Online Town Hall Meetings

Exploring Democracy in the 21st Century

Congressional Management Foundation,
the Harvard Kennedy School, Northeastern University,
The Ohio State University and University of California-Riverside

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Exploring Democracy in the 21st Century

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About this Project

This research is part of the "Connecting to Congress" project, and has been generously funded by the National Science Foundation (award number IIS-0429452) and Harvard's Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation.

The "Connecting to Congress" project is the result of a partnership between the Congressional Management Foundation and researchers from the Harvard Kennedy School, the University of California-Riverside, and The Ohio State University. The goals of the project are to:

1. Determine how Members of Congress can use the Internet to enhance communication with constituents and promote constituent engagement in the legislative process;
2. Understand how Members and staff learn to use best and innovative practices for their web sites and Internet communications;
3. Identify how information about technology and innovation spreads among staff and congressional offices; and
4. Identify best and innovative practices for congressional web sites and technology use that can be more widely adopted by congressional offices.

Through this work, CMF is developing resources and services that will help congressional offices improve their web sites and online communications in order to engage citizens and meet their own goals. Our partnership with the researchers at these universities also provides scholarly insight into the practices of congressional offices and ways in which they can improve.

Acknowledgements

This report has a great deal of work behind it, and it would not have been possible without the contribution of many people. First, we would like to thank the National Science Foundation (NSF) and Harvard's Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation for their financial support of this research. We are grateful for NSF's sponsorship of the entire "Connecting to Congress" project, which is yielding exciting results and stimulating ideas for further research. And we very much appreciate the Ash Institute's support, which enabled us to test our online town hall format with a larger group of constituents.

We also want to extend deep thanks to the Members of Congress who participated in the project and the staffers in their offices who worked with us. These individuals put their confidence in us and in the process, and their support of this research will make a valuable contribution both to their colleagues and to political science. We hope they found their involvement worthwhile and that they, also, learned something through their participation.

Curt Ziniel, a graduate student at University of California-Riverside, was also instrumental to this research. He not only provided technical support and guidance throughout this project, but also provided important assistance with the research and analysis. Curt was integral to this project from its inception, and his contribution was considerable.

Facilitating research with Members of Congress requires knowledge of, and savvy about, working with Members and their staffs. We could not have done this without our colleagues at CMF, Beverly Bell and Nicole Folk Cooper. Beverly and Nicole worked tirelessly to ensure sessions were positive experiences for the Members, and during the sessions they provided invaluable assistance to the moderator and support to Members and staff.

Analyzing data of this volume and nature requires considerable time and attention to detail. For the research assistance they provided, we thank Daniel Davis and Robert Gulotty, graduate students at The Ohio State University and Stanford University respectively.

We thank James Cooney of the Ash Institute for his expert assistance in running the session with Senator Levin. We also appreciate the work of Tim Hysom at CMF who was integral to the Senate session and who invested time and energy in the writing. This report benefitted greatly from his knowledge of congressional use of technology.

Finally, we want to thank the following CMF interns for their contributions: Anne Wingate, Allison Zellman, and Liz Gilson for their participation in test sessions to ensure the town hall meetings would go smoothly; Brad Simmons for providing background research to help inform the research and report; and Toni Zosherafatain for her contribution to the writing of this report.

David Lazer, Michael Neblo, Kevin Esterling, and Kathy Goldschmidt

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Executive Summary

The Internet is transforming our democracy, and has received much scholarly and popular attention. Strikingly little attention, however, has been focused on how the Internet might facilitate and enable conversations between citizens and Members of Congress. This report aims to at least partially fill this deficit. To this end, we facilitated 20 online town hall meetings in 2006 with U.S. Representatives and one event in 2008 with a U.S. Senator, with a total number of participants in excess of 600.

The sessions were moderated by a member of the research team. The Member and moderator spoke via voice over IP, and constituents asked questions and made comments by typing them. Only off-topic, redundant, unintelligible, or offensive questions were screened, and only questions asked by people who had not yet asked a question were prioritized.

In order to be able to examine the impact of the online town hall meetings, we randomly assigned individuals to participate (treatment subjects) or not to participate (control subjects). We surveyed both groups three times during the study; once before the online town hall, once about a week after the online town hall, and once after the election in the same year (2006 or 2008). The comparison between treatment subjects and controls, much as in a rigorous drug trial, allow one to infer whether the online town halls actually had an effect on participants.

Through this research, we found that:

- **The online town halls increased constituents' approval of the Member.** Every Member involved experienced an increase in approval by the constituents who participated. The average net approval rating (approve minus disapprove) jumped from +29 before the session to +47 after. There were also similar increases in trust and perceptions of personal qualities – such as whether they were compassionate, hardworking, accessible, etc. – of the Member.
- **The online town halls increased constituents' approval of the Member's position on the issue discussed.** Constituents' approval of their Member's position on immigration (the issue discussed in most of the sessions) jumped from 20% to 58%. There were also large shifts in participants' positions on the issue toward the position of the Member, as well as significant increases in their policy knowledge of the issue.
- **The town halls attracted a diverse array of constituents.** These sessions were more likely than traditional venues to attract people from demographics not traditionally engaged in politics and people frustrated with the political system. Of the seven demographic characteristics that traditionally predict participation in partisan and activist politics, six had the opposite effect for participation in the online town halls (only level of education had the same effect).

- **The town halls increased engagement in politics.** Participants in the sessions were more likely to vote and were dramatically more likely to follow the election and to attempt to persuade other citizens how to vote.
- **The town halls increased the probability of voting for the Member.** The probability of voting for the Member was 49% for control subjects and 56% for people who participated in a session with their Member. The impact was particularly dramatic for swing voters, where a person with a 50% probability of voting for the Member in the control condition was 73% more likely to do so if he or she participated in the town hall.
- **The discussions in the town halls were of high quality.** By standard measures of deliberative quality (quality of information, use of accurate facts to support arguments, respect for alternative points of view, perceptions of participants) the discussions in these sessions were of quite high quality.
- **The sessions were extremely popular with constituents.** A remarkable 95% of participants stated that they would like to participate in similar events in the future.
- **The positive results were seen even in a larger session.** Most of the sessions were conducted by Representatives with small groups of 15-25 constituents. To test the scalability, we conducted one session with a Senator and nearly 200 constituents. We saw the same positive results in this session as those described above.

