

# Communicating with the Public More Effectively

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## Introduction

Political contact is an inherent feature of many democratic systems around the globe and describes the interaction between representatives and citizens. Evident in a variety of different forms, from casual encounters on the street to formal consultation processes, representatives and those they represent can interact in different ways and mediums. Although an essential feature of many representative systems, we currently know little about the conditions in which such contact is viewed favourably (or not), and whether the content and media of said contact actually matters.

The United Kingdom, renowned for developing close links between representatives and their constituents, has exhibited a growing desire for contact with MPs. As observed below, communication demands on MPs have increased dramatically since the 1920s.

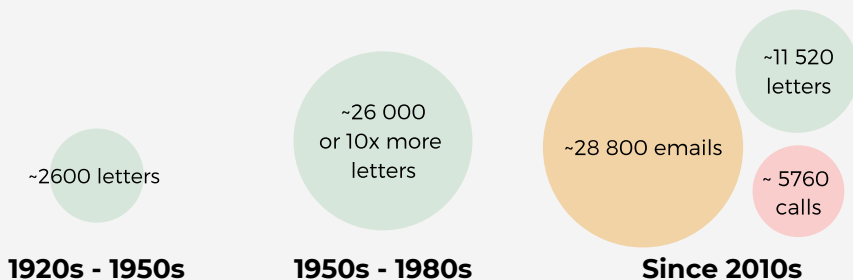


Figure 1. Annual communication received by MPs from 1920s to 2010s



## Investigating Political Contact

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Within the context of growing evidence of political discontent and negative public views about representatives and representative processes, this is a significant gap in our understanding of democratic representation. Thus, in this project, we ask if the quality of contact between governors and governed can positively impact public satisfaction and incentivise further engagement.

Looking in detail at four processes by which citizens can contact their representatives (face-to-face, by letter, email or social media), we created a scenario-based survey where the quality of MP communications were adjusted based on personalisation and speed. In this survey, we designed four experiments based on four salient public concerns: plastic pollution, homelessness, train fares, and NHS waiting times. Based on these scenarios, 1500 survey participants were asked to respond, indicating how satisfied they were with their experience of said political contact and the likelihood that they would pursue future contact with a representative.

## WHAT WE FOUND

In conducting this study, we were interested in exploring the extent to which representatives could tailor their political contact with the public to affect citizens' satisfaction and anticipated future engagement. Specifically, we explored whether variations in the content and timeliness of MPs' responses to citizens' communications across varying media precipitated differences in these outcome variables. We found:



**01** PERSONALISED RESPONSES CAN SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE CITIZENS' SATISFACTION WITH POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND MODERATELY IMPROVE THE LIKELIHOOD OF RE-ENGAGEMENT.

**02** QUICK RESPONSES TO COMMUNICATION CAN MARGINALLY IMPROVE CITIZENS' SATISFACTION AND RATES OF ANTICIPATED POLITICAL CONTACT, ALTHOUGH NOT TO THE SAME DEGREE AS PERSONALISED CONTENT.

**03** THERE IS LITTLE VARIATION IN THESE OUTCOMES ACROSS DIFFERENT FORMS OF MEDIA (EMAIL, LETTER, AND SOCIAL MEDIA).

# What Does This Mean For MPs and What Can They Do?

To increase satisfaction with political contact, our findings suggest small adjustments to current communication practices may result in positive constituent outcomes as well as enhanced civic engagement. These modifications include:

- 01 PERSONALISING CORRESPONDENCE BY ADDRESSING THE CONSTITUENT CORRECTLY BY NAME.
- 02 ACKNOWLEDGING THE CONSTITUENT'S SPECIFIC CONCERNS IN THE RESPONSE.
- 03 REPRESENTATIVES SHOULD FOCUS ON THE CONTENT BEING COMMUNICATED, RATHER THAN SEEK TO USE AS MANY PLATFORMS AS POSSIBLE.

## AN EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE

Dear Valued Constituent,

Thank you for writing to me about your concerns. I am working very hard to resolve local issues and have taken your letter into consideration.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have further questions.

Best wishes  
John Hancock MP



Dear Marianne,

Thank you so much for your letter dated 11 April 2019, where you shared your concerns about the local hospital closing. I agree that it would be detrimental to the community. To this end I have set up a meeting with the local health trust.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have further questions.

Thank you.

Best wishes  
John Hancock MP



# Why This Might Be Challenging

Whilst these recommendations may suggest that improving people's view of political contact is easy, it is important to remember that there are factors that may make it hard for MPs to create favourable views.



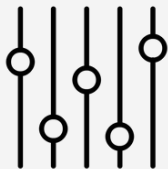
Individually, politicians face large numbers of correspondence, extreme workloads, and confront a range of stresses in navigating the vocation of politics. This means they may not have the capacity to respond.



Institutional restrictions such as parliamentary budget, equipment, and training may also limit how MPs manage their staff and offices.



The challenges MPs face in political contact might be exacerbated for those who hold ministerial portfolios or have additional responsibilities.



People's views of political contact may be affected by other factors (such as their own party preferences).

This suggests that MPs may not always be able to create positive views, but our research suggests that there are good reasons to make these small changes to attempt to improve how contact is viewed.



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To read more about the study, please read the full article on The British Journal of Politics and International Relations: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120919683>



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