



# Congressional Internship

## Methods U.S. Senators Gather Constituent Feedback



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Kellogg Honors College Capstone Project

### CONGRESSIONAL INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

#### Internship Snapshot:

United States Senator Dianne Feinstein Los Angeles District Office  
June 2022 – September 2022  
Tuesday and Thursday 8am to 5pm

#### Senator Feinstein Background:

Senator Dianne Feinstein serves in Congress as a United States Senator from California. She was elected to the Senate in 1992. During this time, there were only two female senators in the Senate. She has since become the longest-serving woman senator, with a record thirty years in the Senate. She is one of two United States senators from California. As a U.S. Senator, Feinstein votes, sponsors, and cosponsors different legislation that can affect people across the United States. Senator Feinstein serves on four committees; Judiciary, Intelligence, Appropriations, and Rules and Administration. She has four district offices across California; Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, and Fresno. All district offices assist constituents, serve as a home base for her field representatives and take constituent calls to report on their views and problems that must be addressed.

#### Policy Project:

Part of my internship included a Policy Project that I sent to Senator Feinstein and presented in front of her LA team, including her State Director. For my policy project, I drafted the "The Foster Youth Higher Education Success Act of 2022" to address the financial obstacles foster youth face when attending higher education.



#### Internship Duties:

As a congressional summer intern in United States Senator Feinstein's district office in Los Angeles, I had day to day responsibilities to complete, however depending on the day I took on additional tasks. I worked approximately sixteen hours every week, coming into the office at eight in the morning then leaving at five in the evening.

There were five main daily tasks I was responsible for in the office; clips, mail, calls, letters and call report.

- Clips: Selected 10 – 15 articles from local papers for Senator Feinstein and her team to read.
- Mail: Process mail that comes into the office, they rang from invitations, flyers, constituent feedback and casework etc.
- Calls: Answer constituent calls and take down feedback if they are calling to voice their opinion. I also assisted constituents who had general questions or needed help with a federal agency.
- Letters: Are requested from the Senator, from a member of the public, or an organization to celebrate a milestone. They need to be drafted in her writing style and the type of verbiage she uses. Once they have been prepared and approved by the staff assistant, they are ready for the Senators signature.
- Call Reports: Covers all constituent calls and voicemails from the day. The call report includes the number of calls received on an issue, a brief message about the call, and whether the message is in favor or against what a constituent called for.

Additionally, interns accompanied field reps for local meetings and events when possible and sometimes attended on behalf of the field representative. When attending an event or meeting on your own, you must take notes, create a report to send to the field representative, and provide a briefing if requested.

- Meetings attended:
- White House Monkey Pox weekly briefings
  - Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority
  - Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority 2022 Homeless Count presentation
  - West LA Veteran Affairs campus master plan briefing
  - West LA Veteran Affairs Campus construction briefing and tour
  - Los Angeles Water Authority – Santa Susana MOA
  - Cal Poly Pomona legislative meeting with CPP Government Affairs and campus tour

#### MEMO

TO: Senator Feinstein  
FROM: Melane Olmeda (Intern)  
DATE: September 15, 2022  
SUBJECT: Foster Youth Higher Education Success Act of 2022

**DF Request:** Approve staff drafting "The Foster Youth Higher Education Success Act of 2022", which would expand The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (The Chafee Program) Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs).

#### What the bill would do:

- Increase the ETV amount from its current amount of \$5,000 to \$12,000.
- Raise the eligibility age for ETV's from 25 years old to 29 years old.
- Expand the number of years foster use can apply for an ETV from 5 years to 6 years.

#### Background:

- Only 50% of foster youth finish high school and only 3% obtain a college education.
- Approximately 1 in 4 foster youth will become homeless after aging out of the foster youth system.
- The cost of tuition at an average 4-year institution from 1999-2000 and 2019-2020 has increased 136.5% and the cost of living has risen 72.05% since 2000.

