Introduction

“Dear Senator Douglas,” wrote thousands of people to United States Senator Stephen A. Douglas in the 1850s for thousands of different reasons. “Humble constituents” and “ardent supporters” wrote Douglas to express their “most hearty approval,” to ask him to “releave us of [an] uncalled for officer,” to inquire about the status of a bill, to request “an appointment of purser in the navy” or “Patten office reports,” and for myriad other reasons. People, in ever growing numbers, wrote to Douglas as “strangers,” “political friends,” “brothers,” “admirers,” and “constituents.” They asked him for things, they asked him to do things, and sometimes they wrote simply to tell him things. These letters were often personal. Indeed, letter-writing is a personal process. As David Gerber has observed, “It is the closest approximation that both parties involved in a correspondence may come to that which they most desire, but cannot obtain -- an intimate conversation.” And Douglas’ correspondents felt that intimacy, often intensely. They apologized profusely at times for intruding on his Senate duties, and begged to be pardoned

1 Visiting Assistant Professor, Duke University Law School; Ph.D. Candidate (History), University of Chicago. The author would like to thank Kathleen Conzen, Bill Novak, Amy Stanley, Dan Hamilton, Richard John, Al Brophy, Jamie Boyle, Thom Bahde, Gautham Rao, Kyle Volk, the participants in the Political History Workshop at the University of Chicago, and my classmates in Kathleen Conzen’s Social History Seminar for their wonderful comments, criticisms, and suggestions. I would also like to thank the staff at the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago’s Regenstein Library for their help guiding me through the Stephen Douglas collection and for permission to use the collection in this paper.

for such intrusions. But this did not stop them from writing, as evidenced by the more than 15,000 letters that can be found among Douglas’ papers.3

The existence of this correspondence raises some interesting questions about the nature of political representation in the mid-19th century. At a time when elections were the cornerstone of political representation, the United States Senate stands out as an anomaly; a virtually representative body in an age of actual representation. In the decades leading up to the Civil War, for instance, not only was the right to vote extended, but states made most state officers elective, including governors, state senators, even state judges. Even before the Civil War Gordon Wood, for instance, “Election in America became the sole criterion of representation,” and “only with the ballot would [someone] protect his interests.”4 The U.S. Senate, though, was an exception to this trend. While the federal judiciary also proved resistant to these changes, as a

---

3 Constituent correspondence has been largely overlooked by historians, especially legal and political historians. The social science political historians (the first “new” political history) tended to dismiss it because it lacked empirical value. Though there was some sense that it might be useful, it was not a source that many explored. Margaret Susan Thompson and Joel H. Silbey, “Research on 19th Century Legislatures: Present Contours and Future Directions,” Legislative Studies Quarterly 9 (May, 1984), 319-350. There have been some collections of letters written to presidents. See, e.g., Harold Holzer, ed., The Lincoln Mailbag: America Writes to the President, 1861-1865 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006); Lawrence W. Levine and Cornelia Levine, The People and the President: America's Extraordinary Conversation with FDR (Beacon Press, 2002); Jack McLaughlin, ed., To His Excellency Thomas Jefferson: Letters to a President (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991). By and large, however, constituent correspondence has been “used mostly to provide color and drama in historical narratives, or to document societal-level and group level generalizations based on other primary sources, social science theory, or manipulation of aggregate data taken from published, mostly official, sources, such as census records.” Gerber, Authors of Their Lives, 31. For an interesting use of correspondence by a legal historian, see John Phillip Reid, Law for the Elephant: Property and Social Behavior on the Overland Trail (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1980).

house of the national legislature, the Senate was particularly anomalous.\(^5\) Moreover, it wasn’t until the 17th Amendment was ratified in 1913 that United States senators became elected officials.\(^6\) And yet, at least prior to the Civil War, there was not much frustration with the Senate’s position.\(^7\) Indeed, after 1820 the Senate was one of the most respected political institutions in the United States, as Douglas’ correspondence suggests. Why, then, if these correspondents did not vote for their U.S. senator, did they write to him as if they did? Did they actually view him as their representative, and if so how?

In this article, I attempt to answer these questions in a couple of different ways. First, I explore how their correspondence was conveyed. How people were able to send letters to their senators, and receive things in return, is an important aspect to this story. As Richard John has


\(^6\) Hoebeke, *The Road to Mass Democracy*.

\(^7\) According to George Haynes, five bills were introduced in Congress before the Civil War providing for a constitutional amendment to make them elected. They were all tabled without discussion. George H. Haynes, *The Election of Senators* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1906).
demonstrated, the conveyance of information played a crucial role in transformation of American governance and political culture in the early republic. Building on his work, I argue that postal policy, particularly the franking privilege, played an important role in the structural transformation of political representation by facilitating the free conveyance of letters and packages to and from federal representatives. Examining the role of postal policy reveals a new structure of representation that was built up over the course of the early republic. The completion of the postal system with post offices reaching seemingly everywhere within the federal government’s jurisdiction meant that it was possible for a broad swathe of the population to write and convey letters for the first time. This new structure of communication coincided with other changes, including the opening of the Senate that made it more visible and accessible to the public and a party system that put federal representatives into new relationships with party members. Although not a conscious construction, it created new structures of communication and representation that lay both beyond and within the federal constitution.

Second, I explore the specific reasons for which they wrote. It is important to understand the range of subjects about which they wrote, and the things for which they asked. Two things emerge from an examination of the content of their requests. One reveals the role that correspondence played in registering public opinion. Letters allowed citizens to express their views more specifically than they could by merely voting. Second, in requesting public information from their senator, they in effect gave the Senate an important role in the distribution of information. This in turn provided a material nexus for the representative relationship.

Finally, I explore another “how” question. How correspondence wrote their letters is as important for understanding the nature of representation in the mid-19th century as the requests
they made. What is so often let out of studies of representation, and what I am trying to recapture here, is the relationship between representatives and constituents. Indeed, we know very little about how ordinary people in the mid-19th century viewed the Senate, how they understood their relationship to their senators, or how they interacted with their senators once in office. To a certain extent this is a source problem; it is hard to find their voices. Constituent correspondence offers probably one of the few opportunities to uncover how ordinary people thought about representation. The epistolary form, in fact, provides a unique opportunity understand the Senate and its relationship to the public through the discourses it reveals. Two discourses with respect to political representation were prominent. One was partisanship, which correspondents used in a number of different ways to establish a relationship with Douglas and a theory of constituency. A second was a related discourse of deference that was used to establish a paternalistic relationship and a sense of obligation on both sides. Together these discourses served to create an understanding of political representation rooted in both equality and hierarchy. These new structures of communication and representation likely moderated the impact of the Senate’s non-elective mode of representation. The Senate’s own internal

---


9 I am, of course, making a major assumption here, that these writers were ordinary people not elites. What seems clear from the letters is that most writers did not know Douglas personally, nor anyone who knew him. Indeed, many letters were written by people who knew Douglas, and they had a much different tone.

10 The literature on parties and partisanship is vast. But it is generally understood that the emergence of political parties undermined older political practices. More work needs to be done on the ways in which the newer and older political practices worked together. For examples, see Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Formisano, “Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic’s Political Culture, 1789-1840” *The American Political Science Review* 68 (1974), 473-87; Susan Radomsky, “The Social Life of Politics: Washington’s Official Society and the Emergence of a National Political Elite, 1800-1876” (Ph.D. Diss. University of Chicago, 2005).
institutionalization, which made it both more visible and more accessible, likely helped too.\textsuperscript{11} But without new channels of communication, and people willing and able to take advantage of them, the Senate’s internal changes would have been much more limited.

\textit{The Correspondence}

Before detailing this transformation of representation, however, it is important to have some idea of what is contained in the correspondence. Douglas’ correspondence includes over 15,000 letters covering 36 boxes.\textsuperscript{12} I examined 1142 letters in sixteen boxes, covering the years 1844, when Douglas entered the House of Representatives as a congressman, to early 1858, and 1860 to 1861, when Douglas died in office.\textsuperscript{13} The 1142 letters include all the letters from Illinoisans in the boxes covered, as well as a handful of letters from out-of-state residents. Surprisingly, the bulk of the letters were written from people outside of Illinois; the percentage of


\textsuperscript{13} Having said that, problems remain with using this correspondence as a source. For instance, I have not investigated the backgrounds of the correspondents. Thus, I cannot say much about backgrounds of the people who wrote. Second, there is a self-selection problem; not everyone from Illinois wrote to Douglas. Knowing who did not write can be just as important as knowing who did. Some glimpse into the minds of those who did not write can be seen in the letters written to Douglas by people who explicitly stated their reasons for not writing other representatives. But other sources are necessary for a fuller idea of the corresponding universe. Also, without knowing what, if anything, was being written to state legislators, particularly about Senator Douglas, and what was being written to other public officials, we can only have a partial picture of the nature of the relationship between senators and constituents. Finally, there is the problem of collection; we do not know why the letters in the collection were retained. Nor do we know about letters that were destroyed. This could skew the themes that emerge from the collection.

\textsuperscript{13} I should say a word about the selection of Douglas for this study. Douglas was an exceptional figure in the U.S. Senate in that he served almost five times longer than the average pre-Civil War U.S. Senator. He was also a national political and party figure, as well as the main political lightening-rod of the 1850s. Douglas was both loved and hated as a politician. He was a fierce partisan and party-builder, and generated both passionate supporters and opponents. As a result, his correspondence may not be representative of the broader world of constituent correspondence around the country. Partisanship themes could perhaps be more pronounced, as may themes of loyalty and devotion. Yet his notoriety may also be to our advantage. People may have been more apt to write to Douglas than other senators. And the polarizing effects of his political personality may help to highlight ideas and themes that might otherwise remain obscure.
out-of-state letters increased notably in the latter set of boxes. I have ignored the few boxes from his years in the House, and just focused on those from his Senate years.\textsuperscript{14}

The correspondence fell into strong enough patterns to identify several categories. By far the most overwhelming type of letter was what would probably be referred to today as “constituent service.” Correspondents asked for a variety of things, including documents, appointments to office, letters of recommendation, and requests for reference letters. Document and patronage requests formed the bulk of this part of the correspondence. This is not surprising as “[t]hroughout the nineteenth century the political fortunes of members of Congress depended heavily on their ability to send patronage home to their states and districts.”\textsuperscript{15} The remainder of this service correspondence dealt with requests for aid of varying sorts, as well as requests for seeds from the Patent Office. Another type of correspondence was policy. These letters generally fell into two categories -- advocacy and support/congratulatory letters. A final category consisted of a hodgepodge of letters, including business letters, invitations, honorary memberships, and a host of other items.

