Out of the 90 state legislature offices, there was a total of 50 surveys conducted.

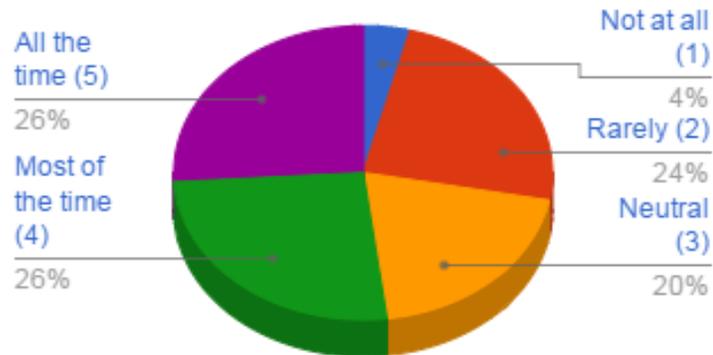
Survey Results

One would think that casework is the most effective method to reach constituents, however, that was not the case with this research. The results of these surveys are displayed below along with detailed explanation about each.

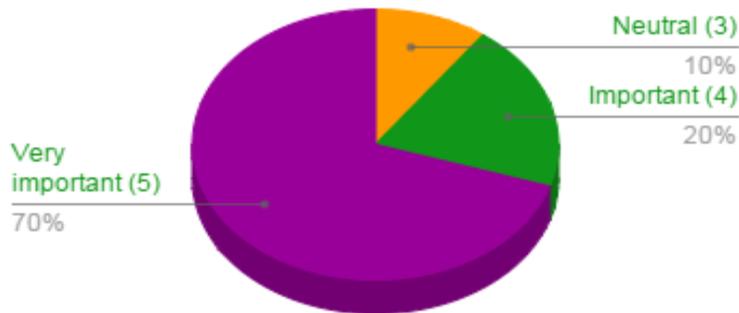


First, staff was asked how important they felt doing casework was, 63% claimed that it was very important, however, only 26% was frequently performing the method of casework or was performing it most of the time in their office. An even lower percentage at 24% rarely did casework, 20% gave a neutral answer and the remaining 4% did not perform any type of constituency casework.

Casework Performance

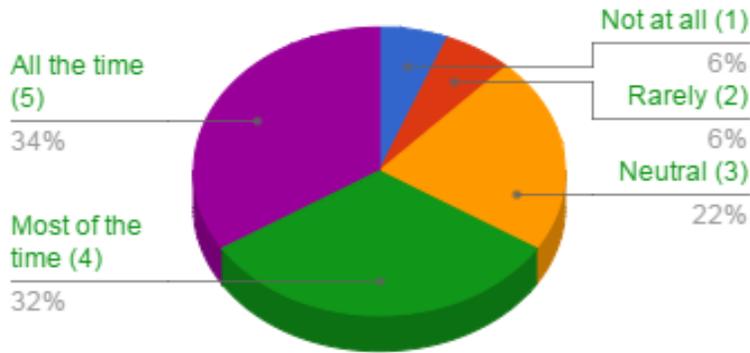


Outreach Importance

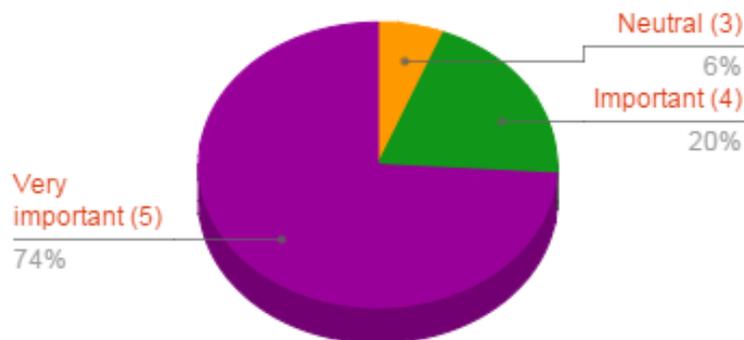


Second, when asked the same about Outreach, 70% claimed that they found it extremely important and about 34% actually performed the task. 32% did outreach most of the time, 22% provided a neutral answer, 6% rarely did outreach and the remaining 6% did not do any outreach.

Outreach Performance

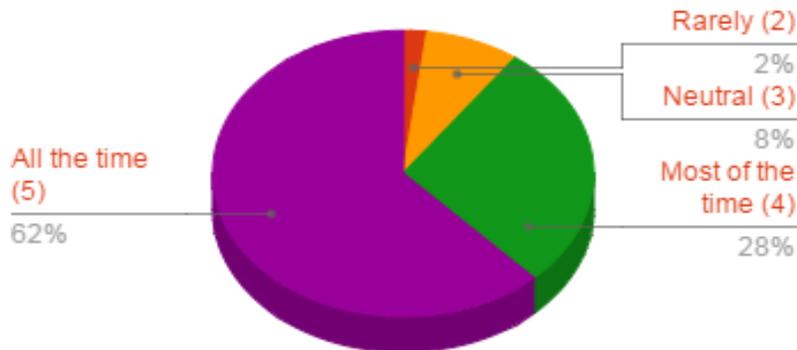


Providing Information Importance



Lastly, when asked the same about Providing information to constituents, 74% had claimed that it was very important and 62% actually performed the task frequently. The second highest was at 28% where offices provided information most of the time, 8% was neutral and 2% never provided information.