These sessions had the further advantage of carrying a low overhead. The demands on the Member's time were minimal, because there was no need to expend time getting to and from a particular location. All they needed was access to a telephone.

The design of the event likely enhanced the impact of the town halls. The sessions were structured to recruit a diverse set of constituents, involved light-handed moderation by a neutral party (a member of the research team), transparent involvement by the particular Member (because the Member's voice could be heard in real time), and a focus on a timely issue (immigration). We also provided brief, unbiased information on the issue in advance.

Comparative research between town hall meetings conducted in-person, on the telephone and online needs to be conducted, but it appears that the online forum provides another excellent opportunity for citizens and their elected officials to exchange information and share their views.

Introduction

Much like the printing press of another era, the Internet is being used to transform our democracy. While enormous attention has been lavished on the role of the Internet in Presidential electoral politics, relatively little attention has been focused on how the Internet might transform the existing relationship between Members of Congress and their constituents. This relationship is the fundamental building block of a representative democracy, and it has come under strain with the escalating complexity of policy and the increased size of congressional districts.

Does the Internet offer opportunities to ease the strain and bring citizens closer to their Representatives in Congress? To find out, we worked with Members of Congress to conduct a series of online discussions with constituents. What we found surprised even us. By participating in a single half-hour discussion with one of their Members of Congress, constituents were more likely to:

- Increase their trust in, and approval of, the Member;
- Better understand the policy issue that was discussed;
- Change their opinion on the issue discussed to align more with the Member's position;
- Increase their engagement in politics;
- Turn out to vote; and
- Vote for the Member.

This report provides the details of our findings from a series of online discussions conducted between 2006 and 2008. For the most part, the discussions involved Members of Congress meeting online with a small but diverse group of constituents (15-25) selected at random by a research firm. Much like rigorous drug trials, after we identified a representative sample of constituents, we randomly assigned them to either participate in a session with their Member of Congress or to participate in a control group. We surveyed all of the participants several times over the course of several months to determine changes in behavior and attitudes over time, and we found dramatic differences between those who met with their Members online and those who did not.

Constituents who participated in the online town halls with their Members were enthusiastic about the sessions. Almost all of them indicated that they would be interested in participating in such sessions again. As one constituent put it: "It was great to have a Member of Congress want to really hear the voices of the constituents." Further, we found that when we tested the scalability of our format to a larger group of nearly 200 constituents, the positive impact of the session on participants' behavior was similar to that experienced by participants in the smaller groups.

On the practical side, these sessions were fairly easy to run and did not require a significant amount of Members' time or effort. The sessions took Members 30 minutes and could be conducted from any location with a reliable telephone connection. Participating Members also found these interactions useful. As one Representative stated, "I thoroughly enjoyed being able to engage with my constituents on the topic of immigration and learned a lot from the session."

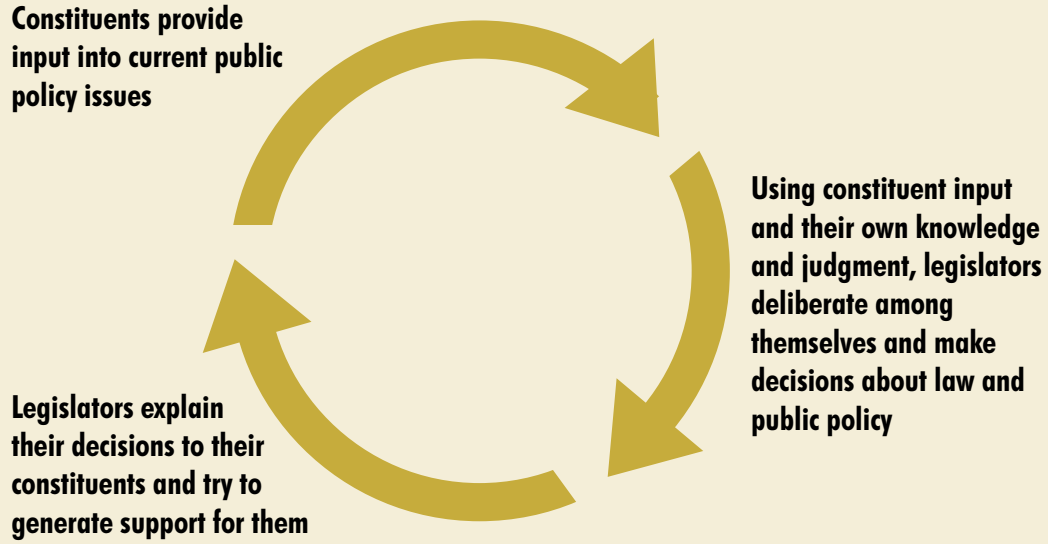
Our conclusion is that online sessions like those we facilitated offer a powerful tool for strengthening the relationship between Members and their constituents, for fostering increased citizen engagement with politics and policy, and for enabling a deeper policy discourse in the public, more generally.

The Importance of Meaningful Member-Constituent Interaction

> *THE SECOND charge against the House of Representatives is, that it will be too small to possess a due knowledge of the interests of its constituents. It is a sound and important principle that the representative ought to be acquainted with the interests and circumstances of his constituents.*
>
> – James Madison & Alexander Hamilton, Federalist 56

Members of Congress have a general duty, and a strong incentive, to enact policies that align with the ideologies and priorities of their states and districts. However, they typically have better information with which to make policy judgments than most citizens, so they do not simply vote for whatever the public thinks it wants at the moment. To enable Members of Congress to balance constituent input and their own policy judgments and to effectively communicate and gain support for their policy decisions, they must use what we call a Madisonian or "republican" feedback model. A Madisonian model is a cycle of deliberation that allows citizens to cooperatively formulate and communicate their general interests to their Senators and Representatives, whereupon legislators debate and craft policies to advance those interests, and then persuade their constituents of the (sometimes non-obvious) connection between the two, after which the process repeats itself in a cycle of feedback.

Figure 1. The Madisonian Feedback Cycle



As we view it, the Madisonian cycle potentially encompasses a wide range of meaningful interactions between Members of Congress and their constituents, including: public events, constituent visits to a Member's office, town hall meetings, telephone calls, e-mails, letters, and so on. However, we do emphasize the word "meaningful" in this context. Staged interactions by citizens or by Members of Congress offer ersatz deliberation, with the promise to further fuel public cynicism regarding our political system.