Document requests generally took three forms. One was to do “battle” with, or to “confront our opponents.” These people wanted documents because, “in order to enable us to combat our common enemy we must seek for all the information we can in reference to our national affairs.” Douglas appreciated this need, and once had 80,000 copies of his speeches made for distribution. In fact, he printed so many copies of his speeches over the years that it

\textsuperscript{14} The Douglas Collection has been at the University of Chicago for sixty years, and was opened to the public in 1994. Another collection was kept in Greensboro, North Carolina until 1992, when it was added to the University of Chicago collection. Additional documents can be found in other collections, including the Illinois State Historical Society in Springfield, Illinois. Johannsen, Douglas, viii-ix.

\textsuperscript{15} Samuel Kernell and Michael P. McDonald, “Congress and America’s Political Development: The Transformation of the Post Office from Patronage to Service,” American Journal of Political Science, 43 (July 1999), 792-811, 792.
placed financial strains on him. Others used documents as a news source. They sought copies of speeches and the Congressional Globe, because they took a “great interest in political and congressional matters,” or because they were “interested in regard to those great national measures with which you are so prominently identified.” Eli Fisk of Havana did “not get any documents and wish you would supply me, for I want to know how things are with you and in Congress.” And W.W. Brown wanted “to Read of our Nebraska friends.” The “sole object in making” these requests, they claimed, was “to correctly inform” themselves.16

But people wanted information for other purposes as well. Other than speeches the most common document requests were for Patent Office, Census, and Smithsonian reports, and railroad reports and surveys. These document requests generated a large volume of mail throughout the nation. According to Wayne Fuller, government documents accounted for over thirty percent of the weight of mail leaving Washington, D.C. as early as 1828. By the 1850s, “laws, books, newspapers, periodicals, government documents, and the Congressional Globe poured through the mails in one mighty torrent, diffusing information certainly, if not knowledge or wisdom.”17

16 C. Lamberton, Peru, to Stephen A. Douglas (“SAD”), April 16, 1856, box 4, folder 1; W.J. Collins, Collins Station, Illinois, to SAD, [Dec. 18, 1857], box 6, folder 13; S.D. Crane, Springfield, to SAD, December 1857, box 6, folder 14; Johannsen, Douglas, 656; A. Michel, Lebanon, to SAD, December 23, 1857, box 8, folder 2; Alvin A. Bacon, Hord P.O., Clay Co., to SAD, January 8, 1860(1?), box 34, folder 3. Eli Fisk, Havana, to SAD, December 30, 1857, box 8, folder 14; W.W. Brown, Chicago, to SAD, December 12, 1857, box 6, folder 23; Jas. W. Welton, Newburg, to SAD, May 30, 1860, box 31, folder 4. All of the correspondence cited in this paper comes from Series 1 of the Douglas Collection in Special Collections Research Center of the Joseph Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago. I examined boxes 1-9 and 30-36, and will cite only to the box and folder number since the series is always the same. Unfortunately, a significant portion of the letters were illegible. I have dispensed with “sic” when quoting these letters.

17 Wayne E. Fuller, The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 109; see also John, Spreading the News. Correspondents occasionally acknowledged receipt of these items. See, e.g., G.L. Iliet[?] to SAD, Pottsville, April 2, 1852, box 2, folder 2.
Patronage requests were another important element of Douglas’ correspondence. People sought all types of appointments from postmaster to lighthouse keeper. “[D]o urge it upon the Department,” wrote Hugh Strickland about his desire for an appointment as a railroad route agent. Another writer sought an appointment from Douglas to “enable me to support my family through the winter.” Some Pawnee had stolen his cattle and he claimed to be penniless. “[T]he times has got so hard, that a person cant get work no more.” So he turned to Douglas “to see if you . . . could do anything for me.” The requests were often simple: “any thing that will mak a Living for my family.” And they were confident that Douglas could “get me the office and I know you will do so if become acquainted with all the facts.” Patronage requests also came in the form of letters of recommendation and removal requests. Several letters urged Douglas to remove a federal official from office. Most common were postmasterships that had fallen into Republican hands.18

There were also letters from those who asked Douglas to intervene on their behalf with the federal government. This often occurred with land and pension issues. Lewis Underwood, for instance, wanted some land at Rock Island, and related that interest to Douglas in no uncertain terms: “I want you to get me that land -- it is a matter of the slightest importance to how you get it -- but get it!! and you shall not be the looser or have cause to ever regret any favor bestowed uppon me.” Similarly, Levi Owen of Union Precinct demanded, “I want you to [secure the land] for me.” Others were a bit less forthright in their demands but still sought Douglas’ aid. “I wish you to attend to some business for me,” wrote Thomas Ross of Victoria, who wanted to

know whether he was eligible for father’s Revolutionary War pension. Some were apologetic:
“If you can in any way assist him by letter to the President or otherwise without doing violence
to your own feelings or sense of propriety it will be thankfully received.” Silas Sears simply
urged Douglas to “Please present this matter and cause me to be informed as soon as may be.”

Occasionally, people wrote to Douglas urging him to take a bill “under your especial
charge.” An “Old Soldier,” for instance, urged Douglas to “be so good as to take up the pention
bill and git us soldiers a pention.” And Pliny Thayer suggested that Douglas “interduce a bill to
instruck the assembly lately Elected in Kanses to order en election of delagats to draft a
constitution and submit the same to a vote of the people for their approvel or rejection.” He
assured Douglas that such a “corse will bee shure to meet the apprebation of your friends in
Illinois.” R. Murphy wrote to say that, “I regret one thing about the Platform, and [that] is the
Home Stead Bill Principles had not been aded. . . . I want to see, one, of your best Effort on that
Bill.” “I doubt not,” wrote Jacob Holt, “you will give this matter due consideration when it shall
be discussed in the Senate and cause such measures to be taken as will improve the currency.”
And a writer from Monticello told Douglas, “I want you to Exert your influence to have a law
passed to confirm the [illegible] to the states. . . . I desire you should do your best to have a law
passed to that effect. I shall expect you to inform me of your proceeding.” One correspondent
demanded that Douglas explain himself. “I write again,” James Mitchell complained, to “call
your attention to my last note. I do expect you to either explain or defend you position in the

19 Lewis Underwood, Sharon Whiteside County, to SAD, December 30, 1855, box 3, folder 15; Levi Owen, Union
Precinct, Randolph County, to SAD, March 21, 1856, box 3, folder 23; Thos. Ross, Victoria, to SAD, December 31,
1860, box 33, folder 22; Joseph Ledlie, Springfield, to SAD, July 10, 1857, box 5, folder 21; Silas Sears, Winslow,
to SAD, December 28, 1857, box 8, folder 11.
matter at issue. . . . I think your present position wholly indefensible.”20 Yet letters demanding Douglas take a certain policy position were rare.21

More common were letters of support and approval. “You are right!!” proclaimed W. Coler. “Every Democrat in this county endorse you in everything you have [said] so far. Keep up the fire, and all will be right in future.” “[E]very Democrat in the country stands firm” for the Kansas-Nebraska Act, wrote James Hughes of Belleville. “[H]ere one and all have felt a great anxiety as to the course which would be taken by our Senator and I and all are well satisfied with your course. . . . [A]nd we now feel all is safe and hope that Kansas Must Come in free or not at all it looks to me like Sound Democratic doctrine.” Even those who had previously opposed Douglas would occasionally offer their support. “Although differing in my political views,” wrote Henry Brown, “I can heartily indorse your position on the Kansas question and can assure you of hearty support of the people of the State which you so ably represent.”22

People wrote to Douglas for other reasons too. But these were the most revealing with respect to how correspondents understood their relationship to Douglas. In registering opinion and taking advantage of the franking privilege by requesting documents and seeds, they brought

20 Bailey Davenport, Rock Island, to SAD, December 15, 1857, box 7, folder, 5; Old Soldier, Knoxville, to SAD, June 27, 1860, box 32, folder 3; Pliny Thayer, Ripley, to SAD, December 21, 1857, box 7, folder 22. David Seem of Freeport made an interesting suggestion that postmasters should be made elective. David Seem, Freeport, Illinois, to SAD, May 21, 1860, box 30, folder 13; R. Murphy, Springfield, to SAD, June 17, 1852, box 2, folder 15; Jacob Holt, Monmouth, to SAD, December 23, 1857, box 8, folder 2; D. Longnecker, Monticello, to SAD, February 11, 1857, box 4, folder 17; James Mitchell, Freeport, to SAD, July 28, 1857, box 5, folder 23.

21 Even less common were appropriations requests. Only one person in the correspondence examined wrote to Douglas requesting an appropriation. L.M. Chapman wanted money for an invention he claimed would prevent boats from sinking. He asked Douglas to take it “into Mature Consideration and if you should deem it worthy of notice to present the Views to Congress that they may appoi[n]t a comity to investigate its merits and if favorable to appropriate $30,000 for the purpose of experiment.” L.M. Chapman, Sterling, Illinois to SAD, December 4, 1857, box 6, folder 17. Chapman was apparently inspired by Samuel Morse’s success in obtaining a $30,000 appropriation for his telegraph invention. I thank Richard John for pointing this out to me.

22 W. Coler, Urbana, to SAD, December 23, 1857, box 8, folder 1 (emphasis in original); Jas. W. Hughes, Belleville, to SAD, December 10, 1857, box 6, folder 21; T.C., Malta, Illinois, to SAD, December [10], 1857, box 6, folder 21 (emphasis in original); Henry Brown, Galesburgh, to SAD, January 18, 1857, box 4, folder 12.
together the new representational structures created by the franking privilege, the postal system, and the party system. Letters were both artifacts of a new political relationship and texts by which they articulated this relationship. As texts, constituent correspondence offers a way into the popular mind. The epistolary form enabled them to articulate their understanding of their relationship to their senator. Here I want to point out three aspects of this correspondence that highlight the transformative impact of constituent letter-writing.

The Structural Transformation of Political Representation

The structural transformation of representation that occurred in the early republic was a combination of federal postal policy, the emergence of political parties, and the opening of the United States Senate. These developments opened up new channels of communication between the public and their senators, and created a new set of political relationships built around partisanship. Postal policy was a crucial element. The franking privilege and congressional control over post roads meant that new groups of people were able to communicate with their federal representatives. The Senate’s internal institutionalization made senators more visible and accessible, and partisanship made senators responsive to party members in new ways. Separate, distinct, and independently conceived phenomena, they were ultimately brought together through constituent correspondence.

The franking privilege -- a privilege that dates back to mid-17th century England, but for our purposes begins with the 1792 Post Office Act -- enabled constituents to write to their federal

representatives for free. Unlike state governments, which generally lacked the franking privilege altogether, the 1792 Post Office Act gave this privilege to members of both houses of Congress, certain executive officials, and occasionally other individuals. Over the next six decades, Congress frequently expanded the privilege. The 1825 and 1847 Post Office Acts proved to be the most important innovations. Section 27 of the 1825 Act allowed members of Congress to send out any document “printed by the order of by either House of Congress.” Congress repealed section 27 in its 1845 Post Office Act, restoring the 1816 Act privilege, which limited the privilege to letters up to 2 ounces. But it reinstated and even expanded the 1825 privilege two years later in the 1847 Post Office Act. The 1847 Act did two things. First, it allowed members to send and receive letters any time during a session of Congress, rather than requiring attendance, which had been the rule since 1792. But more importantly, it allowed them to “send and receive public documents free of postage,” whether or not ordered printed by either House. By the 1850s, these innovations would help to make the Senate a clearinghouse of public information.


