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DIGITAL TOWN HALL:

HOW LOCAL OFFICIALS USE THE INTERNET AND THE CIVIC BENEFITS THEY CITE FROM DEALING WITH CONSTITUENTS ONLINE

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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

The first-ever survey of mayors and city council members of the National League of Cities about their use of the Internet shows that local officials have embraced the Internet as part of their official lives and most now use email to communicate with constituents. In contrast to Congressional representatives, who have felt swamped by email and who often dismiss emails as not very meaningful, local officials find them useful. And local officials do not feel overwhelmed by the volume of incoming email.

- 88% of local elected officials in this broad national sample use email and the Internet in the course of their official duties.
- 90% of online local officials use email in their official duties at least weekly and 61% use it daily for such purposes.
- 79% of all municipal officials in this survey say they have received email from citizens or local groups about civic issues. Some 25% receive email from constituents every day.
- 61% of online local officials use email to communicate with citizens at least weekly. 21% do so every day.
- 75% of online local officials use the Web for research and other purposes in course of their official duties at least weekly and 34% use it daily for such purposes.
- 86% of online officials say they can handle all their email messages.

There is a clear civic payoff to Internet use at the local level as officials say they learn about constituents' opinions and activities when they go online. More local groups are being heard and recognized at the local level thanks to email. Still, it is generally the case that while the use of email adds to the convenience and depth of civic exchanges, its use is not ushering a revolution in municipal affairs or local politics.

- 73% of online officials note that email with constituents helps them better understand public opinion.
- 56% of online officials say their use of email has improved their relations with community groups.
- 54% of online officials say that their use of email has brought them into contact with citizens from whom they had not heard before.
- 32% have been persuaded by email campaigns at least in part about the merits of a group's argument on a policy question.
- 21% agree that email lobbying campaigns have opened their eyes to "unity and strength of opinion" among constituents about which they have been previously unaware.
- 61% of online officials agree that email can *facilitate* public debate. However, 38% say that email alone cannot carry the weight of the full debate on complex issues.

Email still lags behind more traditional communications media between local officials and citizens.

- Online local officials are still more likely to cite phone calls (64%), letters (35%) and meetings (29%), rather than email, as the most common means citizens use to communicate with them. (These numbers add up to more than 100% because officials were allowed to give several answers.)
- 24% of officials include email among the most common means used by citizens to contact them.
- Online local officials are also most likely to cite meetings (55%), phone calls (49%) and letters (27%), rather than email, as the kinds of contacts from constituents that carry the most weight with them. Only 14% said that they assign a significant amount of weight to email.

Online local officials often use both official and personal email accounts for official business. Officials in small cities are more likely than big-city officials to rely on personal accounts; big-city officials are more likely to rely on government-provided accounts. Those who make use of both government and personal email accounts do so for reasons of convenience for both themselves and their constituents. Officials who work day jobs want to be available to their constituents during the day. Others note it is easier to deal with their official emails at home.

- Although the majority of online local officials use Internet access provided by their cities and email accounts set up by their cities, only 30% rely on those accounts exclusively for their official duties. Some 37% say they use both government and personal accounts, and 33% rely on personal accounts exclusively for their official business.

Acknowledgement of Partnership with the National League of Cities

INTRODUCTION: THE GLOBAL/LOCAL CONUNDRUM

Politics is local. The Internet is global. Where do the two meet?

The last three years have provided powerful evidence of how the Internet and email have entered national and international political life. Activists used it mobilize interested citizens and to handle the logistics of organizing such mass demonstrations as the 1999 protests at the World Trade Organization talks in Seattle and the Million Mom March in Washington, DC. Conservative activists can also find online rallying points at such sites as http://www.nra.org/ and http://www.townhall.com/.

Moreover, there has been strong growth in the number of online Americans who use government Web sites. In our latest survey on the subject in July 2002, we found that 62% of U.S. Internet users – some 70 million people – have used government agency Web sites, up from 42 million who had used agency Web sites when we first started probing on the subject in March 2000. On a typical day in July, more than 9 million people were going to Web to get information and services from public agencies.

