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LOCAL

Rep. Scott Franklin's limits on Facebook comments draw complaints

Staff says congressman filters but does not block all feedback

Gary White The Ledger

Published 1:04 p.m. ET Aug. 26, 2021

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Interview with Rep. Scott Franklin at his office in Lakeland Fl. Wednesday July 7 2021. ERNST PETERS/ THE LEDGER
Ernst Peters /The Ledger

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Linda Steniford of Lakeland is not a supporter of her congressman but is a follower — on Facebook.

In May, Steniford noticed that U.S. Rep. Scott Franklin, R-Lakeland, posted a clip of a speech he made on the House floor to commemorate National Police Week.

“Sadly, our police force faces unprecedented attack,” Franklin said in the short video posted to his official Facebook account. “Last year, 264 enforcement officers

were killed in the line of duty, nearly double the amount from 2019.”

Franklin then criticized some in Congress for seeking to reduce law-enforcement funding.

Steniford posted a comment, linking to a CNN story that attributed the spike in officer fatalities to COVID-19, with the virus accounting for 55% of the deaths.

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“Incomplete info for another half truth post!” Steniford wrote. “Good God man, I just looked it up. Geezus, read the article.”

About a month later, Steniford noticed that she was no longer seeing comments on Franklin’s Facebook posts. All posts since June 23 are accompanied by the automatically generated phrase, “Most relevant is selected, so some comments may have been filtered out.”

In an era when public meetings are rare, members of Congress increasingly rely upon social media as a way to reach constituents. Franklin, in his first term, has taken a different approach than Polk County’s other two representatives, Rep. Darren Soto, D-Kissimmee, and Rep. Greg Steube, R-Sarasota.



Polk’s U.S. House representatives, from left, Scott Franklin, Greg Steube and Darren Soto *Provided Photo*

Soto and Steube allow all comments to be visible on their Facebook feeds, including ones that are viciously critical, essentially creating public forums. But Franklin has opted to restrict the visible conversation on his official Facebook feed.

Melissa Kelly, Franklin’s chief of staff, said his office does not hide all Facebook comments from public view, as Steniford suggested. She said the staff created a filter based on keywords, causing Facebook’s algorithms to make some comments invisible.

One-way communication?

“It sounds like the congressman uses Facebook as essentially a bullhorn approach,” said Josh Scacco, an associate professor of communication at the University of South Florida. “There’s kind of a, really, ‘I’m going to push messages out at you, but I don’t necessarily want any feedback’ approach, which is in a lot of ways what a lot of elected officials use social media for, particularly Twitter.”

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Russ Read, Franklin’s communications director, said the congressman’s staff reviews Facebook comments.

In his page’s “About” section, Franklin states: “The purpose of this page is for Rep. Scott Franklin to communicate with the citizens of Florida’s 15th Congressional District regarding his activities on behalf of his constituents and other matters of federal policy. It is not a public forum, so comments to posts on the page are not intended to be visible to the public at large.”

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The statement suggests that constituents contact Franklin through his official website (franklin.house.gov) or by traditional mail.

“As our policy clearly states on the page, its purpose is to keep people up to date on our office’s activities — not to serve as a forum for public debate,” Franklin said in an emailed statement. “To be clear, though, we do not block anyone from leaving comments for our review.”

Franklin’s page displays the number of comments made on each post, even if many are invisible to any particular follower. A post from Aug. 12 linked to a Forbes story on President Joe Biden’s possible circumvention of mask-mandate bans in Republican-led states, to which Franklin added, “Don’t Fauci my Florida!”

The phrase, a campaign slogan of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, refers to Dr. Anthony Fauci, a medical advisor to presidents since the 1980s and an advocate for masks to combat the spread of COVID-19.

Franklin’s post drew 12 comments, but the only one visible to a Ledger reporter was left by a mutual Facebook friend.

Franklin said he welcomes feedback from constituents by phone, letters or email.

“I would also like to add that we generally have received positive feedback on all our methods of communication,” Franklin said by email. “This includes our popular newsletter, which I would encourage readers to sign up for on my website.”

Getting established

Franklin took office in January, and hasn’t yet established a social media presence comparable to those of Steube and Soto, in their second and third terms, respectively. As of Thursday, Franklin had 1,300 Facebook followers, compared to

about 15,400 for Soto and 24,500 for Steube.

On Twitter, Franklin has 4,867 followers, far fewer than Soto (21,600) and Steube (25,900).