**Recommendation:** Yes, approve staff drafting the legislation. Education has the power to transform anyone's life, creating opportunities and employment. As the cost of living and education continues to rise at a rapid rate, vulnerable populations like foster youth need additional support to succeed when exiting the foster care system. This aligns with your support for S.2081, the "Pell Grant Preservation and Expansion Act of 2021".

Approve staff drafting the bill? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

### GATHERING CONSTITUENT FEEDBACK

#### Background:

As established in the Constitution, two senators will be elected from each state regardless of size or population. Since the founding of this country, the idea that elected representatives are presumed to act on the interest and instruction of those they are representing has been an essential foundation. United States Senators face a particular challenge serving their state while representing the United States through federal legislative action.

In California, the two active senators are United States Senator Dianne Feinstein and United States Senator Alex Padilla. There is an estimated population of over 39.24 million California residents who are meant to serve and act on their behalf. California has the largest and most diverse state population in the United States. Being able to address the concerns and properly help such a large unique population is a huge undertaking.

Since constituents play a vital role in government affairs, this study addresses how elected officials receive opinions and feedback in the United States Senate. Drawing from my internship experience at Senator Feinstein's Los Angeles Office, this research evaluates how elected officials communicate feedback requests to their constituents through various media, including their senate.gov webpages, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

#### Literature Review:

Constituent communications through direct feedback significantly impacted Elected Officials' legislative actions more than constituent polls (Bergan, 2014; Chupp, 2010; Cole, 2014; Lee, 2002). Additionally, the common ways Elected Official's offices collected and took down constituent feedback outlined the need for more reporting of social media data (Abernathy 2018). In the House of Representatives, 36% did not note whether they were in favor or against the matter the constituent was calling to discuss (Abernathy 2018).

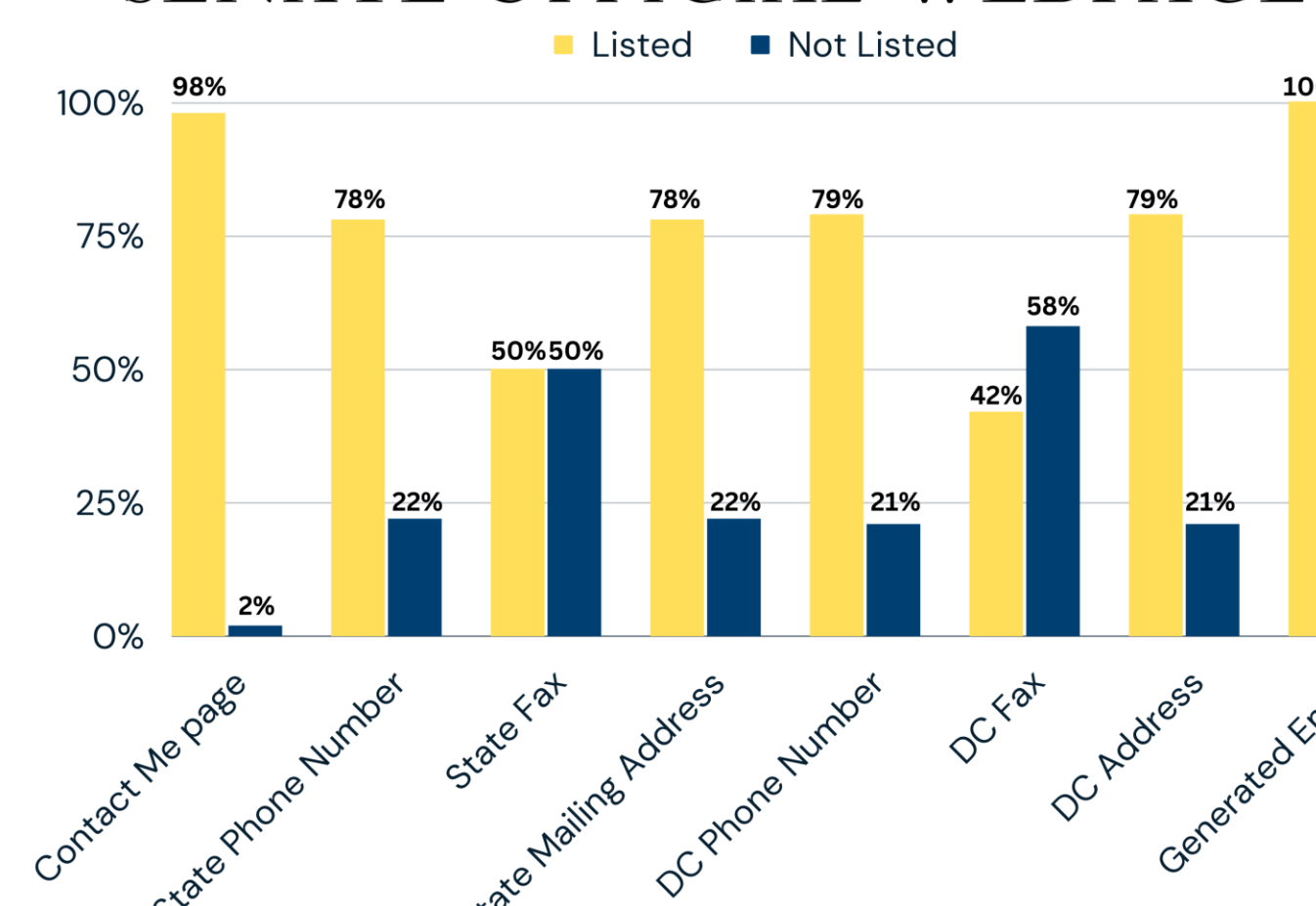
Although constituent concerns impact elected officials' work and policy actions, every office has policies and protocols to handle constituent feedback that leaves holes in constituent feedback data.