25 Glassman, “Franking Privilege,” 6. Interestingly, it wasn’t until 1963 that the House and Senate had different rules on the franking privilege. Ibid., 8.

26 4 Stat. 102 sec. 27, Sess. II, Ch. 64 (March 3, 1825).

27 5 Stat. 732, sec. 5, Sess. II, Ch. 43 (March 3, 1845). The 1816 Post Office Act limited the franking privilege to “letters and packets” not exceeding 2 ounces conveyed during a member’s attendance in Congress plus thirty days before and after each session. 3 Stat. 264, sec. 3, Sess. I, Ch. 43 (April 9, 1816). According to Richard John, one-third of the postmasters resigned in the wake of the 1845 act, because it abolished the franking privilege. John, Spreading the News, 123.

28 9 Stat. 147 sec. 3, Sess. II, Ch. 33 (March 1, 1847).
While most scholarly discussion of the franking privilege has focused on its abuse, Richard John has suggested that it played an important role in the spread of information and in the creation of a national community. Douglas’ correspondence underscores this point, and also suggests that the franking privilege had an important impact on understandings and practices of political representation. In particular, the franking privilege combined with a set of new institutions and social practices to create new structural links between representatives and constituents. The expansion of the postal system, for instance, meant that people beyond the seaports along the Atlantic coast had access to the mails. The completion of the postal system, as John has shown, meant that people at the farthest reaches of the federal government’s jurisdiction had access, through the franking privilege, to their senators. Postal policy, which was originally thought of in terms of distribution, of an outward flow of information likely did not envision the transformation of one of the foundational institutions of the federal government. However, by opening up opportunities for correspondence, the postal system and the franking privilege created new channels for communication between senators and constituents who were able to take advantage of them through their increasing literacy.


30 John, Spreading the News.

31 This suggests the importance of looking beyond traditional formal sources for understanding political and constitutional institutions, as well as emphasizing structural considerations over the more formal.
A second development was the institutionalization of the Senate itself. While the Senate was resistant to formal constitutional reform, it was subject to some fundamental changes in the 19th century. “[T]ransformations in the congressional agenda, electorate, political parties, and institutional leadership,” Elaine Swift has argued, led to an opening of the Senate that made it both more visible and more proactive.32 As a result of this transformation, many senators in the early republic emerged as among the most prominent national politicians, people like Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, John Calhoun, and Stephen Douglas. By making senators more visible, the institutionalization of the Senate opened the possibilities for greater interaction with the public, especially in combination with other political and governmental developments.

Additionally, the emergence of mass political parties and its emphasis on voters placed party leaders and party members in a distinctive relationship. Finally, an expanding and distributive federal government made it worthwhile for people to write to representatives because they could actually receive things from them.33 Together with the franking privilege these developments created a new structure of representation outside of those created by the text of the federal constitution itself.

32 Elaine K. Swift, “Reconstitutive Change in the U.S. Congress: The Early Senate, 1789-1841,” Legislative Studies Quarterly 14 (1989), 175-203, 195. Daniel and Stephen Wirls dispute Swift’s claim about what she calls “reconstitutive change.” According to Swift, the Senate was originally conceived as an American House of Lords. But through a process of internal and exogenous institutionalization, became a distinctive American legislative body by 1840. Elaine K. Swift, The Making of an American Senate: Reconstitutive Change in Congress, 1787-1841 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996). The Wirls reject Swift’s claim that the Senate was originally conceived as a House of Lords. They acknowledge that the Senate emerged from the Constitution as a problematic institution. But argue that it was the result of the confluence of theory and political compromise in the federal convention. Moreover, they date the Senate’s emergence as a “normal” legislative body to 1800. Wirls and Wirls, The Invention of the Senate.

New channels of communication, however, did not mean that people actually took advantage of it.\textsuperscript{34} And for much of the early republic, it was difficult for ordinary people to write letters. For the first half of the 19th century a “taxation on correspondence” largely limited letter-writing to elites. Nonetheless, as Richard Brown points out, even before the post on letters was reduced by the 1845 and 1851 post office acts, correspondence grew from two million letters a year in 1800 to 40 million in 1840.\textsuperscript{35} This growth occurred at the same time a growing instruction in letter-writing emerged, as well as letter-writing habits that spread down the social structure.\textsuperscript{36} By the 1850s, then, Americans in growing numbers had the literacy, instruction, and opportunity to write letters.\textsuperscript{37} And write they did. One of the unintended consequences of the franking privilege was the creation of a new set of institutional agents. This is where constituent correspondence becomes particularly interesting and useful. The opportunities opened up by these structural changes came at a time of increasing literacy and instruction in letter-writing. This increased proficiency in popular communication was important. As we will see, mass


\textsuperscript{35} Richard D. Brown, \textit{Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 60. According to Brown, “Prior to the major letter-rate reductions in 1845 and 1851, letter writing remained confined mostly to merchants, the well-to-do, and public figures who enjoyed the franking privilege, which permitted them to send or received [sic] an unlimited number of letters free of charge.” Ibid., 64-5.


\textsuperscript{37} Although beyond the scope of this paper, it would be interesting, indeed important, to know when popular constituent correspondence to senators began and the rates at which it grew. I cannot make definitive claims about the 1850s on the basis of Douglas’ correspondence, but there does seem to be some reason for believing that the 1850s was an important moment in American letter-writing history, and constituent correspondence as well.
requests for documents helped create a new role for the Senate in the distribution of information, and gave the senator-citizen relationship a material nexus.

In short, then, the franking privilege and the Post Office created new structures and channels of communication between senators and constituents. And increasing literacy and instruction in letter-writing enabled more people to take advantage of partisan political relationships that provided the representative cast correspondents used to establish ties to their senators in order to make requests effective. This representative structure not a conscious creation, it involved an array of actors going about their daily lives. It was the result of opportunities opened by federal policy, new political and social practices, and the desire for information of an array new political actors. Together these structures and practices constituted a hidden transformation of the representational structure of the U.S. Senate.

**Correspondence and Public Opinion**

The opportunity to write their senator, allowed citizens to register their opinion in new, personal ways. Letters enabled individuals to articulate their views to their senator in ways much more specific ways than merely voting.\(^{38}\) This worked in at least two ways. One was explicit support for a particular policy. Typically, as noted earlier, this came in the form of support and encouragement for Douglas' stance on a policy. Letter-writers often wrote to express their views about the major policy and political debates of the day. These people were not necessarily

\(^{38}\) Compare Joel Silbey, “‘Delegates Fresh From the People’: American Congressional and Legislative Behavior,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 13 (1983), 603-27.
“voting via the mailbag” as they would in the 20th century.\textsuperscript{39} Indeed, letters asking Douglas to vote for a particular bill or take it under his “especial charge” were too rare to be effective from the perspective of gauging public opinion. And for the most part letter-writers did not suggest that Douglas vote in a particular way. Their language was much more deferential, and tended to offer support and encouragement more than direction. Nonetheless, it could help Douglas to gauge the level of popular, partisan, or factional support for a policy.

The most pressing political issue in the 1850s was the growing sectional crisis, and for Douglas’ correspondents, especially in the second half of the decade, this often meant the Kansas question and Douglas’ popular sovereignty doctrine. Douglas, in part because of his position in the Senate as Chair of the Committee on Territories, received “voluminous correspondence” on the Kansas issues, from those in Kansas, Illinois, and elsewhere. And it had a powerful affect on Douglas’ thinking about the issue, forcing him to reconsider who to blame for the problems and to search for a new solution.\textsuperscript{40} And while correspondents from around the country wrote from a variety of perspectives, correspondents from Illinois generally wrote to voice their support for “the great principles of the Kansas and Nebraska Bill,” “the doctrine of the people.” They wanted Douglas to guarantee to the people, “The right to regulate their domestic institutions for themselves,” “a right inestimable to them as freemen and formidable to tyrants only.” Thus, they wrote to “say without hesitation that I can fully endorse it as a good and wholesome Democratic doctrine.” This “great principle established is eminently Democratic and

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{40} Johannsen, \textit{Stephen A. Douglas}, 560-66, 598.
\end{flushright}
preeminently just.” In fact, “No principle is more deeply cherished by our countrymen than that all governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.” In essence, they assured Douglas of their faith in him as a leader, as their leader.⁴¹

Letter-writers also offered views from and about their neighborhoods. “The Illinois Democracy are with you,” wrote one person. “[S]end the Lecompton Constitution Back to the people of Kansas,” wrote another, “and the Democracy of this section shall sustain you.” A writer from Sycamore wrote that Douglas’ speech on Kansas “delighted your friends in this region and silenced those who were bitter in their denunciations.” And J.R. Hobbs wrote to assure Douglas that, “The Democrats are standing firm by the great principles of the Kansas and Nebraska Bill.” “The opinion of the people here,” Hobbs continued, is “that your course is right and will be sustained by a majority of the whole United States.” T. Cameron assured that “We have heard of but one man in town, T. Shirley, who opposes the ground you have taken. He can do no harm.” These offerings of support helped to give Douglas a sense of the local (partisan) opinion. Often these offerings of support and encouragement were attached to some sort of request, and thus may have been gratuitous. But they so often displayed an understanding of Douglas’ policy positions, as well as that of his opponents, of Douglas’ personal political history, and of the positions of the Democratic Party more generally, that it comes across as more genuine than genuflecting. As Harley Green, “a humble farmer and one of [Douglas’] constituents,” explained what appears to have been a common sentiment, “I being a Democrat

⁴¹ J.R. Hobbs, Chicago, to SAD, December 12, 1857, box 6, folder 23; J.J. Brown, Charleston, to SAD, December 30, 1857, box 8, folder 14; Pliny Thayer, Ripley, to SAD, December 21, 1857, box 7, folder 22; John L. Payton, Chicago, to SAD, October 23, 1854, box 3, folder 9; H. Densman, Clay Co., to SAD, December 16, 1857, box 7, folder 7 (emphasis in original); Benjn. Richardson, Joliet, to SAD, December 28, 1857, box 8, folder 11; John Russell, Bluffdale, to SAD, December 25, 1857, box 8, folder 5.
myself I feel at liberty to give you my views on the subject.” Green’s letter suggests that while
laudations may have been linked to requests, the nature of the letter may have enabled
correspondents to canvass a number of topics, related or not. Indeed, letter writers may have
seen their letter as their best and only opportunity to express their views directly to their
senator.\textsuperscript{42} Green’s letter also suggests an understanding of the Senate and its relation to the
public distinct from formal constitutional doctrine. Registering an opinion, and doing so as a
partisan, suggests they were thinking of a more direct relationship.