But while the Internet allows people to access Web sites and activists to communicate effectively with each other, it has not proven to be as important a tool for communicating with some kinds of policymakers. The ease with which those promoting a cause can solicit thousands – or even tens of thousands – of emails to be sent to any number of politicians has lead to a backlash against email campaigns on Capitol Hill. The Congress Online Project reported that that House of Representatives received 85.5 million email messages in 2001[1] (an average of almost 540 messages per day to each office). Activists now warn about the futility of sending multiple copies of identical emails to overburdened congressional staff, so popular have email campaigns become among citizens. [2]

Could the Internet create the same dynamic in local government affairs? Can community leaders tap into the same passions and online organization that other activists have done to launch national campaigns? Will local leaders take to online engagements with their constituents?

At first glance, it would appear that local government provides a very different environment for online relations than does the national government. Only half of Internet users know if their local government has a Web site, even though about 80% of cities do.[3] While two-thirds of Internet users say the Net helps them get involved with groups outside of their communities, only 9% say it's useful for things close to home. Just 1 in 9

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[1] "Special Report: Email Overload in Congress – Update 2002" The Congress Online Project, 2002. http://www.congressonlineproject.org/080702.htm.

[2] Of course, the anthrax attacks of fall 2001 have changed everything, halting mail deliveries to House and Senate alike. Email has become a requested means of communication.

[3] "The Rise of the E-Citizen: How People Use Government Agencies' Web Sites" April 2002. The Pew Internet and American Life Project. http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=57

users are aware of a debate in their community where the Internet played a major role in organizing citizens to communicate with public officials.[4]

Anecdotal evidence from the ongoing "Query of the Moment" survey maintained on our Web site supports the idea that people rely only marginally on the Internet for local needs. Responses to the question "Do you often go to the Web sites of local institutions?" ranged largely from surprised ("Why check local content on the Web?") to disillusioned. Many respondents noted the lack of interesting local content on Web sites. Several noted that they relied heavily on locally-oriented Web sites to get their bearings when they moved to a new town, but few indicated that their ongoing local lives are significantly enriched by the Internet.

Even so, a few news stories have noted the prominence of online networks in urban life. In the early 1990s, the Public Electronic Network in Santa Monica allowed homeless participants to participate in a community campaign for better access to lockers and showers.[5] And in 2000, The Preservation Resource Center in New Orleans successfully activated email lists to save a historic building from demolition.[6] In that case, fewer than 100 emails seemed to have a profound effect on state legislators.

The proximity of online local officials to their constituents provides a communications paradox. On the one hand, local officials live and work in the communities they serve, their loyalties and interests generally undistracted by partisan issues or issues that affect populations beyond their specific electorate. They should be very approachable. On the other hand, many work without staff or even office space, so may not always be easy to reach. The Internet and email could allow citizens and officials to connect where traditional means fall short.

We surveyed local elected officials across the country to get an understanding of their experiences in dealing with the electorate online. Our research shows that city governments are now eager to have a presence online, and that city officials appreciate the benefits of electronic communications. However, they are also aware of the shortcomings of clumsy handling of this new media.

Methodology and respondents
A random sample of 2,000 local elected official was drawn from the National League of Cities database of municipal officials. Officials were selected from cities with populations greater than 10,000. The survey was mailed out to all officials during January 2002. Officials were given the choice of responding on the mailed survey or taking the survey online at a password-protected site. Non-respondents received a follow-up postcard and then a second letter. The survey closed on April 30, 2002.