#### Research:

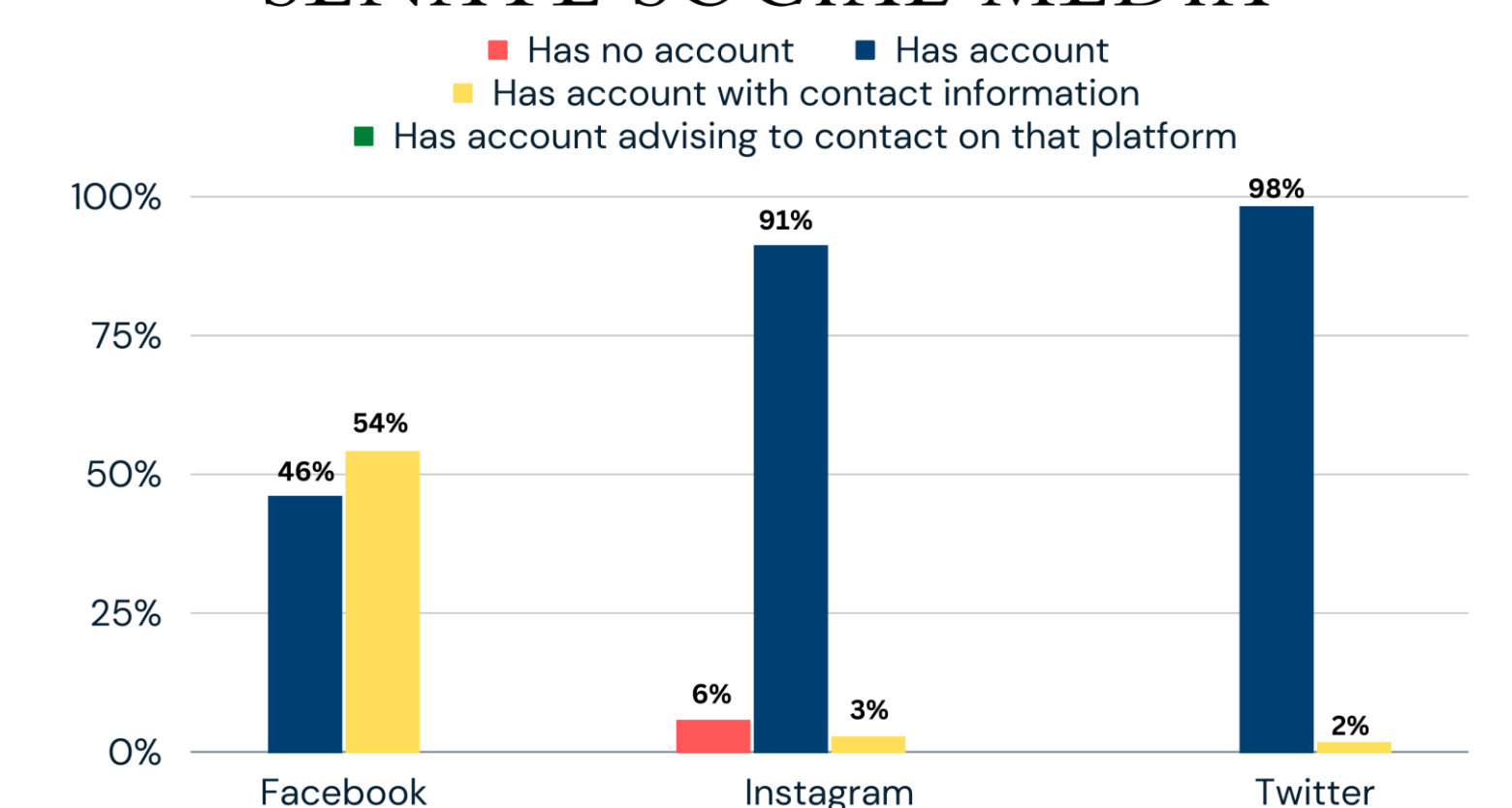
In order to assess how U.S. Senators gathered constituent feedback I examined their Senate.gov webpages and official social media accounts on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. The findings only include written text on their Senate.gov "contact" webpage or official social media pages of the senate office discussed. No videos were coded on their senate webpages or social media accounts in my research. Social Media contact information includes phone, fax numbers, offices addresses or direct links to contact me webpages.