The second aspect of public opinion was more implicit, and can go almost unnoticed as
government. But in making requests for documents and other information, letter-writers were
implicitly offering their approval of the work the federal government was doing, and
encouraging further efforts. One of the most important things that the federal government did in
the 1850s was compiling and distributing information. And constituents registered their approval
of this work in their repeated requests for documents in which this information was compiled.
They also implicitly approved of the Senate’s role in the distribution of that information.

At a very basic level, then, the correspondence facilitated by the franking privilege
enabled people to state their opinions directly to their federal representative on a personal level,
rather than the aggregative level of voting. Still the opinions they offered were mostly
gratuitous; they generally lacked a sense of Douglas as their agent whom they felt they could
direct to act. But this should not deflect attention from the significance of the new lines of
communication that enabled new modes of expression. The very fact that ordinary citizens could

\textsuperscript{42} Coler, Urbana to SAD, December 2, 1857, box 6, folder 16; R. Murray, Kankakee, to SAD, December 3, 1857,
box 6, folder 17; Wm. B. Hovey[?], Sycamore, to SAD, December 6, 1857, box 6, folder 18; J.R. Hobbs, Chicago,
to SAD, December 12, 1857, box 6, folder 23; D. Cameron, Chicago, December 14, 1857, box 7, folder 1; Harley
Green, Merona, to SAD, December 13, 1857, box 6, folder 25.
write to their senator and express their views directly to him as often as they could write was a momentous development in the history of representation. Correspondence was, like petitioning, becoming an exercise of one’s citizenship.\textsuperscript{43}

\textit{The Senate as a Clearinghouse of Public Information}

The requests that people made played other important roles with respect to political representation besides registering opinion. At one level document requests provided a material basis for representation that helped account for the lack of an electoral nexus. Constituents could write to Douglas and receive something in return, creating a direct, consequential relationship. Relatedly, these requests gave the U.S. Senate a new governmental role; it made it a clearinghouse of public information. The federal government was engaged in the production of a wide variety of information, information that only it was producing. The franking privilege enabled this information to be distributed freely throughout the nation. And the Senate proved to be an important waystation for the distribution of this information.

Document requests were made possible by the Post Office Acts of 1825 and 1847, which allowed members of Congress to send out government documents under their franking privilege. Unlike patronage requests, then, there were essentially no limits on the distribution of government documents. Senators could reach thus accommodate a much larger number of people than if they were limited to patronage alone. Nor should these requests be dismissed as trivial. The desire for information was one of the most important reasons for writing to Douglas.

\textsuperscript{43} On the emerging importance of petitioning to citizenship in the early republic, see Susan Zaeske, \textit{Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women’s Political Identity} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
It was no coincidence that the growth of letter-writing emerged with the communications and information revolutions that occurred in the early 19th century.\textsuperscript{44} Until the 1760s, Richard Brown has shown, public information was a scarce commodity for Americans. This changed with the first communications revolution that spanned the 1760s to the 1840s. By the mid-19th century information “was abundant and under no control other than the interests and appetites of a vast, popular public of consumers.”\textsuperscript{45} By the 1850s, Americans found themselves in the midst of an abundance of information, and they could be, in fact had to be, more selective in the information they sought. This information revolution was undergirded by a belief in the idea of an “informed citizenry” that committed Americans “to an ethos that prescribed the diffusion of knowledge as essential to the well-being of society.”\textsuperscript{46} Abundance meant that Americans now had to be more selective in the information they sought. And according to Brown, they filtered information in two ways: “accumulation for the sake of knowledge” and “consumption for the sake of recreation.” This captures nicely the reasons Douglas’ correspondents sought information from him. Brown, however, downplays the significance of the federal government in the diffusion of this information. “Politicians repeatedly back their advocacy of an informed citizenry with money from the public treasury,” he argues, “but overall private expenditures on information diffusion dwarfed those in the public sector.”\textsuperscript{47} Douglas’ correspondence, by contrast, suggests that the federal government played an important role in the production of

\textsuperscript{44} Richard R. John, “Recasting the Information Infrastructure for the Industrial Age,” in Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. and James W. Cortada, eds., \textit{A Nation Transformed by Information: How Information has Shaped the United States from Colonial Times to the Present} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 55-106, 55-56.

\textsuperscript{45} Brown, \textit{Knowledge is Power}, 286.

\textsuperscript{46} Brown, \textit{Knowledge is Power}, 287.

\textsuperscript{47} Brown, \textit{Knowledge is Power}, 288.
public information, through a series of public ventures like the Pacific Railroad survey, as well as the information compiled through the normal course of governing. Moreover, the 1825 and 1847 Post Office Acts, by allowing senators to send public documents, gave the Senate an important role in the dissemination of information, making it a clearinghouse of public information.

Requests for reports of various departments of the federal government formed a major component of correspondence. As a clearinghouse the Senate became an important nexus between ordinary citizens and the federal government. Members of Congress could frank “all manner of things, including books, dirty laundry, and even pianos.” These reports contained a wide range of information. The amount of information generated by the federal government was in fact staggering. It is thus important to have some idea of what these reports contained.

Although it would be impossible to offer a comprehensive account of these documents here, or who was compiling and generating the information, it is possible to give a sense of the range of information they included.

Many of the reports, such as the Patent Office and the Treasury Department reports, were published annually. These reports simply contained lists of information. The Treasury Report was an itemized account of the receipts, appropriations, and expenditures of the federal government. This included such items as a $3.84 expenditure for, “Repairing the bracings and repairing the injuries to the iron screwpile lighthouse on Brandywine shoal, Delaware,” to a $781,623.14 expense for steam mail service. But here was information about what the federal government was actually doing. Indeed, this was the federal government in its most basic form: a 569-page list, one year, of how the federal government received and spent its money. The

Patent Office Report was a multi-volume annual report of the patents granted and expired in “agriculture” and “manufacturing.”

Another annual report was the Smithsonian Report. The Smithsonian Institute was not a department of the federal government, but the federal government was the trustee of a bequest by William Smithson, “for the benefit of mankind.” In the 1850s, Stephen Douglas served on the Smithsonian Board of Regents, and took an interest in the diffusion of knowledge more broadly. The Institute was (and is) charged with the increase and diffusion of knowledge, as well as the practical application of that knowledge. Its Annual Report contained a journal of the proceedings, collections donated and what they contained, a list of meteorological stations and some basic observations, and a list of expenditures. Beginning in 1858, the Report began to include an Appendix that included lectures, papers, and reports on various subjects that met with success. According to Secretary Joseph Henry, this material “proved highly acceptable to a large number of intelligent persons in every part of the country.” Henry also indicated how these reports were being used by people like Douglas’ constituents, noting that, “copies of [the Smithsonian Reports] were especially solicited by teachers,” because they contained information “not otherwise attainable.” These reports, he continued, also served as publicity for the Institute, “which tends to increase the number of its friends and co-operators,” which in turn tended “to

---

49 *Treasury Report*, 345, 347. It should be noted, however, that report like the treasury and census could also be used for “combat.” The treasury report, for instance, contained lists of defaulters. Johannsen, *Douglas*, 77, 79.


51 Johannsen, *Douglas*, 466.
elevate popular conceptions in reference to science, as well as to increase the number of its
cultivators.” The Institute’s work, and the information it reported annually, thus attracted the
attention of both scholars and laypeople. It not only diffused knowledge, it encouraged an
appreciation of knowledge and its generation, which was one of the Secretary’s stated goals. By
1860, the Secretary was able to report that “this Institution had done good service in placing
prominently before the country the importance of original research, and that its directors are
entitled to commendation for having so uniformly and persistently kept in view the fact that it
was not only for educational or immediately practical purposes, but for the encouragement of the
study of theoretical principles and the advancement of abstract knowledge.” And “gratifying
evidence” of the Smithsonian’s success in this regard was “that Congress has been so favorably
disposed, even during the depressed condition of the treasury, towards the distribution of [the
Reports].” Congress likely continued to fund the distribution of these reports because its
constituents requested them.52

Other types of reports involved specific projects in which the federal government was
involved. Perhaps the most important of these, at least in the 1850s, was the Union Pacific
Railroad Survey. The Survey was a massive compilation of information. The various
expeditions were charged with compiling a range of information, from meteorological, magnetic,
natural history, and geological observations to sketches of flora and fauna, and natural history
collections, in addition to surveying the land for railroad routes. The initial report was mostly an
account of the various expeditions. The accounts varied in detail, with some offering details of

52 Annual Report for the Board of Regent of the Smithsonian Institution, showing the Operations, Expenditures, and
Secretary,” Smithsonian Report, 1860, 32, 14, 17, 33.
potential routes, passability, costs, distances, and elevations and grades, and others only journal-like accounts of what had been done. Considerably more significant was the multi-volume *Explorations and Surveys for Pacific Railroad*, which was produced over a four-year period, and consisted of 12 volumes. The volume titles themselves suggest the range of information compiled: “Routes, Indians, Meteorology,” “Whipple’s route, geology, Indians,” “botany, zoology,” “mammals, text, and plates,” “birds, text,” etc.\(^{53}\)

Seed was another type of information correspondents sought. The federal government began procuring and distributing seeds in the 1830s, when Patent Commissioner Henry Leavitt Ellsworth enlisted diplomats and naval officers to help collect foreign seed. But the demand for seed began to take off in the early 1850s. On the heels of this demand, Congress appropriated $50,000 for the purchase of foreign seed in 1855, which it subsequently distributed to anyone who asked for it. The Patent Office published notices in newspapers encouraging people to contact their senators and congressmen to request them. In 1857, the Patent Office issued a report in response to this appropriation, which listed the Office’s purchases of fruit, vegetable, grain, and herb seeds from Europe. While the seed quality was often questionable, it was