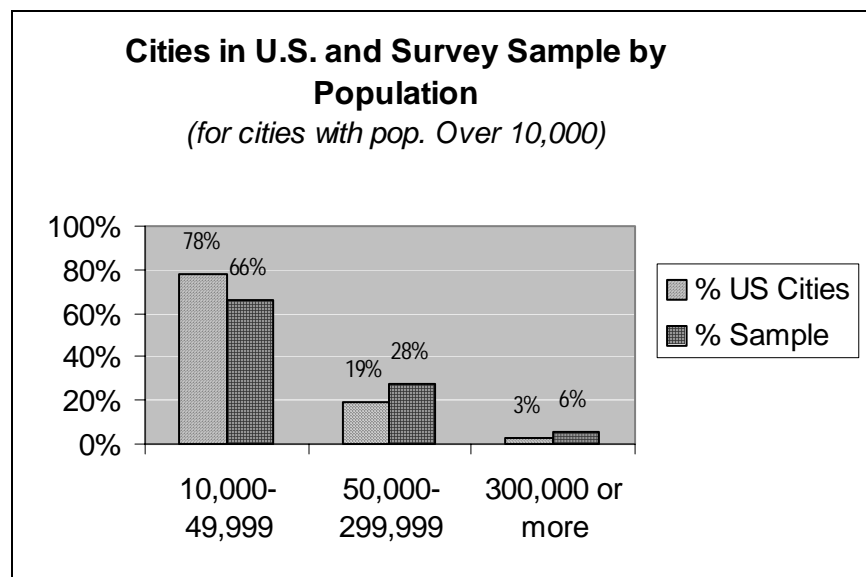[4] Online Communities: Networks that Nurture Long-Distance Relationships and Local Ties. October 2001. The Pew Internet and American Life Project. http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=47
[5] Tassy, Elaine. "SHWASHLOCK helps homeless prepare for the working world.' *The Los Angeles Times*, November 18, 1993, p. J1.
[6] Lafrance, Siona. "Email Activism." The Times-Picayune, August 20, 2000, p. 1 of "Living" section.

We received responses from officials in 520 cities, with populations ranging from just under 10,000 to 3.5 million. Of the respondents, 23% are mayors, 71% sit on the city council or the local equivalent legislature, and 6% describe themselves as "other." The response rate was slightly over 25%. Not all officials answered all questions.

The respondents fairly closely mirror the composition of the universe of municipal officials throughout the United States. The population breakdown of the cities represented by respondents roughly mirrors that of municipal governments across the nation, although our sample was somewhat more weighted towards more populous cities. Mayors who responded tended to come from smaller cities. The average population of a city for which the mayor responded was about 45,000, compared to 91,000 for the cities of responding council members. Thus, the sample is not a fully representative one. However, officials at the National League of Cities and we believe it is a very good accounting of the range of experience and beliefs among municipal officials.

Cities in U.S. and Survey Sample by Population
(for cities with pop. Over 10,000)

	% US Cities	% Sample
10,000-49,999	78%	66%
50,000-299,999	19%	28%
300,000 or more	3%	6%

Source: 1997 U.S. Census of Governments, Volume I: Government Organization

THE ADOPTION OF THE INTERNET IN CITIES

Municipal officials indicate that incorporation of the Internet into civic affairs is widespread. Eighty percent reported that their city had a Web site. Seventy-one percent said their cities provide their staffs with both Internet and email access, and another 21% provide access to *either* the Internet or email. The most common reasons cited for a lack of Internet access in the small number of places where there was no official Internet account included budget constraints, lack of technical expertise, and lack of demand.

Local officials make considerable use of the online tools their cities provide them. Eighty-eight percent of respondents say that they use the Internet and/or email in the course of their official duties. Three-fourths of these online officials use the Internet in the course of their official duties at least once a week – 34% do so every day. Email is even more popular, with 90% of officials using it at least weekly, and 61% using it daily

City officials are also increasingly likely to use the Web to do research that relate to their public jobs, by doing such things as accessing the Web sites of government agencies at all levels, downloading research reports, gathering statistics, and getting news, among other things. Fully 85% of officials say they use the Internet to do research, and 55% of them do such research at least on a weekly basis.

The features on municipal Web sites	
80% of the cities represented in this survey have Web sites. Here are the percentage of respondents who said their city's Web site contained these features	
Featured on site	Percent
City staff directory	78%
Meeting agendas with minutes	71%
Information on receiving municipal services	71%
Calendars for meetings/events	70%
City staff directory with email links	61%
Access to zoning/city planning information	54%
Budget/tax information	41%
Municipal forms and applications	40%
Voting information	34%
Information for citizen lobbying	18%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project City Government Survey, January 2002 – April 2002. N=520.