The Madisonian feedback cycle is implicit in many components of the public policy process. Indeed, citizen engagement is one of the core principles of constitutional democratic government. As the framers stated in Federalist 56, in particular, the design of the House of Representatives is meant to facilitate connections between representatives and the represented. Moreover, the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees citizens the right to petition government for a redress of grievances. However, the framers could not have imagined the scale and complexity of modern politics and policy. Consider, for example, that the population of the United States in 1787 was about equivalent to five congressional districts today, which is smaller than the average state population. The challenge for a Senator or Representative to become "acquainted" with his or her constituents has become proportionately more difficult.

Of course, the framers also could not have imagined modern communication technologies. The Internet seemingly offers a particularly compelling platform for enabling meaningful Member-constituent interaction. There is wide – although not universal – access to the Internet, potentially enabling more diverse and active civic participation than ever before possible. The Internet has the promise of greatly lowering the barrier of entry to participation. Compare an Internet-based interaction to a conventional town hall meeting: attendance at a town hall may be quite onerous – requiring, for example, child care, transportation, and availability at particular times. Conventional town halls thus draw a very narrow slice of society and small numbers of constituents. The Internet allows a multiplicity of ways of communicating with a large number of citizens – synchronously or asynchronously – through video, audio, and text, and through materials aimed at various levels of policy sophistication. The Internet is also low cost by many measures. Further, materials do not need to be printed and mailed, and neither Members nor constituents need to travel to and from an online town hall.

To evaluate the Madisonian vision for our democracy, as enabled by 21st Century communication technology, we conducted a series of experiments involving Members of Congress discussing two of the major issues of the day, immigration and detainee policy. Through these experiments, we sought to answer questions including:

- How can Congress make use of the Internet to foster deliberation in an emerging digital democracy?
- How can Congress apply the principles of the Madisonian cycle, which is second nature to Members off line, to the Internet?
- What impact will online deliberation have on constituents' views of, and engagement in, politics?

- What impact will online deliberation have on constituents' perceptions of their Member of Congress and of the issue?

The answers our research provided to these questions were even more encouraging than we had hoped. We now turn to the details of the experiment.

Methodology

Given that we wanted to understand how a rich online interaction with a U.S. Senator or Representative might affect participating constituents, we had to design and create the forum for the interaction, recruit Members of Congress and citizens to participate, and conduct a rigorous scientific examination of its impact on the participants. Below we describe how we accomplished each of these.

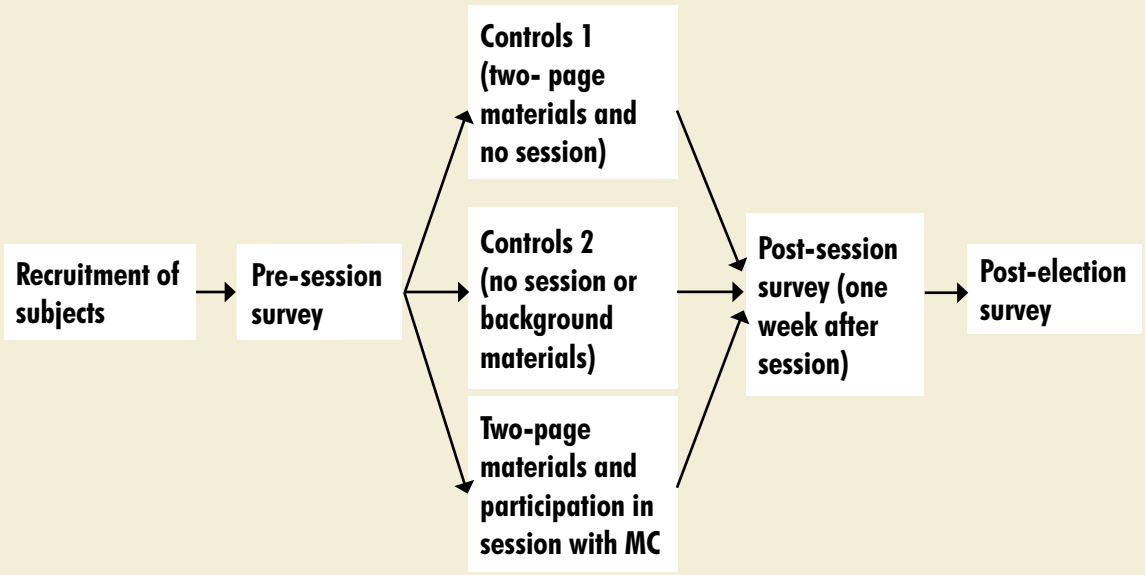
Research Design

Our primary objective was to evaluate the impact on constituents of participating in online deliberative forums with their Members of Congress. However, to conduct a rigorous and valid study, we had to carefully design the process. If we had simply made a comparison between people who happened to participate in online town halls and those that did not, we would have faced the problem that participants likely started out differing from nonparticipants in some relevant way, for example, in their views of democracy, their Member, and so on. We therefore approached our research much like a drug trial, where there is a treatment (the drug) and participants are randomly assigned to receive the treatment ("treatment subjects") or not ("control subjects").

In this case, when we originally made contact with potential participants, we asked whether they would be willing participate in an online town hall with their Member of Congress. For those individuals who agreed, we then randomly selected some to participate and some to not participate. The individuals chosen to participate received background materials (two pages adapted from Congressional Research Service and Congressional Budget Office reports). The rationale for supplying some basic factual materials was to facilitate a more informed, and thus more productive session for both the Member and the constituents. Indeed, the data suggest that our subjects were overall very poorly informed about the issue of immigration, where the average score on a series of factual questions prior to the session did not differ significantly from choosing answers at random. In order not to cloud the discussion, we went to great lengths to use sources and language that were objective and politically unbiased.

We divided those who did not participate into two types of control groups: one which received the background materials on the issue and one which received no background materials. This design allowed us to distinguish between the effects of receiving the background materials and the effects of participating on the online town hall.

Figure 2. The Five Stages of Our Online Town Hall Research



The mode of analysis we used, just as with drug trials, was a comparison between treatment and control subjects. As a result of the nature of the research design, it is reasonable to interpret differences between the two groups as being causal – i.e., due to participation in the online town hall.[1] To make our results as easy as possible to understand, however, our findings below are based only on comparisons between participants and the second control group, which did not receive any materials and did not participate in the town hall. However, the results from comparisons between the first control group and participants in the town halls are substantively consistent with the findings we report below.