While Soto and Steube allow visible comments on Facebook, they and their staffs rarely respond publicly to them. Belén Sassone, a spokeswoman for Soto, said the staff sometimes sends direct messages to commenters who have asked for assistance.

Capitol riot: Two Polk reps vote against forming Jan. 6 committee

Steniford said she called the House Committee on Ethics to lodge a complaint about Franklin's limiting of visible comments. A committee spokesman declined to comment when asked by a reporter if House members are free to restrict comments on Facebook.

Steniford said Franklin often posts links to news articles and makes statements she says distort or contradict the reports.

"He posts that one-liner lead, and people automatically assume what he's saying is correct and they don't read the article," she said.

Richard Batchelor also criticized Franklin for concealing Facebook comments. Batchelor, a graduate of Kathleen High School, lives in Gainesville but said he still often visits Lakeland, where his parents live. He said he is particularly concerned about Franklin's approach to COVID-19, which he said directly affects his parents.

"Some of my concern with that (policy) is that he has effectively shut down the public forum and healthy debate surrounding the outcomes of his policymaking," Batchelor said. "Beforehand, there was a clear area where we could go. We could discuss things he's doing, things he's saying, and interact with others and get feedback and also hear other people's perspectives. But by turning off his comments, he's getting rid of that mechanism, where instead of being a public forum now it's more like a complaint box, where if we just want to leave a comment it's like dropping a paper off in the box. Someone might read it."

Legal gray area

Legal guidelines for members of Congress and social media are still evolving, said Andrew Geronimo, director of the First Amendment Clinic at Case Western Reserve University School of Law in Cleveland.

Former President Donald Trump faced lawsuits after blocking followers on Twitter, meaning they could not see or comment on his tweets. The Knight Institute at Columbia University argued that Trump had created a public space with his Twitter feed and that blocking followers denied their free speech rights.

Comedic congressional candidate: Ex-comedian running as Democrat in U.S. House-15

A series of courts ruled in the plaintiff's favor, and Trump appealed to the Supreme Court. That court vacated an appeals court decision in April, after Trump had left office.

Scacco said rulings from lower courts in the Trump case indicated that politicians'

social media activities, including comments from followers, constituted a public realm.

“That’s not necessarily to say it would be a one-to-one comparison with what’s going on with the congressman (Franklin),” Scacco said. “But I think that there will be a First Amendment implication here of whether or not there is a concern about excluding individuals from any sort of interactive space created on Facebook.”

Similarly, Geronimo said Franklin seemed to be avoiding the creation of a public forum, a crucial issue in the lawsuits against Trump.

“It’s not an ideal way,” Geronimo said. “It doesn’t embody the ideals of transparency and trying to hear from your constituents, but I think it is less of a problem to turn off (some) comments than to allow some and disallow others based on their viewpoint.”

Scacco, who previously worked for a U.S. senator, said elected officials don’t use Facebook the way the rest of us do, as a means of holding virtual conversations. He said social media allows politicians to present an illusion of access.

“I think at the moment, because this is still evolving, what you’re seeing is candidates as well as elected officials pushing the envelope for what they can get away with,” Scacco said. “At the end of the day, one of the goals for elected officials and candidates engaging in political communication is to control their message, and environments, like social media and the general media environment, that invite individuals to offer feedback in the form of comments and interactions, ultimately what that does is that increases the chance the elected official or candidate can lose control of the message.”

Batchelor complained the Franklin had blocked him from commenting on his unofficial campaign account (Scott Franklin for Congress). A review of the account found comments from two followers who claimed Franklin had deleted other comments they made.

Those two could not be reached.

[More: U.S. Rep. Scott Franklin's C.U.R.B. Act seeks to cut federal regulations on businesses](#)

Kelly acknowledged Wednesday that Franklin had blocked some followers on the campaign Facebook page. She said Franklin had changed his policy and would unblock those followers. Kelly said Franklin is not trying to silence criticism but wants to avoid having his accounts become forums for arguments among commenters.

Scacco said that some members of Congress, such as Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Florida, seek maximum attention on social media by being provocative and allowing unlimited comments. The more restrictions on interaction, Scacco said, the less visible an account is. Gaetz has 1.3 million followers on Twitter and more than 240,000 followers on his official Facebook page.

“We have to remember, for the congressman here (Franklin), he’s a freshman, and so he might be deciding that having tighter control over his messaging is more important right now than his visibility,” Scacco said.

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