

**Project Abstract**

Trust in the institutions of governance is a fundamental element of democratic legitimacy, yet Congress is plagued with low approval ratings rooted in the public's perceived lack of representation (MacInnis et al. 2018). This project addresses questions of representation by exploring an under-studied aspect of the political process, how district preferences are reflected in the written communication of members of Congress. Specifically, I focus on the language used in Congressional letter-marking, which occurs when legislators explicitly ask (in writing) the head of an agency to retain, or allocate, distributive benefits in their districts. Letter-marking has become an institutionalized practice in Washington D.C. with members of Congress requesting support for their districts across a wide-range of policy areas (Nixon 2010; Mills, Kalaf-Hughes, and MacDonald 2015), yet there is scant work in political science on the rhetorical strategies members use to influence the likelihood of a successful appeal. Drawing on both political science and communications scholarship, this project takes an interdisciplinary approach to examine when legislators choose to communicate with agencies, and which rhetorical strategies are most successful in their legislative appeals. Using a novel dataset of Congressional communication logs and letters to agencies, as well as interviews with members of Congress and staff, this research will expand our current understanding of democratic governance, political representation, and how legislators use language to persuade and advance public interests. Additionally, this project will shed light on how individuals can best communicate with elected officials to increase representation of their interests at the federal level.

**Proposed Community Engagement Activity**

Understanding how elected officials bring federal support back to their districts is relevant for everyone, as this support can take the form of economic development projects, improved public works, or increased political representation. I propose to lead a community workshop titled "How to Write so Your Government Will Listen," where I will share the results of this research, and give participants tools to communicate with their elected officials in a way that their concerns are heard and possibly translated into policy. I will also create files to be used in classrooms or public spaces to further dissemination of the information.

**Project Description*****Overview***

The record-low public approval ratings of Congress in recent years can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the perception members of Congress pay a great deal of attention to elites rather than the general public, dissatisfaction with laws passed, or the chronic gridlock plaguing Congress (MacInnis et al. 2018). Trust in the institutions of governance is a fundamental element of democratic legitimacy, and the low levels of confidence in the legislative branch can present a problem for political representation in the United States as public dissatisfaction affects the perceived legitimacy of governmental institutions, willingness to accept public policies (Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence 2005), preferences regarding which institutions should make policy decisions (Bowler, Donovan, and Karp 2007), and even discourages individuals from running for office (Fowler and McClure 1990). Thus, understanding the many ways in which members can

and do represent the interests of their constituents is relevant for a healthy democracy and engaged populace.

Studies seeking to explain representation are ubiquitous in political science, however most draw on two mechanisms of position-taking in Congress, bill introductions and voting behavior. However, most opportunities for representation in Congress occur outside of recorded votes, leaving areas of legislative behavior unexplored and unaccounted for in public understanding. This project seeks to remedy this problem by exploring an under-studied aspect of the political process, the communication between members of Congress and Executive branch agencies.

Inter-branch communication between legislators and bureaucrats is important because it can have consequences for policy outcomes, with previous research suggesting direct contact from legislators can influence, even *reverse*, bureaucratic decision-making (Ritchie and You 2019). However, the current body of work does not address what factors make legislative appeals successful. To fill this gap and expand on existing scholarship, I draw on work in the fields of political science and communications to explore the rhetorical strategies members employ when representing their constituents and district. This interdisciplinary approach will allow for a more nuanced understanding of how elected officials use language to advance policy objectives and represent the individuals, communities, and organizations within their districts.

To explore how language and politics intersect to influence representation, I focus on Congressional letter-marks. Letter-marking occurs when members of Congress explicitly ask (in writing) the head of an administrative agency to retain, or allocate, distributive benefits in their districts. The long-standing practice of earmarking allowed members of Congress to insert provisions into bills, which provided targeted federal funds for projects in their districts. To gain support for their earmarks from other members, and more importantly Congressional leaders, members would often agree to vote for or against general interest legislation (Evans 2004). However, in 2010 and 2011 both the House and Senate passed a ban on earmarks. While the Legislative branch retains control over the budgetary process, the end of earmarks has given agencies increased control over the allocation process (see Mills, Kalaf-Hughes, and MacDonald 2015 and Mills and Kalaf-Hughes 2015). Members of Congress are therefore tasked with asking federal agencies to retain or allocate these benefits. Rather than trading votes for projects benefitting their state or districts, as happened under earmarks, members themselves must translate district preferences into creative and persuasive appeals to federal agencies.