Twelve U.S. Representatives and one U.S. Senator participated in the sessions. Eight Representatives conducted two sessions each, and four Representatives and the Senator conducted one session each. The participating Members were representative of the body. For example, for the experiment with the Representatives, there were 7 Democrats and 5 Republicans, with a member of leadership from each party; there was excellent geographic balance, and a balance of views on immigration. The participating Members were:

[1] The data were complicated by the fact that we could not require people we invited to the session to actually participate. The data thus pose "selection to treat" issues, which required the development and application of novel statistical techniques, the Generalized Endogenous Treatment (GET) model. For a full description of the methodology see Esterling, Kevin M., Neblo, Michael A. and Lazer, David, "Estimating Treatment Effects in the Presence of Noncompliance and Nonresponse: The Generalized Endogenous Treatment Model." Experiments in Political Science 2008 Conference Paper. Available at SSRN: http://ssrn.com/abstract=1269485. For the purpose of simplicity, however, we do not present the results of this more advanced statistical analysis in this report, but everything we present here is consistent with the analyses we performed with the GET model.

- Senator Carl Levin
- Representative Earl Blumenauer
- Representative Michael Capuano
- Representative James Clyburn
- Representative Mike Conaway
- Representative Anna Eshoo
- Representative Jack Kingston
- Representative Zoe Lofgren
- Representative Don Manzullo
- Representative Jim Matheson
- Representative David Price
- Representative George Radanovich
- Representative Dave Weldon

The town halls with the Representatives were conducted in the summer and fall of 2006, prior to the 2006 election, and the session with the Senator was conducted in the summer of 2008. We had not originally planned to conduct a session with a Senator, but, in our initial analyses of the data, one major concern that arose was whether the effects that we were finding would occur if there were a larger number of participants, since the sessions with the Representatives included small groups of 15-25 constituents. To evaluate whether the effects on participants we found scaled to a larger audience, we replicated the experiment with a single session with a U.S. Senator and 193 of his constituents.

Our objective was to create an online space for a town hall meeting. Producing such a forum was fairly straightforward because various reliable tools exist for facilitating online group meetings. We analyzed a number of the most common applications, and we settled on Macromedia Breeze (now Adobe Acrobat Connect) for the sessions with the Representatives and Microsoft LiveMeeting for the session with the Senator.

For the sessions with the Representatives, constituents were recruited by the survey firm Knowledge Networks. We chose Knowledge Networks because their research methodology takes particular pains to recruit a representative sample for online research. For example, their panel of potential participants includes individuals who would not normally be easily reached through online research – such as those from lower incomes and lower education levels – because they provide hardware to individuals who do not have access. This ensured that our research could be conducted with constituents who, to the greatest extent possible, were representative of the demographics of the Member's district.

For the session with the Senator, constituents were recruited by the survey research firm Polimetrix through their web site PollingPoint.com, using a raw (or "unmatched") sample from their panel, resulting in a somewhat less representative subject pool than those in the Representatives' sessions.

In all cases, participants were voting-age constituents of the Member holding the session.

Each session involved half an hour of discussion with the Member followed by half an hour of chat among participants, without the Member of Congress present, to enable the constituents to debrief and enable the researchers to collect qualitative data on the sessions.[2]

[2] We did not conduct the post-session chat with the larger Senate session because it was not practical to have nearly 200 individuals in a single chat room.

To provide comparability across sessions we chose a single issue as the focus of all sessions. In consultation with Representatives who were potentially interested in participating, we chose the issue of immigration, one of the most prominent issues of the spring and summer of 2006, to be the subject of the online town halls. In consultation with the Senator, we chose the issue of detainee policy instead of immigration, which was more a part of the public debate than immigration in the summer of 2008.

We structured the forums so that the moderator and the Member of Congress could speak via voice over IP and constituents could hear them over their computer speakers. The constituents posed written – not oral – questions in real time during the sessions. No questions or answers were compiled in advance. Constituents' questions were posted to a queue, which was managed by a moderator's assistant, a member of the research team. Questions were presented orally by the moderator in the order in which they were asked. Only redundant, off-topic, unintelligible, or offensive items3 were removed, and questions by constituents who had not yet asked were prioritized over those who had. The Member responded orally to the questions, but, to facilitate accessibility for the hearing impaired and to minimize any potential problems participants might have with the audio, we also arranged for the audio to be captioned in real time. Those captions appeared simultaneously on the computer screens of participants.

[3] Our definition of offensive included any questions which included profanity or were abjectly disrespectful. However, this last criterion was theoretical. Not once in the 21 sessions did a question need to be screened for being offensive.

Key Findings

The online town hall meetings were highly successful in building positive relationships between constituents and their Members of Congress. The sessions had a significant and favorable impact on constituents' perceptions of their Members of Congress, including their approval for the Member, their perceptions of personal attributes of the Member, and the likelihood that they would vote for the Member. They generally increased constituents' awareness and understanding of the issue being discussed in the session and were likely to convince undecided participants to adopt the Member's position. Finally, by a range of measures of deliberative democratic practice, such as broadness of participation, impact on political engagement, and overall deliberative quality of sessions these sessions were also of high quality.

The key findings from the town hall meetings were that:

1. The online town halls increased support for participating Members of Congress.
2. Members persuaded constituents of their position on the issue discussed.
3. The town halls increased policy knowledge of constituents on the topic of discussion.
4. The sessions attracted a diverse set of constituents.
5. Participation in the town hall increased citizen engagement in politics.
6. The discussions were of generally high deliberative quality.
7. The positive results of the smaller sessions were also seen in the larger session.
8. The sessions were extremely popular with participants.