Issues of the digital divide

When asked to estimate the levels of Internet access in their cities, one in three online officials said they did not know. Sixty-five percent say that increasing Internet access to residents is an issue of some importance. Interestingly, increasing levels of Internet access is not more important to cities reporting low levels of access than it is in cities with better-connected residents. Rather, officials who could estimate levels of access in their cities as a whole found increasing access of greater importance than did officials did not know how many residents had access. This suggests that in cities where the digital divide is an active issue, officials may simply be more aware of access levels than are officials in cities where it is less of a priority.[7]

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[7] One city noted that the digital divide problem had moved beyond the mere question of have and have-not. "The access issue has been getting DSL and high-speed modem availability and wireless improvements."

HOW LOCAL OFFICIALS USE EMAIL

Communicating with citizens

Eighty-two percent of online local officials use email to communicate with citizens. Sixty percent do so at least weekly, and 21% do so every day. Those in larger cities tend to email citizens more frequently. Almost half (49%) of online officials in cities over 150,000 email citizens daily, while only 9% of those in cities with populations under 20,000 do so.

In their communications with constituents, 21% have used email to solicit input on a community issue, and 13% have sought to float a new idea to residents.

Online local officials appear to receive slightly more email than they send. Some 74% of these respondents say they receive email from citizen groups at least weekly, and 24% saying they receive it every day. Not surprisingly, those who receive email the most frequently tend to be the same people who send it most frequently; we see little evidence of officials sending email to the community and getting nothing in return, or

Percent of online local officials who have ever used the Internet to…	
Explain/defend a position	27%
Solicit input on a community issue	21%
Rally support for a new initiative	13%
Float a new idea to citizens	13%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project City Government Survey, January 2002 – April 2002. N=482. Margin of error is ±4.1%

of officials who do not use email being pummeled with electronic messages from constituents.

In addition to individual messages exchanged between citizens and officials, some communities have set up group listservs where residents and officials alike can discuss local issues in an informal, coffeehouse type manner. Participation is relatively rare among online officials, at about 17%. And half of those participate only tangentially – they have others monitor the listservs and keep them informed. The remainder is equally divided between those who read the listservs but do not post, and those who actively participate.

Contact with colleagues

Seventy-eight percent of officials use email to communicate with their colleagues. A small group, about 8%, of online officials use email exclusively for intra-governmental communications, and never email citizens at all. Officials email their colleagues with the same frequency across cities, regardless of population.

Local officials combine public and private Internet accounts to suit their own schedules and needs

Although the majority of online officials receive Internet access and email through their cities, only 30% rely on those accounts alone for their official duties. Some 37% rely on both government and personal accounts, and 33% rely on personal accounts exclusively.

Larger cities, with their correspondingly larger budgets, are more likely to provide local officials with the resources needed to rely on government accounts exclusively. While only 19% of online officials from cities with of under 20,000 use government accounts exclusively for their duties, 42% in cities of over 150,000 do so. Online officials in the smallest cities are more likely to rely exclusively on their personal accounts: 37% vs. 23% for larger cities. (Those who make use of both official and personal accounts appear in all cities, regardless of size.)

Thus, it is not surprising that nearly 2 in 5 (38%) online officials report using more than one email address in the course of their official duties. It appears that many of these individuals are part-time citizen-legislators who support themselves with full time jobs. Many do not have regular "office hours" (or even offices), so they provide constituents with their business or personal email addresses in order to be available throughout the day. One official noted that government email accounts could not be reached outside government offices, and many others said that it was generally easier to deal with official email at home. A few even noted that their personal accounts simply worked better than their official accounts. For example, one official complained that the city account did not provide a spell check feature for email.

Others cited reasons that reflect the reality of living among constituents. One official continues to respond to constituents on his pre-election email address, presumably one that those constituents already have in their in their electronic address books.

FOIA and email

Another issue that injects itself in the official/personal email account management is the tension between Freedom Of Information Act (FOIA) laws and privacy rights. FOIA laws, often called "sunshine laws" serve to promote honesty in government. It is much harder to do official business out of the public eye, make secret deals or even cover up illegal activities if documents are preserved and available to the public. Nonetheless, public documents contain a considerable amount of private information about individual citizens. Government has recognized certain privacy rights that cannot be violated in the name of FOIA. Tax returns, for example, are generally exempt from FOIA due to the extensive personal information contained in them.

