

# Congress members speak at 10th-grade level

By Laura Chilaka, California News Service

WASHINGTON – Members of Congress speak at a 10th-grade level – down almost a full grade since 2005 – raising the question of whether they are embracing a more effective communication strategy or dumbing down their messages, a new report says.

The findings published by the Sunlight Foundation, a nonpartisan government transparency group in Washington, found that California representatives use more complex words – speaking at about the 12th-grade level.

The foundation analyzed floor speeches as reported in the Congressional Record, using the Flesch-Kincaid scale, which rates speeches based on the complexity, length and difficulty of words and sentences. Congress speaks at roughly the same level as the typical American, who speaks between the ninth- and 10th-grade levels.

Among Northern California lawmakers, Dan Lungren, R-Gold River, and John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove, are at polar extremes – with Lungren’s speech the equivalent of a college senior and Garamendi’s not quite a high school freshman.

Lungren was the highest-rated member in Congress, followed by another Californian – Lucille Roybal-Allard, D-Los Angeles.

One sentence from a recent Lungren speech went on for 62 words – boosting his score under a formula that links longer sentences and more syllables with higher-grade levels. Members with the lowest ratings typically use sentences containing seven to eight words.

“The challenge is how to introduce a full thought or a full

argument,” Lungren said in an interview.

“One of the challenges of dealing with communication today – when you have people tweeting on Twitter and limited to 140 characters – is that people are interested in shorthand and symbols rather than full words.”

Congress’ movement toward plain language is illustrated in the Sunlight Foundation’s database, which tracks the most popular words spoken by lawmakers on the House and Senate floor.

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