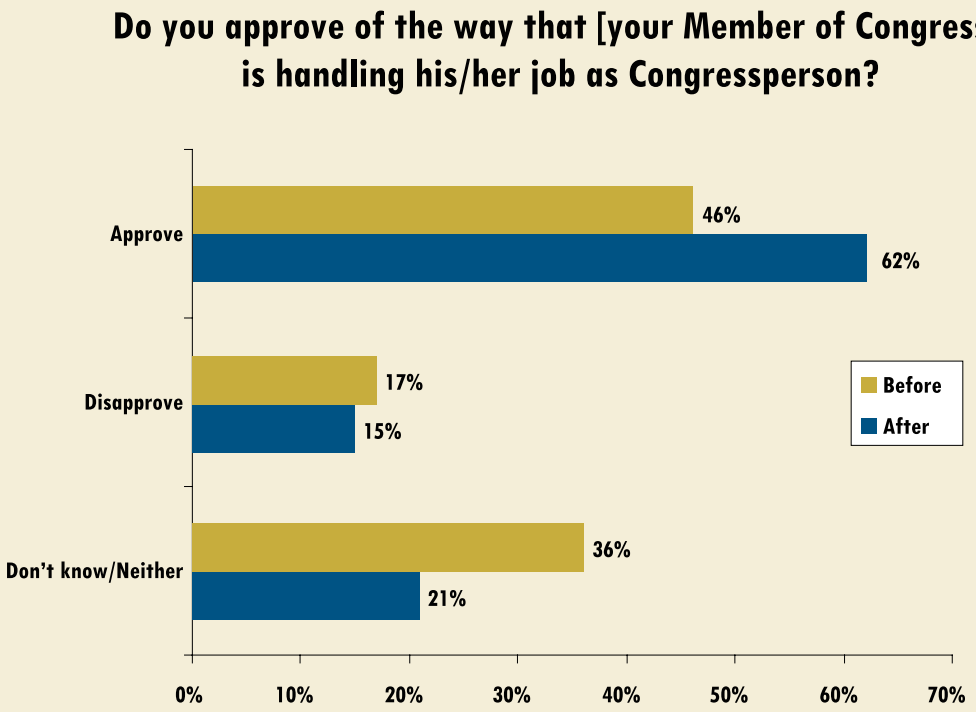
Each of these findings is discussed in detail below. Most of the findings are based on the online town halls with the Representatives and do not include data from the session with the Senator, unless specifically noted. The session with the Senator is discussed separately in finding seven.

1. The online town halls increased support for participating Members of Congress

The sessions had a strikingly positive impact on constituents' views of their Member of Congress. Every participant was asked before and after the session, "Do you approve of the way that [your Member of Congress] is handling his/her job?" The approval ratings of every Member who participated significantly improved as a result of the online sessions, largely because a significant number of individuals who responded "don't know" to this question before the session responded "approve" after.[4] On average the approval rating of the Member increased from a +29 (i.e., percentage approves minus percentage disapproves) to a +47. By comparison, there was no notable change in the approval ratings by the constituents in the control groups.

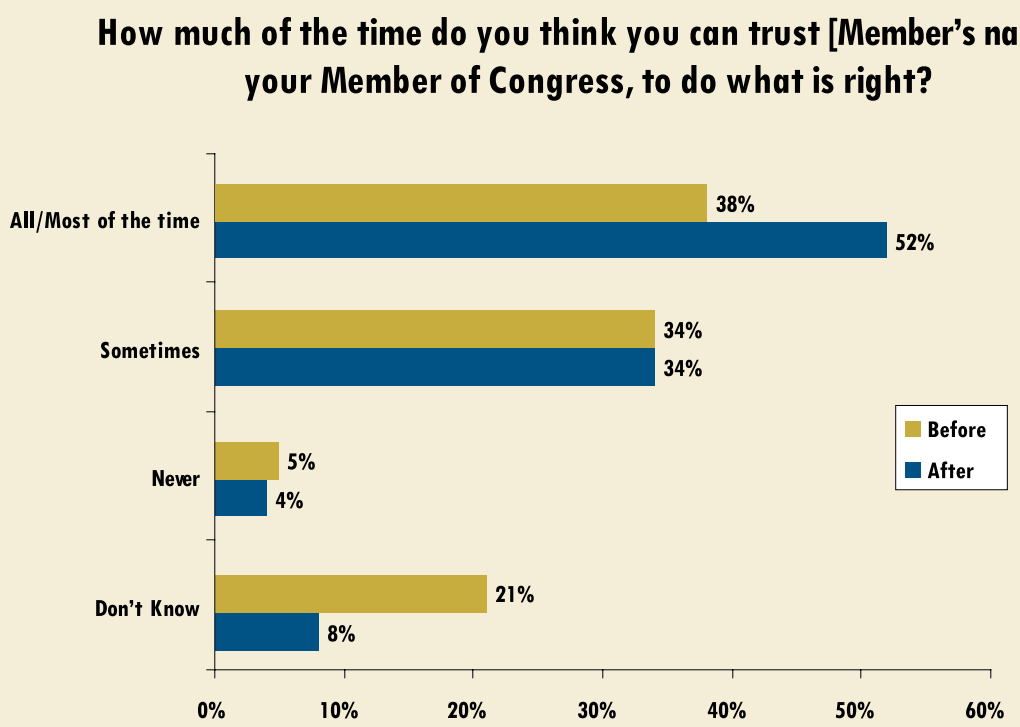
[4] There was one exception to this pattern, but it was an exception that proved the rule. In one case the Member, without explanation, backed out shortly before the session. We substituted an expert on immigration for this session, however it is clear that participants were acutely disappointed. This was reflected in the significant drop in the Member's approval ratings. Notably, this is the only Member who agreed to participate in these sessions who lost re-election. The data collected from this Member's constituents is not included in the analysis, and the Member's name is not included in the list of participating Members.

Figure 3. Participation in Online Town Halls Significantly Increased Participants' Approval of the Member



In addition to increasing their approval ratings, every participating Member also realized gains in their constituents' trust – i.e., constituents' sense that the Member will continue to do a good job, especially with regard to issues that the constituent knows little about. On average, the trust that constituents had in participating Members jumped 14 points. The public is often quite cynical about politicians, so in many ways trust ratings are a more important indicator of effective communication than approval ratings. Compared to approval, trust tends to be less volatile, more difficult to gain, and more easily applicable to new issues and situations.