\(^{53}\) The initial 118-page Report was divided into five sections, for each of the assigned expeditions. The bulk of the report (the first 99 pages) was devoted to the northern-most route. *Reports of Surveys, &c., of Railroad Routes to the Pacific Ocean*, H. Ex. Doc. 46, 33d Cong., 1st sess. (1854). The first volume of the fuller reports appeared on February 27, 1855, and the last volume was published almost exactly four years later on February 29, 1859. *Explorations and Surveys for Pacific Railroad, vol. 1: Routes, Indians, Meteorology, etc.*, 758 S. Ex. Doc. 78, 33d Cong., 2d sess. (February 27, 1855); vol. 2: *Reports of Beckwith, Lander, Pope, Parke, and Emory*, 759 S. Ex. Doc. 78 (Feb. 24, 1855); vol. 3: *Whipple’s route, geology, Indians, etc.*, 760 S. Ex. Doc. 78 (Feb. 24, 1855); vol. 4: *Whipple’s route, botany, zoology, etc.*, 761 S. Ex. Doc. 78 (February 24, 1855); vol. 5: *California route, geology, botany*, 795 H. Ex. Doc. 91 (December 31, 1854); vol. 6: *California to Oregon route, geology, botany, etc.*, 763 S. Ex. Doc. 78 (February 24, 1855); vol. 7: *West California and Rio Grande, geology, botany, official review of surveys*, 764 S. Ex. Doc. 78 (February 24, 1855); vol. 8: *Mammals, text and plates*, 765 S. Ex. Doc. 78; vol. 9: *Birds, text*, 766 S. Ex. Doc. 78 (February 24, 1855); vol. 10: *Reptiles, fishes, and miscellaneous zoology, with plates*, 800 H. Ex. Doc. 91 (February 14, 1859); vol. 11: *Explorations 1800-1857, with maps, profiles, etc.*, 769 S. Ex. Doc. 78 (February 24, 1855); vol. 12: *Bus, 992 S. Ex. Doc. 46, 35th Cong., 2d sess. (February 28, 1859). In addition to the initial Reports and the *Explorations and Surveys*, there was also a multi-volume report of the surveys themselves. *Pacific Railroad Surveys, vol. 1: Humphrey, McClellan, Jessup, and Stevens*, 736 H. Ex. Doc. 129, 33d Cong.; vol. 2: *Beckwith, Whipple, and Pope*, 737 H. Ex. Doc. 129, 33d Cong.; vol. 4: *Maps*, 739 H. Ex. Doc. 129, 33d Cong.
designed to foster experimentation by farmers. According to Kathy Cooke, “congressional seed distribution stimulated a more widespread interest in new and unusual plants, and encouraged the small trade in seed.”

The federal government, then, was producing or causing to be produced a vast array of information, and more importantly making it freely available. This information was available to anyone from a casual observer of government to migrants to inventors to teachers. But however this information was used, the important point here is that the federal government was centrally involved in the production and distribution of information, much of which was not, and probably could not be, produced by anyone else. And the Senate played a crucial role in disseminating this information. In the process, constituents and senators were drawn into a closer relationship with one another. Correspondence became a primary conduit through which people built their relationships with senators. The receipt of materials confirmed their efforts to make contact, and gave a material basis to the relationship. Congress learned which activities proved most popular for constituents and thus what to appropriate money for, and the executive branch continued to focus much of its attention on the production of knowledge and information. All of which deepened the commitment to popular government.

Partisanship, Deference, and Citizenship

Thus far we have seen the ways in which correspondence affected the structural transformation of representation. It is now time to explore how letter-writers thought about representation. This requires, however, a brief detour through what Janet Altman has called “epistolarity,” which involves the study of both the literary and social practices of letter-writing. Letters offer entry-points into the writer’s mind, and a massive collection like Douglas’ correspondence can offer insights into broader patterns of thought. Understanding the epistolary practices of these correspondents can help to recover why they wrote, how they understood and constructed their relationship to Douglas, and how they constructed themselves as constituents. Fortunately, there has been a growing interest in both the literary and historical aspects of correspondence more generally over the past few years. The literary studies have focused attention mostly on the ways in which letters connect writer to reader through the forms of letter writing, or “the use of the letter’s formal properties to create meaning.”

Perhaps the most important and distinctive quality of the letter that these scholars have uncovered is its mediation role. Letters help to negotiate the separation between writer and reader. “Letter-writing, after all, is a technique of union: we write letters to make ourselves more present to another (or others). Were there no distance (physical, epistemological, psychological), there would likewise

55 Janet Gurkin Altman, Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 4. According to Altman, this definition is “primarily a frame for reading. A work’s epistolarity cannot be scientifically measured. It can only be argued by an interpretive act, which involves the critic’s description of a letter novel’s epistolarity as much as the novelist’s or novel’s actualization of the letter’s potential to creation narrative, figurative, and other types of meaning.” Ibid.
be no occasion for epistolarity.”\textsuperscript{56} At the same time, however, “the letter is always technologically deficient,”\textsuperscript{57} as it can never fully bridge the distance -- “the very definition of correspondence stresses both reciprocity and separation.”\textsuperscript{58} Thus, letter-writers “can choose to emphasize either the distance or the bridge,”\textsuperscript{59} they can “emphasize alternately, or even simultaneously, presence and absence, candor and dissimulation, mania and cure, bridge and barrier.”\textsuperscript{60} The important point for the purposes of this article is that it is in these spaces inherent in letter-writing that opens opportunities for creativity, as the author attempts to navigate those distances.\textsuperscript{61} How letter writers navigate language, form, etc., helps constitute their relationship to their reader. This is particularly important with respect to constituent correspondence where there was no underlying relationship.

Understanding the role of the reader, or intended recipient, is also important to understanding correspondence, as the reader “at the very inception of the letter…plays an instrumental generative role.” Indeed, the “fundamental impulse” of correspondence comes from the very nature of union and reciprocity between reader and writer.\textsuperscript{62} This is the metonymic function of correspondence, which attempts to establish continuity between writer and reader in

\textsuperscript{56} Elizabeth Hewitt, \textit{Correspondence and American Literature, 1770-1865} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 55.


\textsuperscript{58} Hewitt, \textit{Correspondence and American Literature}, 189, n. 8.

\textsuperscript{59} Altman, \textit{Epistolarity}, 13.

\textsuperscript{60} Altman, \textit{Epistolarity}, 140.

\textsuperscript{61} According to Decker, “Because of these unique formal qualities, letter-writing creates interesting “possibilities for the creation of human relationship … by a practice that negotiates distance between persons through the … material exchange of written texts[.]” Decker, \textit{Epistolary Practices}, 4.

\textsuperscript{62} Altman, \textit{Epistolarity}, 89.
the face of separation. In other words, the writer crafts the letter, in part at least, in light of his/her relationship to the reader, and the perceived expectations of the reader. Because of this metonymic function, it is important to exercise caution and sensitivity in evaluating letters. Altman rightly points out that as scholars we be “sensitive to messages of all kinds within the letter,” and “interpret a given letter in the light of its intended recipient.” What writers intend is often what they think the reader wants to hear.

This relationship between writer and reader also suggests that letter-writing is not only it a literary device, “It is a social practice, which, within predictable rules and mutual understandings, inscribes personal relationships in letters in order to maintain these relationships and provide continuity for the correspondents.” According to Altman, “To write a letter is to map one’s coordinates -- temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual -- in order to tell someone else where one is located at a particular time…. Reference points on that map are particular to the shared world of writer and addressee: underlying the epistolary dialogue are common memories and often common experience that take place between the letters.” Altman here is referring to

63 According to Decker, “in one or another condition of contiguity despite some measure of geographic separation, and which often has recourse to affirming contiguity of soul to soul...while the body of one correspondent is separated from that of the other by an ocean or a continent.” Decker, Epistolary Practices, 15. “The metonymic function of language … is to establish contiguity and contexture. Such precisely is the function of epistolary writing.” Ibid. Metonymy can be thought of in relation to metaphor. Where metaphor emphasizes similarity, metonymy emphasizes contiguity. A lawyerly example of metonymic language is “damages.” The original meaning is harm; the metonymic meaning is compensation for harm.


the personal aspect of this common experience. But it can be historical as well. “[W]hat needs to be plotted,” social historian David Gerber has suggested, “is the relationship the correspondents seek to maintain through their correspondence.” When we move beyond the single letter to a type of correspondence, it takes on more of an institutional dynamic, so that meaning has effects beyond the intent of the writer and the understandings of the intended reader-recipient.

Constituent correspondence, however, is distinct from the types of letters scholars have focused on thus far. Epistolarity studies have focused on the “familiar” letter, and to a lesser extent on business and diplomatic letters. But there are important differences between familiar letters and constituent correspondence. Familiar letters are generally persistent over time. Constituent correspondence on the other hand is ephemeral at the personal level and persistent at a larger level. Individuals wrote few letters, but collectively letter-writing was a massive phenomenon. Moreover, constituent correspondents wrote to a person they knew only publicly not personally. Establishing a relationship was thus a central component to this correspondence, and offered letter-writers opportunities for creativity. And it was through these attempts that they plotted their relationship to Douglas, exposing a particular set of socio-political relations. The most common way correspondents did this was through party. Correspondents negotiated the space that separated them from their senator through creative deployment of their status as Democrats. This partisan relationship was at once equalizing and hierarchical. In the case of

constituent correspondence, then, these “emplotments” can tell us much about the nature of political culture of a particular historical period.

Some correspondents understood their relationship to Douglas in simple and direct terms. Harley Green, for instance, claimed to be “nothing but a humble farmer and one of your constituents.” S.R. Moore similarly asked Douglas to “please consider the undersigned one of your constituents and occasionally favor him with Public documents, speeches, etc.” And “one of the humblest among your constituents” approved of Douglas’ actions “in Congress as a senator from our state.” But it was at the point of intrusion where the correspondence becomes most interesting and where correspondents were the most creative. It was here where they thought most deeply about why they were writing, and how to understand their relationship to Senator Douglas. It was the personal and individual nature of letters that inspired explanations for writing, and forced constituents to think more deeply about their politics and articulate them in a concise way in a sentence or a paragraph. It was in these explanations and the connections they drew with Douglas that were significant, because they appeared so often in letters by many different people. And in this sense constituent correspondence constitutes an important text for understanding the popular mind, as well as a practice constituting a particular relationship.⁶⁸

A writer’s status as a Democrat was prominent in Douglas’ correspondence.⁶⁹ For many it was how they established their relationship to Douglas. Cornelius Knapp, for example, apologized for writing to Douglas. “I make bold to intrude upon your senatorial duties,” he

---

⁶⁸ Harley Green, Merona, to SAD, December 13, 1857, box 6, folder 25; S.R. Moore, Kankakee, to SAD, April 16, 1857, box 5, folder 9 (emphasis added); A.W. Avery, Mason, to SAD, December 18, 1857, box 7, folder 12; P.H. Tompkins, Decatur, to SAD, May 28, 1860, box 31, folder 1.

⁶⁹ Of the 1142 letters examined, 402 identified their party affiliation by name. Of this total, 394 identified themselves as Democrats, four as Republicans, three as Whigs, and one as Loco Foco.
wrote, “and my only apology is that you will not refuse to listen to a Democrat who is now and always has been an ardent admirer and firm supporter of the principles of Democracy as proclaimed by yourself in the Halls of Congress and before the people.” Correspondents feared “trespassing too much on your time,” and asked to be “pardoned” for doing so. Not only was Douglas’ “time and goodness” limited, but only under certain conditions was it appropriate to write to their senator, such as when they felt “constrained to offer you my hearty, genuine acknowledgments to your recent position in the U.S. Senate,” always hoping, of course, “it will not offend you.” “Perhaps you will think I am obtruding my private opinions upon you. but notwithstanding I deem it my duty to you . . . .” Despite their trepidations, these people wrote, “believing that every thing that pertains to your own beloved State, will be, and ever has been, a matter of interest to you.” Thus, “although personally unknown to” Douglas, they ventured to write nonetheless.

