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Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

A Curse and a Blessing

Rochelle Dornatt explains the ways technological changes have shaped the relationship between Members and their constituents.

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You know, the internet is a cursing and a blessing at the same time, because everybody thinks things can be done instantaneously, and they can't. And so constituents who write in, first of all, think that they'll get an immediate reply. When you write an email, somebody replies right back, right? Well, it doesn't work that way. It takes a while for us to figure out what you're talking about, and then to frame the answer. And so I think the relationship between district and, and DC offices have, have changed, and, and relationships between the Member writ large and his constituents have changed, and I think technology is responsible for that. And some of it is very good, because you can share a lot of information quickly, and so that's good, but it also creates expectations in the constituents' minds that they're going to get what they want right away, and that's not always true. For a long time, in my office, we resisted responding to emails with emails—constituent mail emails—because we were afraid that they would be changed in the process, you know, somehow, and somebody would, would intercede and change what we were writing, and so by the time it got to the constituent it wouldn't be what we wrote, and it would be wrong, and there would be a problem. So it took—it actually took us a long time to trust internet responses. Plus it got to be—the nature of working on Capitol Hill has changed so dramatically from 19, you know, '81, when I started, to, to today. Everything is so electronic, and everything is so instantaneous, and, and yet human nature is not like that. People need time to absorb information and, and, and to determine whether they like that information or not. You know, demanding a split instant answer is probably the worst thing that could happen in politics, because there's no more debate. There's no more thinking about it.