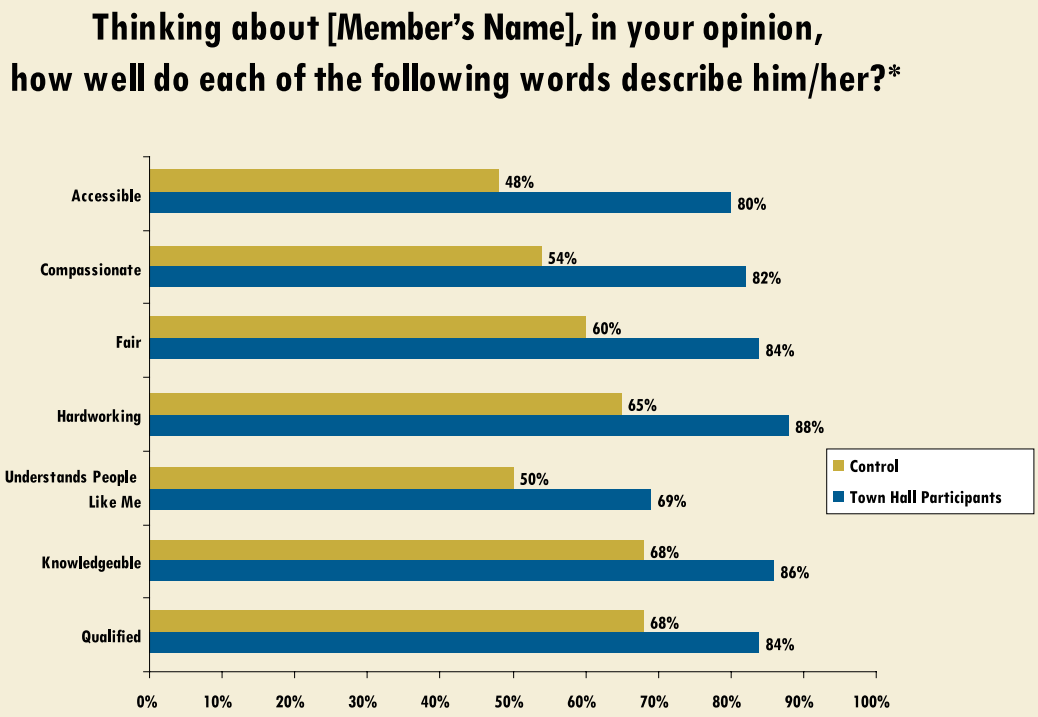
Figure 4. Participation in Online Town Halls Significantly Increased Participants' Trust in the Member



Each participating Member also improved on their constituents' perception of several traits known to affect approval, trust, and vote support. Figure 5 shows constituents' perception of their Member on these traits, both from control subjects and those who participated in the online town halls. There were dramatic improvements in how constituents viewed their Members across the board, with the most dramatic effect with respect to accessibility.

Improvement on perceptions of core traits such as these suggests that the changes in constituent attitudes run deep, and are likely to last. For example, constituents who strongly associate positive traits with their Member will be much more likely to decide in the future that the Member must have a good reason for a vote they do not agree with than constituents who do not strongly associate positive traits with the Member. For this reason, these traits can be powerful indicators of both current and future approval, trust, and support. Perceptions of the personal qualities of each Member improved enormously, ranging from a jump from 68% to 84% for "qualified," to a substantial leap for "accessible" from 48% to 80%.

Figure 5. Online Town Hall Participants Were More Likely to Think Favorably of the Member than Participants in the Control Group

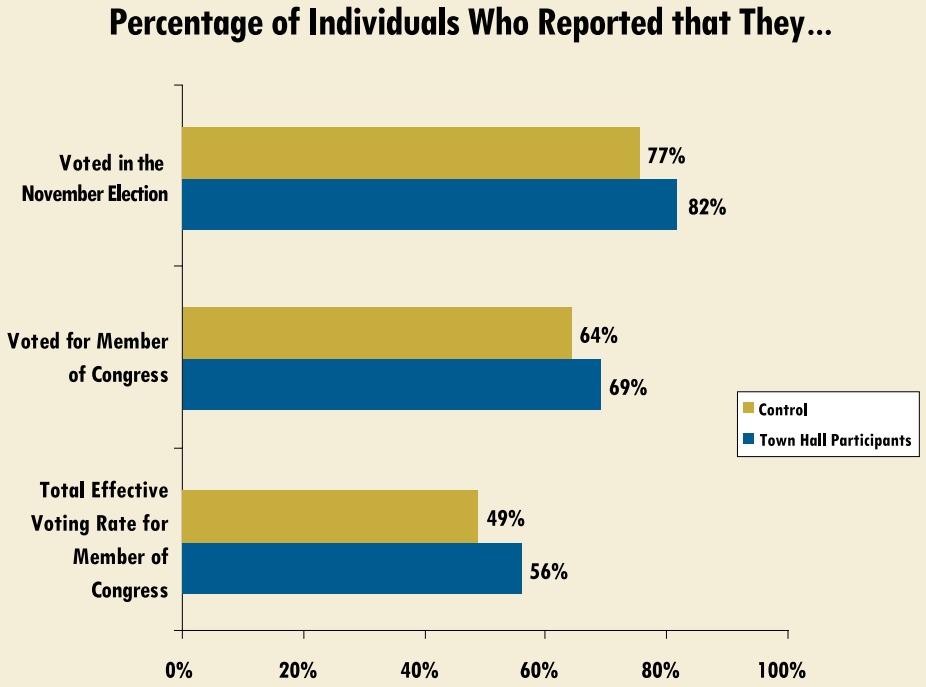


* Data reports percentage of participants who responded that the characteristic applied to the Member "extremely well" or "quite well".

Perhaps most consequential for every participating Member was the increase in the percentage of participating constituents who actually turned out to vote and in the percentage that voted for their Member, as compared to those in the control group. On average, constituents who participated in the session were more likely to vote, and, if they voted, more likely to vote for the Member. Thus, the probability of a control subject voting for the Member was 49%, and of town hall participants, 56%. The impact of the event was particularly dramatic on swing voters, where an individual who we would have predicted in the control condition to be 50% likely to vote for the Member in the treatment condition[5] was actually 73% likely to do so. This is all the more notable for the fact that most of these events occurred months before the election.

[5] Based on individuals' responses to the pre-session survey questions, such as party identification and approval of the Member.