Being a Democrat proved crucial. One of the operating principles behind this partisan representation was “that the poorest democrat in our ranks is better than the best whig the country can produce. I speak in reference to principle.” Douglas’ representational obligations, correspondents suggested, should be those “satisfactory to the Democratic Party,” or those “calculated to promote the Interests of the Democratic Party.” H.G. Weston, for instance, wrote “as a life long democrat; as an Illinoisan, as one who has tried to [support] you in whatever way was proper for me to do . . . .” Charles Eggleston identified party affiliation more explicitly as

70 Cornelius Knapp, Albany, to SAD, January 28, 1861, box 34, folder 25.

71 A. Bainbridge, South Pass, to SAD, January 18, 1861, box 34, folder 15; Geo. Stowell, Polo, to SAD, March 28, 1856, box 3, folder 25; Obadiah Jackson, Chicago, to SAD, December 31, 1857, box 8, folder 15; Michael Tait, Joliet, to SAD, January 1, 1858, box 8, folder 22; Samuel Ashton, Chicago, to SAD, May 9, 1858, box 4, folder 3 (emphasis in original); W.L. Deneen, Lebanon, to SAD, December 21, 1857, box 7, folder 20.
the basis of representation when he claimed to “Belong to the old school Democratic Party without any alloy, and [thus] one of your constituents.” Constituents, then, were understood to be “very worthy,” “unbending,” or “consistent” Democrats.72

This partisan discourse was most evident, unsurprisingly, in the patronage correspondence. Douglas occupied a strategic position with respect to patronage as chair of the Committee on Territories. Not only did he control patronage over Illinois, he played an important role in territorial appointments. Douglas’ patronage power was in flux after the 1856 election, as his attempt to extend his authority over the entire Midwest met with resistance. But his role in Illinois and territorial appointments remained influential.73 And throughout the 1850s constituents wrote to Douglas about both appointments and removals. “There lives not a better and truer Douglas Democrat than Mr. Crane,” wrote one recommender. “Nor any one, regardless of politics whose appointment to that office would find more general and universal satisfaction to the people at large in the State of Illinois.” John Dickson, recommending his brother for a postmastership, claimed that his brother “was born a Democrat, once never was anything else.” J. Rucker recommended “a reliable Democrat and a sober trustworthy gentleman, [whose] appointment would be very acceptable to the Democracy of this district.” While another sought to appoint “a good working democrat and if you should aid in getting him the appointment as keeper of the light house I am satisfied it would receive the approbation of a large majority of

72 G.L. Iliet [?], Pottsville, to SAD, February 2, 1852, box 2, folder 3; Wm. McCormack Danville, to SAD, April 1, 1856, box 3, folder 26; James Murphy, Williamsburgh, New York, to SAD, March 13, 1856, box 3, folder 22; H.G. Weston, Peoria, to SAD, December 17, 1857, box 7, folder 11; Charles Eggleston, Peoria, to SAD, January 8, 1852, box 2, folder 2.

the democratic party.” James Vandevanter summed up this idea of the partisan constituent in a recommendation he wrote for a prospective postmaster. He is, he wrote,

a member of the Democratic Party[, who] uses his best Efforts to perpetuate its harmony. He is a strong supporter and Advocate of the principles of Squatter Sovereignty as recognized in the Organic Law of Kansas and Nebraska. He regards the Fusionist and Factionist movements of the present day as being diametrically opposed to the genius of our free institutions.

While an active party member may have been more important when dealing with patronage requests as opposed to, say, seeds, Vandevanter’s description nonetheless points to the centrality of partisanship in the new representational structure as correspondents understood it. In fact, some deemed party so important that “recommending an abolition Black republican” could be construed as a “criminal act” that should not be committed “during [one’s] natural life.”

Partisanship was prominent in the removal letters as well, especially when postmasters were involved. James McNulty, for instance recommended the removal of a Know-Nothing postmaster, simply because he was a Know-Nothing. A.W. Herrington wanted to get rid of his postmaster because he “is and always has been an abolitionist.” Isaac Dimmick was a former postmaster who was irate that he had been removed and replaced by a “Black Republican.” “[I]s this Democratic patronage?,” he asked incredulously. These writers, of course, wanted to protect the integrity of their party, and control over the local post office meant control over the flow of information, which in turn meant an advantage in party-building. The postmaster thus held a crucial strategic partisan position. As Richard John has pointed out, “Not only did postmasters...

74 Ward H. Lamon, Danville, to SAD, May 2, 1856, box 4, folder 3; John Dickson, Camden Mills, to SAD, April 15, 1857, box 5, folder 8 (emphasis in original); Joshua Rucker, Chicago, to SAD, May 18, 1857, box 5, folder 14; [Luke?] Wilson, Libertyville, to SAD, June 3, 1857, box 5, folder 17; James Vandevanter, PM, Le Roy, to SAD, Feb. 11, 1856, box 3, folder 16; John McCallister, Council Hill, to SAD, Feb. 27, 1857, box 4, folder 14. McCallister confessed to committing this criminal act. His apology was that, “I live in one of the damd. English abolitionist Black Republican holes in the U.S. I am the only man in this Township that fights for the Democratic Cause.”
have a built-in advantage when it came to securing up-to-date information on public affairs in transmitting their publications under cover of their official frank, but they also had a clear incentive to block the opposition from transmitting their newspapers in a timely way.”\(^75\) And constituents understood this power. As J.M. Anderson explained to Douglas, do not to “send any thing to the Post Master here or it will go to the Black Republicans.” Allowing a member of another party to hold a postmastership amounted to putting “a Club in our Enemys hands to break our own heads with.” Thus, at all times, “a responsible and reliable Democrat” must be kept in place over a member of any other party. \(^76\)

Patronage was such an essential part of party-building that we should expect a strong partisan discourse in this aspect of the correspondence. But correspondents linked representation and party in other types of letters too. For instance, correspondents sometimes noted that they had attempted to contact their non-Democratic elected representative to obtain government documents or seeds only to be rebuffed. According to H. Tobias, for instance, “last winter I asked a like favor of our Repv. But he was a Republican and knew me to be a Democrat.” Another correspondent’s “Representative in Congress has turned Shanghai [and so] we have not been favored with anything in the shape of Books or seeds from the Patent Office and we think the farmer is as much entitled to them as any part of the community. we would feel highly favored if you would remember the Riley Boys in your distributions.” In fact, the norm probably stood against attempts to forge non-partisan representational links: “Not choosing to correspond

\(^75\) John, *Spreading the News*, 120.

\(^76\) James McNulty, Illinois, to SAD, January 1, 1856, box 3, folder 16; A.W. Herrington, Seneca, to SAD, February 11, 1856, box 3, folder 16; Issac Dimmick, Ottawa, to SAD, April 20, 1857, box 5, folder 10; J.M. Anderson, Summerhill, to SAD, December 24, 1857, box 8, folder 3; A. Diller, Brighton, to SAD, February 11, 1856, box 3, folder 22; Unknown, Kankakee City, to SAD, April 10, 1857, box 5, folder 7.
with our representative from this district I have taken the liberty to send the [illegible] petition for changes of mail routes to your address.” C.C. Alexander, meanwhile, admitted that his “representatives are abolitionist,” hence he would not even attempt to make requests of them. Thus, where “democratic representatives in Congress from the North part of our State are very scarce [Democrats] should claim consideration and attention from our Senator.” In this way, then, senators stood as alternate representatives. They could even be alternate representatives for out-of-state correspondents. “It is true,” one out-of-stater wrote, “I should ask the representatives from this State to supply me, but I am a Democrat, and all Democrats throughout the nation are brothers, and all feel, or should feel, the same anxiety for the success of the great principles for the maintenance of which, they have united in their present national organization.” Viewed this way, partisanship held a powerful potential to restructure the representative structure written into the federal constitution, and it was certainly one that Douglas’ correspondents utilized.

Partisan representation did not completely exclude people from other political parties from writing to Douglas. However, only a few letters written by admitted non-Democrats survive in Douglas’ papers. These correspondents were inspired to write either by a change of heart by the writer or a perceived change in Douglas. C. Goodsil, for instance, “as great a whig as there is in Illinois,” wrote to praise Douglas for his anti-Lecompton constitution stand. “I

77 H. Tobias, Brickton, to SAD, Dec. 9, 1857, box 6, folder 20; A. Eddy, et al, Riley, to SAD, [Jan. 1858], box 8, folder 18; E. Bursall, Jr., Edgington, Rock Island, to SAD, Feb. 28, 1856, box 3, folder 19; C.C. Alexander, Sterling, to SAD, [Nov. 24,] 1857, box 6, folder 10; W.M. Learing, Princeton, to SAD, Dec. 22, 1857, box 7, folder 25; M. [?] Peoples, Mt. Pleasant, to SAD, January 7, 1852, box 2, folder 1. This may explain why so many writers left out their party identification; the assumption may have been that they were Democrats.

78 Although this could simply be a source problem. At this point, I have no idea why or how Douglas maintained his constituent correspondence. He may have simply discarded most of the letters he received from non-Democrats.
rejoice that we have some men on the floor of Congress who are not afraid to counteract the
wishes and exertions even of their own friends for the sake of our country.” He went on to claim
to share Douglas’ views: “The Thing on which my whig principles turn is protection of American
industry and equality of rights to use your own phrase -- ‘Popular Sovereignty.’” Similarly, on
the day South Carolina seceded from the union, William Beble, another Whig, wrote to say that,
“however much we stand aloof from each other I give you my hand,” for Douglas’ efforts at
sectional compromise. Meanwhile, George Meach, a “former Democrat (I with thousands),”
explained that he had “lately acted with the Republican Party, not so much because we
disapprove of the principle of the Nebraska Bill as because we feared that it would not be
honestly and faithfully regarded and enforced by the Democratic Party. We were fearful of
treachery on the part of those who were in high office to the pledges which they had given.” He
was brought back into the fold, however, “by the determined stand which [Douglas had] taken
for Freedom, Justice, and the Right,” and declared that he would “now serve” Douglas.79

That partisanship would form the basis of representation is perhaps not all that surprising,
given its importance to politics in the early republic. But how it affected the structure of political
representation and how ordinary people understood their relationship to federal legislators is not
one that historians have explored in great detail. Douglas’ correspondence suggests that letter
writers used the new party structure and ideas of reforms along with the franking privilege and