#### Findings:

##### SENATE OFFICIAL WEBPAGE



##### SENATE SOCIAL MEDIA



All senate offices utilize generated emails on their official webpages. 78% listed their state office phone numbers and addresses and 79% listed their DC phone numbers and addresses. The lowest form of advertised communication was fax with 50% in the state offices and 42% in their DC locations. Although almost all US Senators utilize Facebook, Twitter and Facebook there are 6% of senators who do not have a Instagram account. On those social media platforms only 54% list contact information on Facebook, 3% on Instagram and 2% on Twitter.

#### Senator Feinstein's Constituent Feedback Gathering Methods Strengths and Weaknesses:

The constituent communications recorded in Senator Feinstein's office were calls, faxes, emails, and letters. On the Senator's official website, www.feinstein.senate.gov, the contact page states, "Please be in touch if you want to let me know your thoughts about an issue if you are looking for more information regarding a specific piece of legislation," then list the ways to get in touch with her listing three options to contact her for your thoughts; Contact her Washington DC office, Contact one of her four district offices and send me an email. Senator Feinstein effectively promotes all methods of communication available on her senate.gov contact me page.

Senator Feinstein's office has no social media policies or procedures for recording constituent feedback shared on her Twitter or Facebook accounts. In the age of technology and with social media's popularity on the rise, critical constituent feedback may need to be recorded from social media web pages. According to Pew Research Center, in 2021, 72% of U.S. adults used social media, and in 2022 40% reported using Instagram. Senator Feinstein does not have an Instagram account; creating an Instagram social media would create a greater outreach to her constituents.

#### Discussion:

While it is the norm not to count social media messages in any constituent report, social media webpages should list how constituents can provide feedback that will be counted. All social media profiles on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter should list phone numbers to call to leave feedback or should include a link that goes straight to the Senator's contact me page. This would ensure constituents can provide input and bring awareness to how their voice will be counted.

#### Sources and Appendix:



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