Still, the matter of privacy vs. FOIA is rarely as clear-cut as in the case of tax returns, and the introduction of the Internet into the public sphere has increased the complexity of the issue further. The Internet can make public records "too public." Records kept in a county courthouse contain significant amounts of personal information relating from everything from child support payments to psychological evaluations. Theoretically, anyone can look at them. But as a practical matter, the availability of such records in bulky paper files that are accessible only during working hours generally keeps that information private. Put all those records on the Internet, and people can check up on their neighbors, customers or employees on a whim. Concerns such as these are leading some states to introduce legislation shielding some public information from online disclosure.

Many people send emails as casually as they place a phone call. But phone calls are ephemeral and irretrievable (unless, of course, there is a wiretap), while emails become their own record. Many laws recognize email from and to public officials as public record.

Just over half (53%) of online local officials responding in our survey say that their email is subject to FOIA disclosure. Of those, about one third (34%) have received FOIA requests for their email from the press or citizen groups. Officials in cities with populations over 150,000 were almost twice as likely (60%) to have been asked to turn over some of their email. Thirty-seven percent of online local officials say they do not know if their email is subject to FOIA (although one wrote "But it should be."). Those who use email every day are the most likely (60%) to say that their email is subject to FOIA, while those who "never" email are the most likely (55%) to say they don't know.

The nature of the work of the citizen-legislator makes email perhaps the most viable communication tool and that may leave citizens feeling that their privacy rights should override FOIA rules. A phone call from a private citizen to an elected official might be logged in the incoming calls log, but the contents of that call would not become public record. On the other hand, an email to a city-provided email address is a record that can easily be made public. One respondent to our survey of city officials cited the lack of privacy for constituents who wanted to speak their mind on issues as a reason for using personal as well as official email addresses. The respondent suggested that personal email accounts are not subject to FOIA. A few others alluded to this same concern.

HOW LOCAL OFFICIALS EVALUATE EMAIL AS A TOOL FOR COMMUNICATING WITH CITIZENS

Comparing email to other kinds of communications
We asked officials to tell us how citizens contact them, and what kinds of contact carry the most weight with those who are elected city leaders. Consistent with our anecdotal findings that Americans do not rely heavily on the Internet for local purposes, online officials say citizens are more likely to pick up the phone, write a letter, or pay a visit than to sit down to compose an email. And officials seem to be happy with this. Despite the accommodations they make to receive constituent email at work and at home, most responded that phone calls, letters, and visits carried more weight with them than did email. Email is preferred only to fax, which is preferred by virtually no one (2%).

Nonetheless, many officials opted out of ranking any means of communication as more worthy than any others, stating that they welcomed all communications equally (though one such official specifically excepted form letters). Another official welcomed any communiqué "as long as the person identifies himself."

Is email a burden to officials?
Unlike their counterparts in Congress, online local officials have not been generally bothered by the volume of email they receive. Fully 75% of online local officials say

they are capable of handling it, even though many do not have staffs or formal offices. Only one in eight (12%) indicated that email volume poses some problems. This satisfaction is consistent regardless of how frequently officials use email, how many people they represent, and how many of their constituents have Internet access. Online officials agreed on this point more than they did any other question evaluating the effects of email.

One factor that may contribute to this finding is the relatively small amount of non-constituent email. Congress members vote on issues with national ramifications. They may receive email from activists nationwide, while being directly accountable to only the voters of their own districts. The Congress Online Project

How online local officials receive most of their communication, and what communication they prefer		
	% who say they receive this most frequently *	% who say this means of communication carries the most weight with them
Telephone	64%	49%
Letters	35%	27%
Meetings/Visits	29%	55%
Email	24%	14%
Fax	3%	2%
Other	1%	2%

*Officials were allowed to give multiple answers to these questions. Thus, the totals add up to more than 100%.