79 C. Goodsil, Dekalb Co., to SAD, Dec. 25, 1857, box 8, folder 5; Wm. Beble, Springfield, to SAD, Dec. 20, 1860,
box 33, folder 16 (emphasis in original); Geo. Meach, Chicago, to SAD, Dec. 31, 1857, box [6?], folder 16. Party
affiliation had its limits, however. At times, material interests could trump the party principle. W.W. Coffy was “a
full blooded Democrat all over, but so far as work is to do I had just a leave work for a Republican as anyone else if
I get paid for it.” W.W. Coffy, Nashville, Illinois, to SAD, March 19, 1861, box 36, folder 20. And James Lawrence
of Collinsville wrote, strangely, to prevent the removal of his postmaster, claiming that he was “as strong a
Republican as lives in the State of Illinois is well qualified for the Office and more than all is poor and needy.”
James Lawrence, Collinsville, to SAD, March 8, 1861, box 36, folder 7.
the post office to create new links to their senator. Party in a sense equalized the representational
qualities of senators and popularly-elected officials. So if a constituent’s congressman was not
responsive, one’s party affiliation enabled the person to turn to another member of the party in
Congress including a senator. For example, John Philip of Arlington, who considered himself
“so unfortunate as to live in a district that is represented by the notorious Owen Lovejoy [a
Republican congressman], . . . thought I would write you as I had done during that last Congress,
asking you to place my name on your list of correspondents.” Another correspondent wrote
more despondently about his lack of representation: “I am Doomed to tarry in this place for
another Season and Sorry I am to be Found to live in such a cursed abolition District.” But
because of party he could seek his U.S. senators’ aid in obtaining government documents.
George Newton simply said that he “would not ask a favor of Lovejoy.” A correspondent from
Ottawa, Illinois made the connection between party and representation explicit: “we are not
represented in the House[, so] we ask you as our Senator to look after our interests.”

80 Even if a senator was not a primary popular representative, then, people could still make demands upon
him through their identification with their senator’s party when their own elected representative
proved unresponsive.81

80 John Philip, Arlington, to SAD, [Jan. 1858], box 8, folder 19; John McCallister, Council Hill, to SAD, Feb. 27,
1857, box 4, folder 14; Geo. M. Newton, Tonica, to SAD, Dec. 12, 1857, box 7, folder 21; Cushman, Ottawa,

81 Partisan representation could not only make a senator a popular representative, but a national one as well. As
Democrats, even those who lived outside of Illinois could make claims as Douglas’ constituents. “[P]ut me on your
list” of people to whom to send documents, requested a Wisconsinite, “as we have no Democratic representation
from this state.” B. O’Connor, Beloit, Wisconsin, to SAD, Nov. 22, 1857, box 6, folder 10. And a New Yorker
wrote that, “Our Congressional district (the Fifth) is at present represented by a member of the K.N. order and we
neither receive nor do we ask any political favors from him and are therefore under the necessity of calling upon Our
Friends in Other sections of the country.” James Murphy, Williamsburgh, New York, to SAD, March 13, 1856, box
3, folder 22. In this system of partisan representation, constituency could be quite broad, not limited to residents of
the state, but to any member of the party in any part of the country. Nationalizing representation in the Senate could
further undermine a senator’s relationship to his state legislature. Cf. Riker, “The Senate and American Federalism.”
But correspondents often moved beyond the idea of their senator as an alternate representative toward a more direct relationship. One way in which they did this was by something we might call *vote transference*, a process of using a vote in one context to establish a representational relationship in another. This practice reveals a distinct and emerging view of the Senate and of senators as popular representatives. Vote transference worked in different ways. Past votes for Democrats, for instance, were often used to establish a relationship to Douglas. “[F]rom my youth I have acted with the National Democratic Party,” wrote a resident of Chicago. Another staked his claim to Douglas’ time because he had “voted the Democratic ticket -- without a single exception -- for twenty years.” Henry Jones outlined his support of the Democratic Party “since Jackson’s first election” in a long paragraph before requesting documents. And L.M. Chapman wrote “to introduce Myself to you as one of the Old School Democrats having voted for all the Presidential Democratick Candidates . . . from Jackson to Bucanon with the exception of Genl Cass . . . .” “I am a democrat Never voted for any other party in my life I have Been in Illinois 21 years,” wrote another. This vote transference from a member of the party who ran for popular election to another who was appointed thus helped to compensate for the lack of more direct electoral ties to their senator.82

Votes were not just transferred from one member of a party to another, though. Often, men came to the Senate after serving in some other elective capacity. Douglas, in fact, had served as a state legislator and U.S. congressman, before becoming a U.S. senator. He had also run for elective offices and lost. Correspondents could thus rely on past votes for Douglas

himself. William Prentice, for instance, wrote that “The first vote I ever gave was for you.” He added, that “if it be my last vote, my ballot shall have the same name inscribed upon it for President.” While “an old and well tried friend having supported you from the first time you offered for public office in Morgan Co.,” asked Douglas to send him documents. Joseph Thomas simply wrote, “I could and did vote for you at your last election.” And a Blue Ridge resident identified the quid pro quo at the heart of this relationship explicitly: “We all voted for you for president,” he wrote. “Now I would like for you to do me a favor.”

Prospective votes for Douglas or Democrats could also be invoked, as suggested by Prentice’s letter above. Douglas was a candidate for president (or at least the Democratic nomination) throughout the 1850s. And writers used their prospective votes as they did past votes. “Hoping that Illinois wil furnish the next President,” was a common sentiment. Others wished “to see you elevated to the highest honor in the gift of the People whose cause you advocate.” And a teenage girl, who wanted seeds and who had neither past votes to lean on nor future elections to look forward to, used similar language. “I know if ladies of this vicinity had to decide the question they would be one but one response and that would be unanimous that Hon SAD is our choice for the White house[.]” A correspondent from Chicago wrote that in addition to the fact that he and Douglas were in “almost perfect agreement in opinion and political opinions included up to a recent date,” “The fact that all my sons entitled to a vote (two) voted for you, at the last Presidential election,” justified his writing to Douglas. Knox

83 Wm. Prentice, Danville, to SAD, February 5, 1852, box 2, folder 4; Rev. Wingate J. Newman, Franklin, to SAD, January 8, 1861, box 34, folder 4; Joseph Thomas, Orange(?), to SAD, December 20, 1857, box 7, folder 18; John Lindesmith, Blue Ridge, to SAD, January 16, 1861, box 34, folder 13.

84 W. (?) Gallahan, Meeny, to SAD, February 9, 1852, box 2, folder 4 (emphasis in original); Mrs. M.B. Davis, Chicago, to SAD, November 11, 1857, box 6, folder 8; Kate Hipple, Plymouth, to SAD, December 24, 1857, box 8, folder 3; Jos. Knox, Chicago, to SAD, March 10, 1861, box 36, folder 10.
articulated a view shared by many of his fellow correspondents that he did not need to vote directly for Douglas as senator to establish him as their representative. Partisan affiliation, a correspondent’s voting behavior, and Douglas’ political career and aspirations offered constituents opportunities to subvert the formal constitutional separation of the U.S. Senate from “the people.”

The epistolary form proved crucial to the re-imagining of the Senate. Through epistolary practices that correspondents drew their senator into a representative relationship. Without direct elections to draw upon, correspondents fashioned their own ideas of representation, relying on partisanship and using elections in discursively innovative ways to construct it.

While the new structures of representation created by the franking privilege and the postal and party systems facilitated the creative re-imagining of correspondent’s relationship to their U.S. Senator, their epistolarity also reveals a strong discourse of deference. Despite the transformative possibilities of the new structures and practices, this discourse suggests that it was bounded by the persistence of an older political culture. As Susan Radomsky has pointed out, Americans continued to rely “heavily on social rituals, bonds, and understandings to order political activity” well into the 19th century. While this deference may have been merely

85 The Wirls argue that party politics helped to “normalize” the Senate in the 1790s, making it coequal to the House by 1800. Wirls and Wirls, The Invention of the Senate.

formal,\textsuperscript{87} Altman suggests that we take it seriously. The epistolary form, she and others have suggested, was crucial to the maintenance of those social bonds and rituals. In the 18th and 19th centuries this was achieved through “politeness,” which was probably the most important ethic of letter-writing in the 18th and 19th centuries; it was constantly emphasized in letter-writing manuals and other prescriptive literature.\textsuperscript{88} And this was achieved through diligent attention to form. The formal aspects of correspondence were thus “class markers.” Through “masteries of protocol, refinement of taste, levels of cultivation, grades of literacy,” correspondents demonstrated their status.\textsuperscript{89} Letter-writing was thus provided “a way of staying-in-line and succeeding in polite society”\textsuperscript{90} and was an “aspiration for upward mobility.”\textsuperscript{91} And the materiality of the letter made this status “readily legible to others as well as affirming for oneself.”\textsuperscript{92} This demonstration of politeness as status was a way of maintaining relationships by demonstrating that one understood not only the formalities of letter-writing but one’s place in a

\textsuperscript{87} Deferential epistolary practices might persist even when deference has lost its larger social utility. But that appears not to have been the case here. Indeed, such language seems to have persisted into the second quarter of the 20th century, when the prescriptive literature began to push letter-writers away from such conventions. L.E. Frailey, “Writing Letters Today,” \textit{The English Journal} 28 (Jan. 1939), 64-66 (criticizing the use of “begged to state” and “obedient servant” in letter-writing); Maurice H. Weseen, “Business English: Going and Coming,” \textit{American Speech} 1 (May, 1926), 447-49 (“‘Believe me to be, Sir, your most humble and obedient servant,’ is even more ancient and intolerable. Advertising one’s humility is in poor taste to-day. It is called ‘boot-licking.’”).


\textsuperscript{91} Dierks, “The Familiar Letter,” 33.