Providing Information Performance



The correlation of percentages between how important a legislative office find a task to be, tends to correlate directly which how often the office actually performed the task. From the results of the survey collection, it is clear that the most frequently performed method done by these offices was Providing Information. As previously mentioned in the background section of this research, legislatures are often seeked by constituents to provide them with knowledge. In a sense, legislatures seem to spend most of their time educating their constituents about their policy work or so it would seem from the survey above.

In order to better understand the reasoning behind these results, four interview was conducted on the Senate side. These interviews were open to all participants, unfortunately, these four offices was available at the time frame that the interviews was conducted. Questions that was asked and responses received from these interviews are expressed below:

Interviews

- 1) Do you think constituency service is an important duty as a state legislator?

All of the following responses are from either a Legislative Assistant or an Intern from the specified office:

Veronica Smith from Senator Michael Dembrow Office (District 23, Democratic): *“It definitely matters, because these are people that will be voting the Senator back into office.”*

Matt Anderson from Senator Laurie Monnes Anderson (District 25, Democratic): *“Constituency service is a very important duty.”*

Samantha Gladu from Senator Chip Shields (District 22, Democratic): *“Absolutely, you are here to represent these people.”*

Bethany Janzen from Senator Rod Monroe (District 24, Democratic): *“Yes.”*

- 2) Out of the following, casework, outreach, and providing information, which type of constituency service have you focused on more? Why?

Smith: *“Providing information is the most important because we get a lot of constituent emails asking for just that.”*

Anderson: *“We have done a lot of outreach and not a lot of providing information. This year there has not been a lot of successful casework. Within this year, outreach is first, providing information is second priority and casework is third.”*

Gladu: *“We do all three but providing information is the biggest since people ask about it often.”*

Janzen: *“Personally, I have focused on outreach, because that is my specific duty. However, I would say that responding to constituent emails (which could go under providing info or outreach) and outreach in general are what our office focuses on because there is not a constituent cases that we receive.”*

3) How often do you hold town hall sessions?

Smith: *"Twice a month."*

Anderson: *"Last weekend we had a community coffee but we only hold formal town halls, once or twice a year."*

Gladu: *"Twice a year."*

Janzen: *"About every couple months. We are holding two this session."*

4) How often do you have update your social media page?

Smith: *"At least once a week and almost everyday."*

Anderson: *"About every two weeks, mostly we use facebook. Roughly about 10 posts total so far this year."*

Gladu: *"Senator Shields updates his personal facebook page daily."*

Janzen: *"Daily on days when staff are in office (Monday – Thursday)."*

5) Do you have a monthly newsletter sent out to your constituents?

Smith: *"We have weekly newsletter."*

Anderson: *"No, we had two newsletter halfway through the session and will have a third one at the end of session."*

Gladu: *"We used to have them every month in the past but now we send them out every few months."*

Janzen: *"Yes, we do."*

6) How often do you respond to constituent emails?

Smith: *"Everyday."*

Anderson: *“Rarely, we responded a total of 100 emails this year, we are getting too many at this point to reply to all. We have a standard response that has been created and we usually responds about once a week.”*

Gladu: *“We respond everyday.”*

Janzen: *“The majority of constituent emails receive a response.”*

7) Which method do you find most effective when it comes to constituent outreach?

Smith: *“Town Halls since it is more personal.”*

Anderson: *“Social media for us is like preaching to the choir, but town halls is most effective.”*

Gladu: *“We send out birthday cards to voters over 75, but the most effective would be social media and newsletters.”*

Janzen: *“Town halls probably are the most impactful, but they also reach the least amount of people. Otherwise, email responses and newsletters are probably the second most effective because they reach the most people and are addressed to people who have already reached out to the Senator with a specific concern.”*

8) How do you regularly update constituents on what you’re doing?

Smith: *“Newsletters and townhalls, Senator Dembrow has a special bike town hall where him and constituents would bike around portland together.”*

Anderson: *“We updated constituents through Facebook because we don’t want to spam their email too much.”*

Gladu: *“We use social media and newsletter to do that.”*

Janzen: *“Newsletters and Facebook.”*

9) Do you ever feel overwhelmed by casework load that you receive?

Smith: *“Yes, because I don’t know the answer most of the time.”*

Anderson: *“This year we had switched from replying to harvesting email addresses, so not really.”*

Gladu: *“In the beginning I did, however, as session goes on , more bills dies and the concerns are less.”*

Janzen: *“Rarely.”*

10) How do you make sure that you are representing your district as precisely as possible?