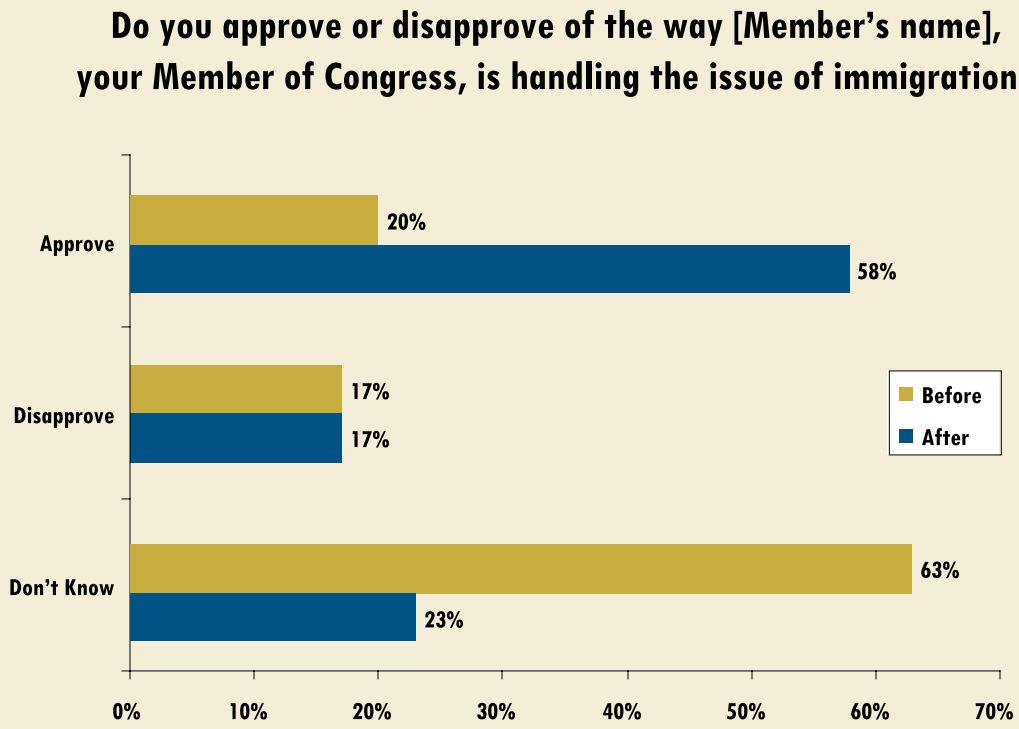
Figure 6. Online Town Hall Participants Were More Likely to Vote and to Vote for the Member



2. Members persuaded constituents of their position on the issue discussed

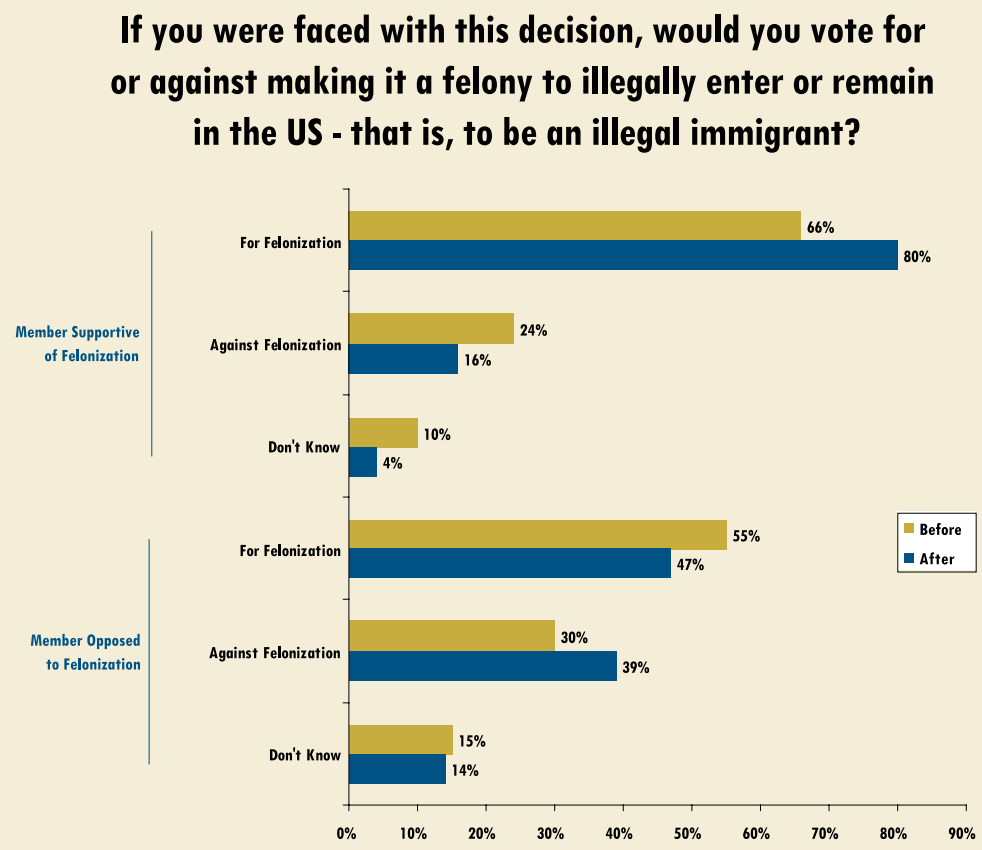
All of the sessions with Representatives focused on the issue of immigration. We found that approval of the Member's position on immigration increased among participants in the online town halls. As one participant said, "I think that she was right on with most of her responses." The majority did not know their Member's position beforehand, but among those who heard their Member speak on it during the town halls, they overwhelming moved over to approving. Across Members, 20% of the participants reported approval of their Member's position before the online session and 58% after. This would indicate that the participating Members of Congress were quite successful in their communications about the issue.

Figure 7. Participants Were More Likely to Approve of the Member's Position on the Issue after the Online Town Hall