\textsuperscript{92} Dierks, “The Familiar Letter,” 33. According to Decker, “letters serve as the material evidence and agency of social power and class attainment. Often they exist as the token of a self-satisfied class identity, but they also exist as scenes of subversion and insurgency, a claiming of power that may or may not achieve effective social reform.” Decker. \textit{Epistolary Practices}, 14.
variety of status relationships. What was considered “polite” depended upon one’s status. Thus, a social superior could write “dear brother,” while “obedient servant” was a subscription addressed to a social superior.93

Their status as Democrats enabled correspondents to establish a relation, but the personal nature of the letter and lack of a personal relationship with Douglas made social status even more important. Norms of politeness and status were even more pronounced in letters to strangers. “For letters to strangers,” Konstantin Dierks has written, “attention to status was crucial.” As Andrew Harvie wrote, “Perhaps my relations with you will not, in your opinion, justify the liberty I am about to take; but I hope you will do me the justice to believe that I am actuated by no other [interest] than a warm regard for yourself personally, and a disinterested solicitude for the welfare of the Democratic party.” Some of this deference was part of the rituals of letter-writing in the 19th century.94 One marker of the relationship between senator and constituent was the subscriptive use of “your obedient servant.” Closing a letter in this way inscribed one’s social -- or socio-political -- inferiority and obeisance to Douglas. But the deferential discourse in constituents’ correspondence went beyond subscriptive practices; it often permeated the entire letter. Apology, for instance, was an important element of this discourse. One letter-writer asked Douglas to “pardon me for approaching you as I am entire stranger to you,” before requesting “Patten office reports.” Magnus Miller meanwhile felt a “great reluctance” in writing to


Douglas, “being a stranger to you.” These correspondents did not want to “be considered presumptions in asking a favor on so short an acquaintance.” And they feared being seen as “imputent,” “audacious,” or “troublesome.” They “begged” of Douglas to “forgive this intrusion upon you,” as it was only “with extreme reluctance that I obtrude myself upon your notice at this time.” Thus, “If I appear too imputant I am sorry but there are times when one must speak strongly for themselves.” They wrote to Douglas out of need, and asked his assistance because “I don’t know of anyone but you to write to for a favor,” or because, “I know of no one who would be better able and more willing to help me than you.” Some simply wrote because they “could no longer forbear expressing my gratification in the bold and independent stand you have taken . . . .” As a result, when asking for help, they were apt to “leave the matter entirely in your hands and . . . be fully satisfied with any action you may see fit to take,” since “you have more important duties to attend than to read what I write.”  

The persistence of deference can also be seen in correspondents’ use of the term “political friendship.” In the mid-18th century “friendship” implied dependency. According to Gordon Wood, “every variety of personal attachment and connection, no matter how unequal, could be described as a friendship. . . . ‘Friendships’ were what a person’s age and rank would lead him to

---

95 Andrew Harvie, Chicago, to SAD, November, 11, 1853, box 3, folder 1; C.C. Alexander, Sterling, to SAD, [November 24.] 1857, box 6, folder 10; Magnus Miller, Rock Island, to SAD, June 17, 1857, box 5, folder 18; O.B. Maples, Chicago, to SAD, December 4, 1857, box 6, folder 17; Arthur Windett, Chicago, to SAD, December 29, 1857, box 8, folder 13; B. Cameron, Chicago, to SAD, April 5, 1856, box 3, folder 26; Mrs. Adaline Buffum, Joliet, to SAD, March 4, 1861, box 36, folder 4; James Fee, Camp Point, to SAD, December 23, 1857, box 8, folder 1 (emphasis added); Fayette Walker, Evanston, to SAD, June 11, 1857, box 5, folder 18 (emphasis in original). ; J.J. Brown, Charleston, to SAD, December 30, 1857, box 8, folder 14; B. Caulfield, Chicago, to SAD, March 9, 1857, box 5, folder 2; William A. Monroe, East Paw Paw, to SAD, January 14, 1861, box 34, folder 12.

Of course, when one was a stranger to all, he could choose which representative to address. Cornelius Knapp was “not personally acquainted with any of our Members in Congress and prefer therefore to address myself to you.” Cornelius Knapp, Albany, Illinois, to SAD, Jan. 28, 1861, box 34, folder 25. And Samuel Rankin wrote to Douglas because he was not “acquainted with any other person at Washington.” That “must be my excuse for troubling you,” he wrote. Samuel Rankin, Fairmont, to SAD, March 13, 1861, box 36, folder 14.
form -- they were euphemisms for all sorts of dependencies,” including political. 96 By the 1850s, although the term political friendship had acquired partisan understandings, it still retained some of the older, paternalistic connotations. Political friendship in the 19th century was used to form a more individualized bond, with political acquaintance, which is to say partisanship, standing in place of personal acquaintance. Thus, wrote Silas Chatfield, “I have never had any personal acquaintance with your Honor but I am acquainted with you politically and otherwise so I hope you will excuse me for taking the liberty of addressing myself to your honor.” William Tyner wrote to Douglas to receive documents as “a [political] friend and one of your constituents.” People who wrote as “politycal friends” were not writing as equals, but as partisans within a hierarchical party structure. A constituent from Paris, Illinois, for instance, asked Douglas to “Excuse a humble, but devoted Democrat, for troubling” him. And an “obscure individual” wrote to suggest a secession compromise, hoping that “it may not be objected to as a party measure, and therefore will meet more general favour.” John McBride of Red Bud made the point about hierarchy more explicitly: “You no doubt will think it some what strange to receive a Note from one of my rank, but when you think of the interest that is felt for your success And the party in these parts and the great effort that your opponents are making to cause your defeat I hope you will overlook my impudence.” 97 “I think you will find that any service you render me


in this matter will be reciprocated by your humble servant when opportunity offers,” wrote one constituent.\textsuperscript{98} Partisanship, then, did not necessarily eliminate hierarchy.

A sense of obligation on the part of the correspondent was another important aspect of this discourse.\textsuperscript{99} W.J. Stephenson, for instance, wrote to Douglas to inform him that the post office in Ashly had been “placed off into the hands of a \textit{Black Republican} of the worst lot.” And he assured Douglas that, “if you Releave us of this called for officer \textit{we will be under lasting obligation to you}.” Obligations meant that requests were understood as favors. A writer from Pittsfield asked if Douglas would “do me the favour” of sending a speech. And if so, “perhaps the time may come when I can return the compliment.” A postmaster from Wilkesboro, meanwhile, told Douglas that he would “confer a lasting favour on one of your old Friends who stood by you in the days of M.L. Covell when Democrats was scarce in Bloomington,” if Douglas would vote for the currency bill. And Isaac McCann “would esteem it a great favor if you would forward a copy of [the Smithsonian report] at your earliest convenience.” Some merely promised not to be so meddlesome in the future: “If you will grant this favor I will promise to ask no other, except the privilege of remaining as ever your devoted and uncompromised friend.” Favors led to obligations, not entitlements.\textsuperscript{100} Praise was yet another aspect of obligation. Indeed, some considered praise a constituent’s duty to his representative. “When a Representative in our legislative halls, stands by his integrity -- stands up boldly in

\textsuperscript{98} William Moore, Paris, to SAD, December 7, 1857, box 6, folder 18.


\textsuperscript{100} W.J. Stephenson, et al, Ashly, to SAD, August 29, 1857, box 6, folder 6 (emphasis added); William Ross, Pittsfield, to SAD, December 21, 1857, box 7, folder 22; R.L. Wheeler, Elgin, to SAD, [January 1858], box 8, folder 20; Jas. Barnard, PM, Wilkesboro, to SAD, January 8, 1861, box 34, folder 3; Isaac McCann, Ashmore Station, to SAD, December 14, 1860, box 34, folder 11; E.A. Collins, Galena, to SAD, January 11, 1861, box 34, folder 7.
opposition to contemptible fraud, trickery, dishonesty and deceit,” wrote a Chicago resident, “it is the duty and should be the pleasure of his constituents to stand by the Representative, to approve and encourage. And as one of the humblest of your constituents, I beg leave to assure you of my most cordial and delighted concurrence and approbation of the frank fearless and noble stand which you have firmly taken in regard to the Lecompton Constitution.\textsuperscript{101}

Thus through a discourse of deference, correspondents displayed “polite manners” that not only respected Douglas’ position as a U.S. senator, but demonstrated their understanding of their own social status and inscribed their relationship to Douglas.\textsuperscript{102} This discourse enabled correspondents to navigate change through the letter’s mediation function, which masked the changes they were effecting. Correspondents proved adept at blending old and new political practices and behaviors to meet their needs. Parties and elections helped them forge a relationship with their U.S. Senator, where none was intended to exist, while their deference mediated these transformations by relying on paternalistic obligations and duties. Through their epistolary practices, constituent correspondents were important agents in the transformation of political representation in the early republic. This transformation in representation was not the conscious construction of any single theorist or group of thinkers. Rather, it was the result of a cumulative, collective practice that was largely taken for granted. It was the result of the daily routine of senators, facilitated by new political and governmental structured, and exploited by ordinary people. It was the unintended consequence of both governmental policies and individual and collective wants, needs and desires. Correspondents took advantage of the new

\textsuperscript{101} Edwin Burnham, Chicago, to SAD, December 30, 1857, box 8, folder 14.

\textsuperscript{102} Bannet, \textit{Empire of Letters}; Hewitt, \textit{Correspondence and American Literature}, 2.
structure of representation opened up by the Senate’s internal institutionalization, the franking privilege and the consolidation of the postal and party systems. By seeking out information, offices, appointments, seeds, etc., from their senator, correspondents constructed a direct relationship to their senator where none was constitutionally provided. The epistolary form turned out to be an effective tool for doing so. It proved helpful in re-imagining the Senate and its function, while their actual requests gave a concreteness to the senator’s new ties. And through bowing gestures, subscriptive practices, and a broader discourse of deference correspondents were able to take advantage of the opportunities opened to them to subvert the constitutional structure, and push the Senate towards a more popular orientation without directly threatening existing political norms or practices.

Conclusion

Over the last few years students of the American state have recovered many of its distinctive traits. We have finally begun to shed preconceptions rooted in European understandings of the state and what it should look like. But, as Suzanne Mettler and Andrew Milstein have recently pointed out, we have “given little attention to how [the state] affects the lives of individuals and the ways in which they relate to government. … As a result, we know little about how governance has influenced citizenship over time or how those changes have, in turn, affected politics.”103 This is particularly true for the 19th century American state, which has

103 Mettler and Milstein, “American Political Development,” 110.
only begun to receive the treatment it deserves. One of the important aims of this article has been to explore one aspect of the relationship between citizen and government, in this case U.S. senators, from the unique vantage point offered by Stephen Douglas’ constituent correspondence. These letters are one of the few sources available for historians to explore the thinking of ordinary individuals about politics, government, constitutionalism, and the state.

But, as I have also tried to point out, it does more than merely register thoughts, it also uncovers broader changes in the early American state, what I have termed here the structural transformation of political representation. This transformation created new links of communication and representation between senators and constituents, and provided a material foundation for this relationship. Letter writers were not merely the beneficiaries of this transformation, but important agents of it as well. Not only did they create a new role for the Senate in the distribution of information, they developed distinctive ideas about citizenship and representation, and how they stood in relation to a federal representative for whom they did not cast a vote. The epistolary form enabled people to think more deeply about, and to re-imagine and reconstruct their relationship to their senator, one that enabled them to function and take advantage of a system of representation without voting. Correspondents were not conscious agents of change. No evidence suggests that they sought to change anything. Rather they were merely taking advantage of opportunities opened up by structural changes. And this is precisely

why we must continue to search beyond the most visible changes of politics and government to understand the American state and its development. For it is so often in the more mundane aspects of governance, the everyday, the routine, and the unintended, in the accumulation of day-to-day practices that major changes take place.\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{105} This study also underscores David Gerber’s observation that making correspondence the object of study rather than a supplement can open up new historical questions and reveal distinct historical patterns. David A. Gerber, “The Immigrant Letter Between Positivism and Populism.”