Smith: *“Town hall meetings are the best way.”*

Anderson: *“We try to listen to people who tells us how to vote.”*

Gladu: *“Senator Shields really values constituent, will bump people out of the schedule for a constituent. He is a firm believer that constituents brings the best legislature, he also attends community events when he can.”*

Janzen: *“Good question. First of all, the district elected Senator Monroe to serve and represent them. He uses his best judgement to decide policy decisions. We also listen to what our constituents have to say through phone calls, emails, personal meetings and town halls.”*

It is obvious from the interviews, that townhalls and social media seems to be the most effective method for constituent outreach. Although, there are many different ways that outreach and providing information can be done, a majority of the offices resorted to townhalls, emails, newsletters and attending events. Surprisingly, there are not much talk about casework at all, or even then, casework does not seem to be the most successful route.

Error Analysis

Due to the limited amount of time and resources, there was certainly room for errors. As I was conducting the Interviews and Surveys, there was multiple suggestions that was brought up. Some asked me to specify the details of the 1-5 scale, they asked me if it was based on a daily basis, weekly, monthly or for the entire session. Others also had to clarify whether they were filling this out as themselves, since these tasks are often divided to different staff, or about the office in general. Other errors that could have affected the results of this research includes, not interviewing all 90 offices, survey was not done blindly (I was present at every single survey that was conducted), and also not having the legislatures filling it out themselves. There was also a lot of confusion with the wording of the survey, as I had to explain what I meant by outreach or providing information. There was also only four interviews conducted, which may not affect the results of the research but could have certainly provided more depth.

Other factors that may have made a difference in the answers are majority vs. minority office, rural vs. urban districts, the amount in terms of services by each legislature (old vs.new) and the amount of staff that each office had. Another error is that, there was only three selected methods of constituency service that was focused on. Perhaps, if more choices was given and this research were to expand, the results could have changed drastically. Overall, if this research was to be extended, there are much clarifications that would need to be established.

Conclusion

In conclusion, casework, outreach and providing information are three of the most frequently constituency services performed by legislators at both the congressional and state level. First, Casework is the action of a constituent or interest groups directly reaching out to

their congressman seeking for some sort of assistance. Second, Outreach is vice versa of casework, where it is the legislator ,himself. herself, seeking the opinions and concerns of his or her constituents. Finally, providing information is a way for legislators to continue updating and maintaining the relationship with their constituents so that they can effectively represent their district. All of these methods are important because they all provide a framework for the congressman to carry on in the session and could also potentially secure votes for the congressman in future sessions. Originally, I hypothesized that that casework would be the most relevant and effective way to maintain connection with constituents. However, my results had indicated that providing information was the most frequent method. A lot of previous research was found on casework, whereas research on both outreach and providing information was not as easily accessible. However, in contrary to the importance of casework found in scholarly literature, providing information was the most favorable method within the Oregon legislature. Therefore, my hypothesis was proven wrong , at least for the case of Oregon State Legislature. Out of the 50 surveys and four interviews conducted, providing information through townhalls, newsletters and social media is found to be the most effective method of constituency service. Providing information dominated the other two methods with a resounding 63%.

After analyzing the data from this research, there are two suggestions on how communication between legislators and constituents can improve. First, legislators must strive to balance all three main types of constituency service and not only focus on providing information. Lastly, vice versa, constituents must also reach out to legislators on their wants and needs. Communication must be consistent and strong between both parties, in order for Oregon legislator to function most effectively.

As observed, many legislators are occupied all day and therefore their time are quite limited. One would think that casework provides the most benefits and in itself shows very high and direct commitment between a congressman to their constituents. However, this is also dependent on how often constituents are willing to reach out to their representative. From the results, it seems that representatives in Oregon often need to reach out to their constituents and provide them with helpful information about ongoing policies.

Works Cited:

1. "Constituent Relations." *National Democratic Institute*. N.p., 2008. Web. Feb.-Mar. 2015. <https://www.ndi.org/files/2407_gov_constituentsmall_engpdf_10082008.pdf>.
2. "Governor's Office Guide: Constituent Services." *Office of Management Consulting & Training*. National Governor's Association, Nov. 2014. Web. 14 Mar. 2015.
3. Johannes, John R. "Explaining Congressional Casework Styles." *JSTOR*. Midwest Political Science Association, Aug. 1983. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.
4. Petersen, R. Eric. "Roles and Duties of a Member of Congress: Brief Overview." *Congressional Research Service*. CRS Report for Congress, 9 Nov. 2012. Web. Feb.-Mar. 2015. <<http://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL33686.pdf>>.
5. "Senate Democrats Legislative Aide Manual." *Senate Majority Office*. Oregon State Capitol, 2015. Web. 9 Mar. 2015.