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project City Government Survey, January 2002 – April 2002. N=482. Margin of error is ±4.1%.

reported in 2001 that most Congressional email comes from non-constituents, and that staffers spend a significant amount of time weeding out and discarding those messages.[8] It is likely that city officials are far less likely than members of Congress to be plagued with non-constituent email, although we did not directly ask local officials if their email came exclusively from the voters who elected them.

Email contributes to understanding of community opinion
Seventy-three percent of online officials in our sample agree that the exchange of email with citizens contributes to their understanding of community opinion. About one fifth of online officials in our sample (21%) say that mass email campaigns demonstrated a unity and sense of purpose of which they had been previously unaware. The benefits appear to increase in more connected cities. Some 84% of online officials who live in highly wired communities (those where over half the population has access) say email helps their understanding of community opinion. Moreover, the officials who use email most often are the most likely to extol its virtues. Some 92% of the officials who use email with citizens daily say email helps them discern local sentiment.

Conversely, officials from cities reporting the lowest levels of access are less likely to benefit in this manner. About 64% of online officials from low-access cities (communities with under 30% of the population online) agreed with this statement: "Due

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[8] The Congress Online Project also reported in 2002 that Congressional staff had adopted more technologies for handling email, so that despite increased email loads, the burdens of handling email had greatly decreased. http://www.congressonlineproject.org/080702.html

to low levels of Internet access in my city, I cannot rely on email to help me get a true sense of community opinion."

Officials say email is a moderately effective tool for promoting policies
Email presents some benefits and few pitfalls to officials in managing their community relations. Some 56% agree that email has helped their relations with community groups – 11% agree strongly. Understandably, officials are more likely to find email useful in their community relations as the number of residents with email access increases. About 47% of those in low-access cities agree that it is useful, compared to 71% of those in high-access municipalities.

Most of these officials say email and the Internet have not generated new and difficult-to-meet expectations about how local officials do their jobs. While letter writers may expect several days to elapse before getting a response, it has been suggested that email writers expect acknowledgements of their missives right away. When asked if email encouraged unrealistic expectations for responsiveness, 54% of said no. That still leaves a significant minority – 30% – for whom email has created some problems (16% of respondents provided no opinion). There were no clear patterns to help explain why some officials had no problems with citizen expectations and others did. The differences were not explained by the position the officials held (mayors compared to city council members), their frequency of email use, the percent of constituents with Internet access, or city size.

Mixed reviews on how well email supports public debate on knotty local issues
We asked officials to indicate the extent to which they agreed with two statements: "Email from citizens facilitates public discussion of complex issues" and "Community listservs and email cannot support public discussion of complex issues." The results indicate that the role of electronic communications in complicated policy disputes is not clear-cut.

Online local officials' evaluation of the role of email and listservs in public debate					
	Agree Strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly	No Response
Email from citizens facilitates public discussion of issues	8%	53%	22%	4%	13%
Community listservs and email cannot support public discussion of complex issues	7%	31%	39%	5%	18%
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project City Government Survey, January 2002 - April 2002. N=412. Margin of error is ±4.5%.					

Some 61% of officials agree that email can facilitate discussion of complex issues. Further, we find correlations that show officials from larger cities, officials in cities with higher levels of Internet access, and officials who use email frequently are more likely to agree.

At the same time, however, a large minority (38%) also agreed with the statement "Community listservs and email cannot support public discussion of complex issues." This includes 35% of the officials who agree that the email can *facilitate* public debate.

Furthermore, when asked to rate email's effectiveness for accomplishing a variety of goals, officials gave "engaging the public in debate" an average score of "Not very effective."

It appears that officials believe that the use of email should not be judged to be good or bad communications tool on it own. Rather, the message seems to be that the usefulness of email is limited. On the one hand, email and community listservs certainly provide an easy medium for participating in local debates. Anyone with an email account can participate, at any time that is convenient. Conscientious participants can ensure they provide compelling responses by taking time to research press and government sites, which they can link to their posts. One respondent to our Web site request for anecdotes credited email with helping citizens overcome media monopoly in getting public opinion delivered to city government. However, nothing in listserv technology itself drives consensus building, or even clarification of divided opinion, both of which are crucial to public discussions. These factors may contribute to the mixed review that email receives when officials judge how useful it is in gauging and guiding public opinion.