### ***Contributions to Academic and Public Communities***

The focus on letter-marks provides an opportunity to explore not just when members use letter-marking to represent their districts, but what rhetorical strategies are most effective and persuasive in representation. Relying on the interdisciplinary approach allows for a focus on two questions important for public trust in our democratic institutions, first, whose interests are being represented, and second, how well is Congress providing that representation? To answer these questions, I will draw on a novel dataset of Congressional communication logs and

Congressional letters to agencies gathered through freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, as well as interviews with members of Congress, their staff, and staff at agencies.<sup>1</sup>

From an academic perspective, the research will expand our current understanding of democratic governance by exploring if the aforementioned public dissatisfaction with Congressional representation is reflected in legislator rhetorical strategies. From a community perspective, understanding how members of Congress translate constituent communications into actionable requests before federal agencies can increase confidence the legislative branch and possibly drive community members to greater levels of engagement with the political process. As gridlock is often cited as a reason for dissatisfaction (see Flynn and Harbridge 2016), understanding how changes to legislative rules, such as the move from earmarks to letter-marks, drives gridlock can foster greater understanding and confidence in the branch.

Beyond increasing confidence and engagement in our democratic institutions and processes, understanding how constituent requests translate into Congressional representation can prove beneficial to members of the University community and community at large should they seek letters of support from members of Congress in applying for federal funding. Our local community has benefitted from this in a practical sense, as our elected officials, including Representative Marcy Kaptur and Senator Sherrod Brown, have written numerous letter-marks to federal agencies, supporting programs such as the Small Community Air Service Development Program benefitting the Toledo airport.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Outcome Goals and Potential Larger Audiences***

If chosen for an ICS fellowship, I will accomplish three tasks. First, I will apply scholarship from the fields of communications, linguistics, and political science to the collected letters between legislators and federal agencies to explore the rhetorical strategies used by members of Congress in agency appeals. This work will be shaped into a book chapter as part of a larger academic book project on letter-marking and inter-branch communications. Second, following the fellowship, I will draw on Congressional interviews and rhetorical studies of legislative appeals to agencies and lead a community workshop titled, “How to Write so Your Government Will Listen,” where I will share the results of this research, and give participants tools to communicate with their elected officials in a way that their concerns are heard and possibly translated into policy. Finally, I will use the conclusions from this research and public workshop to publish a write up in the Washington Post’s Monkey Cage (or similar venue) which will make recommendations on constituent and legislator best practices in communication strategies.

### ***References***

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<sup>1</sup> Data collection and analyses have been supported by funding from the Dirksen Congressional Center (2015) and the Social Science Research Council (2016-2017). Remaining data collection will be completed during Spring 2020 and Fall 2020, leaving Spring 2021 for the rhetorical analyses and interdisciplinary work proposed here.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1 for a short sample of a Congressional letter-mark.

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U.S. Department of  
Transportation

Office of the Secretary  
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DEPARTMENT OF  
TRANSPORTATION  
LEVEL OPERATIONS

The Honorable Marcy Kaptur  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congresswoman Kaptur:

Thank you for your letter supporting the proposal submitted by the Toledo-Lucas County Port Authority for a grant under the Small Community Air Service Development Program (Small Community Program).

The Small Community Program was established to help smaller communities address air service deficiencies, particularly issues related to high airfares and insufficient service. Under the statute, the Department may use the funds to make a maximum of 40 grant awards each year, although no more than four may be to communities in the same State. In order to provide communities with latitude in developing solutions to their air service deficiencies, the statute provides significant flexibility in how the financial assistance may be used.

On July 1, the Department issued an order requesting that communities interested in receiving a grant this year file their applications by August 2. As these grant requests are pending before the Department, I am sure you understand that I cannot comment on the merits of any particular proposal. I assure you, however, that the Department will give full consideration to all proposals that have been properly filed.

As is our normal practice, I am placing a copy of your letter and this response in Docket DOT-OST-2011-0119 as a contact outside the record of this matter. I appreciate your interest in this program. If I can provide further information or assistance, please feel free to call me.

Sincerely yours,

Aloha Ley  
Associate Director  
Small Community Program

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Rural Development,  
FDA and Related Agencies  
COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET  
DEMOCRATIC STEERING AND POLICY



**MARCY KAPTUR**  
9TH DISTRICT, OHIO

July 29, 2011

Aloha Ley  
Associate Director  
Small Community Air Service Development Program  
United States Department of Transportation  
Office of Aviation Analysis  
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE  
Washington, DC 20590

Director Ley:

I am writing on behalf of the Toledo Express Airport (TEA) and its application for a Small Community Air Service grant. As you may know the Toledo Express Airport has suffered from a significant decline in its air service over the past decade and airline capacity at Toledo Express is down more than 70% from 2003.

TEA and its community partners would be able to attract new air service from Toledo Express to improve our region's air service needs with a favorable grant award. TEA and its partners will match the grant funding with significant local cash and in-kind matches. (TEA) has also developed a comprehensive new air service incentive program, including ground handling support and startup phase fee waivers. The combination of the grant supported marketing and promotional funding and the Airport developed incentive program will give Toledo the tools it needs to reverse the decline of local air travel options and re-establish some of the air service that has been lost in recent years.

I support the Toledo Express Airport's application to the Small Community Grant Application and urge favorable consideration consistent with your agency's rules and regulations. Please contact me if you require additional information.

Sincerely,

MARCY KAPTUR  
U.S. Representative