Mixed reviews on email as a tool for outreach

About half (48%) of the online officials in our sample agreed that email has enabled them to reach out to neighborhood or issue-oriented groups. The most frequent users of email are more likely than non-frequent users to have used email this way. Some 74% of those who use email daily for official purposes say they have done outreach to local groups and these heavy email users are also more likely than other officials to have from local groups via email. One official notes sending out periodic informational emails to constituents. A mayor from a city of 21,000 wrote enthusiastically about how the *city's* mass email campaigns have effectively mobilized citizens, including getting 600 to show up for a "locally important Federal hearing."

Another official tempered the email effect by noting that it "expedited" rather than "enabled" outreach to citizens.

At the far end of the spectrum are about 50 online officials who declined to address any of the evaluation questions, many saying that they simply did not have enough experience dealing with citizens through email to assess email's value. One wrote emphatically in all capital letters: "DO NOT LIKE TO USE EMAIL TO COMMUNICATE WITH RESIDENTS!"

Online local officials are not overly impressed by mass email campaigns, but note that some do bring local concerns to light

Some activists have taken up the strategy of trying to influence officials by urging citizens to email their elected officials. The activists sometimes will provide the text of the email so that individuals can simply cut, paste, and send it to the local leader. The effectiveness of this kind of

Percent of online local officials who have been targeted by email campaigns, by city population	
City population size	
10,000-20,000	20%
20,000-50,000	28%
50,000-150,000	51%
Over 150,000	74%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project City Government Survey, January 2002 – April 2002. N=190 Margin of error is ±13%.

campaign has been questioned in some quarters. While there have been some leaders who were caught off guard by the scope of feeling in the community communicated via full email in-boxes, others find such campaigns frustrating and as easy to ignore as activists found them easy to generate. One tactic some activists take to try to increase the urgency and potency of communications has been to encourage citizens to follow an email with a fax on the same issue. Their reasoning is that an inbox physically overflowing with a stack of paper faxes is more compelling than an email box full of electronic messages. Our survey suggests this is not a very persuasive technique. Only 2% of officials say that they give weight to faxed correspondence.

Just over one third (35%) of online local officials report having been targeted by a mass email campaign. Some 12% report being targeted by a fax campaign. Officials in larger cities were the most likely to have received organized email. The most frequent issues addressed in these campaigns include traffic, zoning and municipal services. We asked officials to write in any specific campaign issues that were not included in the survey responses. These included a variety of environmental concerns, parks and recreation issues, salaries for municipal employees, queries about online local officials' views on national and international issues, and development issues, as well as a few eye-poppers such as "having a pig for a pet" and "animal alteration (don't ask)."

These campaigns have achieved mixed results. Half of targeted officials said such campaigns had persuaded them "in part" of the merits of a group's arguments, but that may mean little to the citizens concerned. "One can appreciate the merits of an argument and still vote the other way," noted one official. Almost half (48%) said such campaigns had not had any persuasive power whatsoever. Only 1% of online officials said they were targeted by campaigns so stellar that they were convincing.

Sixty-one percent of online officials agree that "Campaigns that involve mass emails to my office are not convincing due to the ease of sending email, the impossibility of verifying who sends emails, or other reasons." One in six (16%) agree strongly. The sentiment holds both in theory and in experience – even officials who had never been on the receiving end of an organized email campaign said such campaigns would carry little weight with them.

The issues about which city officials are lobbied via email	
35% of the officials in this survey have been targeted by organized email lobbying campaigns. Here's what they hear about most often in those campaigns.	
Issue	*The percent who have been lobbied about this issue*
Traffic	25%
Zoning	25%
Municipal services	23%
Police/community relations	23%
Social justice issues	15%
Schools	9%
Crime	9%
Public transportation	8%
Cable TV rates	6%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project City Government Survey, January 2002 – April 2002. N=182.

Even email enthusiasts among our respondents generally prefer not to be on the receiving end of mass email campaigns. Among those who use email daily in their communications with citizens, 60% still express tepid feelings for this form of activism. Also, 61% of those who attribute significant weight to email communications also dislike mass email campaigns.

On the other hand, if such campaigns are not popular, neither are they universally reviled. Some 25% of online officials claim that online campaigns directed at their offices "showed good background research, plausible solutions, and demonstrated public support," although not all of them said they had been targeted by such a campaign. Among those who have, the agreement level increases to 42%. On the other hand, 36% of targeted officials agree that online campaigns directed at their office have been "poorly organized and irritating." One particularly frustrated respondent noted that such campaigns appear to come from a "[h]andful of malcontents. Same people, same message, just more garbage to sort through."

Of course, we cannot contend that these campaigns would have been more successful if organizers had asked their supporters to use the phone rather than their modems, even if officials do claim to give more weight to phone calls. Political campaigns require more strategic thinking than that. Some officials may truly prefer email and be more open to it. Some may be unavailable by phone. Some may have definite preferences that need to be taken into account. One official said "For the foreseeable future I don't see email changing my mind on issues. I need personal contact to understand issues [on which] I differ [with constituents]."

Apparently, email campaigns can work within the context of a larger communications effort. Sixty-one percent of online officials agreed that such campaigns are successful "only if they get people to show up for meetings or call my office." Given the overall preference for meetings and phone calls as means to communicate with citizens, this is not surprising.

Online local officials' view of email campaigns					
	Agree Strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly	No Response
Campaigns that involve mass emails to my office are not convincing due to ease of sending email, the impossibility of verifying who sends emails, or other reasons.	16%	45%	20%	1%	18%
Campaigns that involve mass emails to my office have demonstrated unity and strength of opinion that we did not know existed.	1%	20%	49%	9%	21%
Campaigns that involve mass emails to my office are effective only if they get people to show up for meetings or call my office.	12%	49%	18%	1%	20%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project City Government Survey, January 2002 - April 2002. N=391. Margin of error is ±4.6%.

THE EFFECT OF INTERNET USE AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS

Some local governments are taking the lead in bringing the Internet into community life. More local governments have Web sites than Americans are aware of. And local officials are embracing email as a tool in their constituent relations, perhaps to a degree that many of their constituents do not fully appreciate.

The scale of local government allows for two-way communications over email that may not be feasible at higher levels of government. Online local officials say they have been quite able to handle the volume of email that they receive. Furthermore, email allows officials to show a responsiveness unfettered by the time restraints of returning phone calls or the expense of preparing and mailing letters. It also provides opportunity for outreach, rather than mere responsiveness, to the community.

But in many areas, email has a way to go in being considered a conduit for "serious" civic communications. Perhaps email is "too easy" to use and is discounted by some officials as an inappropriate and ineffective tool for communicating with citizens. While it is very useful for information gathering and sharing, it has yet to demonstrate a robust effect in consensus building and decision-making.

Does this mean that email is just another communication tool that may speed up some information exchanges, but has no net effect on the local political scene? At first glance, it may seem that this is the case. Given the small number of Americans who use the Web for local purposes, and even smaller number who are aware of email being used to engage local officials, those officials who do use the Internet to talk to citizens may be dealing with a political and technical elite. The technical elite may disappear as more and more people come online to use email. But the political elite – those who are sufficiently involved to initiate contact with local officials – are likely to remain a small and consistent group.

Nonetheless, email does have some democratizing effects of its own. It is an effective anonymizer, erasing racial and economic differences. (The Santa Monica PEN network allowed homeless participants using free library terminals to have a voice in debates without betraying their status.) It allows residents to find their own time for entering discussion. In short, it reduces barriers to public participation, allowing citizens to investigate participation without undue time and expense. While this by no means guarantees that politically apathetic individuals will suddenly gain a zeal for politics, it may allow some entry into local political life by those who would otherwise have neither the time nor the contacts.

Those officials who use email are to some degree participating in the reshaping of the local political base. A majority (54%) noted that their use of email had brought them into contact with citizens from whom they had not heard before. And another group (21%) found in mass email campaigns a sense of unity and purpose of which they had been previously unaware. Email is bringing greater connectivity to and appreciation of local

constituencies. So local officials who use email are facilitating the entrance of new political participants to American cities.