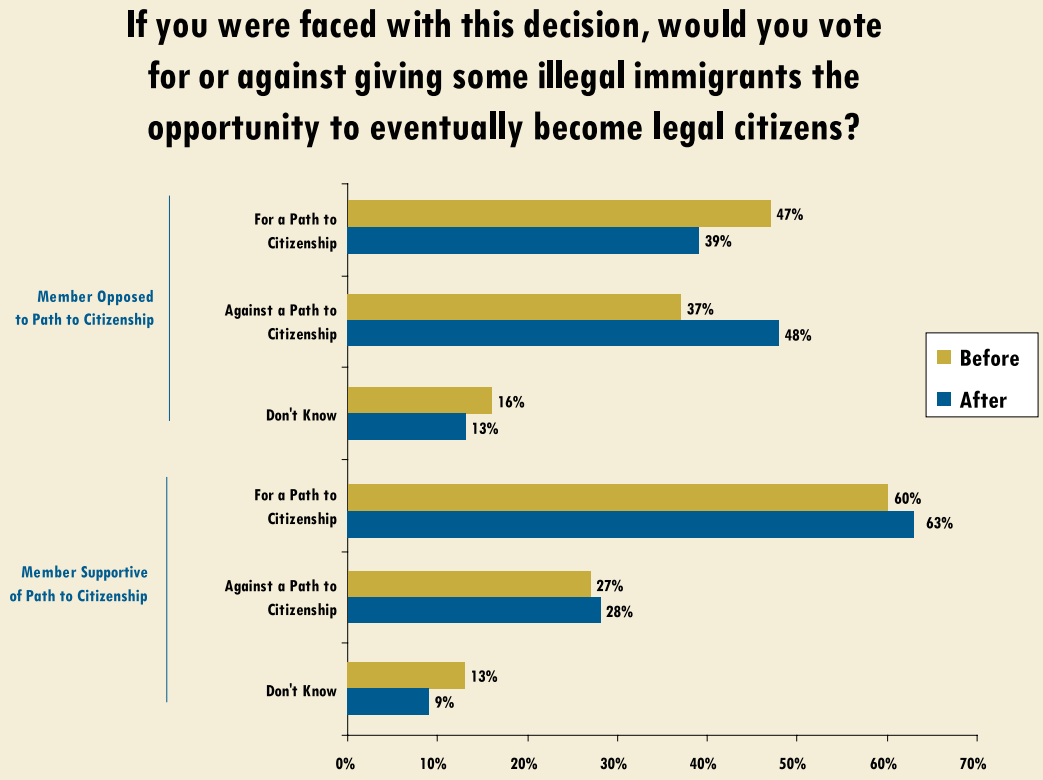
There was strong evidence of substantive persuasion on the issues toward the Member's position, particularly amongst participants who were undecided, independent or did not know much about their Member. We asked participants their opinions of a number of key dimensions of immigration: (1) approval of their Member's handling of the issue; (2) whether there should be a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants; and (3) whether illegally entering and remaining in the U.S. should be a felony. Below we divide the sessions into those sessions with Members who supported felonizing illegal immigration and those opposed to felonization. Opinion in these sessions moved dramatically in different directions. The net approval of felonization among constituents of Members opposed to felonization fell from a +25 points in support to +8 points; and for those Members supportive of felonization, participants' support for felonization soared from a +42 points in support to +64 points. In other words, no matter which side of the issue they were on, the Members dramatically moved their constituents to their perspective.

Figure 8. Members Were Able to Move Online Town Hall Participants to Their Position on Felonization of Illegal Immigration



Similarly, although far less dramatically, among constituents of those Members supportive of a path to citizenship, the net support among constituents went from +33 to a +35, and among those opposed from a +10 to a -9.

Figure 9. Members Were Able to Move Online Town Hall Participants to Their Position on a Path to Citizenship for Illegal Immigrants



Perhaps even more interesting, the qualitative data (based on open-ended questions right after the event) suggested that participants were also persuaded that the issue was simply more complicated than they had realized. As one constituent stated, "As we move to the upper echelon of politicians, things get more complicated. There are just so many outside variables that we as normal citizens just do not consider or see. You don't realize that until you participate in something like this."

3. Participation in the town hall increased the policy knowledge of constituents on the topic of discussion[6]

A citizenry educated on the issues of the day is a citizenry better armed to actively participate in a democracy. Did participation in the town hall increase policy knowledge of the issue being discussed? To measure changes in issue knowledge in these town halls, we asked a set of multiple choice questions about immigration policy both to participants as well as controls. The questions were as follows (with correct answers in parentheses):

1. About how many illegal immigrants currently reside in the U.S.? (12,000,000)
2. About how many illegal immigrants come into the U.S. each year? (500,000)
3. About what fraction of illegal immigrants in the U.S. are from Mexico? (Between one half and two thirds)
4. Under current law, is it a felony to reside illegally in the United States? (No)
5. Under current law, do companies who want to employ non-citizen immigrants have to prove that doing so will not hurt the employment of U.S. citizens? (Yes)
6. Under current law, are illegal immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for five years or more eligible to apply for citizenship? (No)

Notably, the answers to each of these questions was in the materials we provided before the session, which were adapted from reports from the Congressional Research Service and the Congressional Budget Office. We found that participating in these sessions had a sizable impact on subsequent policy knowledge: participants were 10 to 20 percent more likely to give the right answer to each of these items than nonparticipants. Interestingly, just providing the materials to individuals (those in control group 1, as described previously in the methodology) had a significantly lesser effect, suggesting that it was the actual participation in the session that, in part, motivated learning. This highlights the value of providing substantive materials ahead of time for constituents.

Surprisingly, whether the particular facts were mentioned by the Member in the session had little impact on learning. Instead, learning seemed to have been driven by increased engagement with the issue, where those who participated were more likely to talk to others about the issue, and those who talked to others about the issue were more likely to learn about the issue.

Reassuringly, we found that these sessions did not enlarge pre-existing knowledge inequalities among participants. Among those who participated in a deliberative session, such gains appear to stem from an increased propensity to discuss immigration policy with others outside the context of the experiment, such as friends, family members and co-workers – which also suggests that the knowledge gains may well have diffused more broadly.

[6] This finding is analyzed in greater detail in Esterling, Kevin M., Neblo, Michael A. and Lazer, David, "Means, Motive, & Opportunity in Becoming Informed About Politics: A Deliberative Field Experiment with Members of Congress and Their Constituents" (November 14, 2008). Available at SSRN: http://ssrn.com/abstract=1301772.

4. The sessions attracted a diverse set of constituents[7]

Many academics and political practitioners are skeptical that average citizens are really interested in the kind of opportunities for direct consultation that the online town halls afforded. Such skeptics claim that most people dislike politics, and large numbers do not even show up to vote. Thus only activists, political junkies, and people with an ax to grind will want to participate in more direct consultation. Indeed, existing research makes very clear that those who participate most in politics – who volunteer on and contribute to campaigns, who write letters, show up at town halls – are quite unlike average citizens. This experiment provides a test for whether online town halls will increase or reduce existing inequalities in participation.

Our findings strongly suggest that the sort of online town halls which we facilitated can actually reduce existing inequalities. Of the seven characteristics that traditionally predict participation in partisan and activist politics, six of them had the opposite effect for participation in the online town halls. Only level of education had the same effect. A multivariate analysis reveals that younger people, racial minorities, and lower income people were significantly more willing to participate in the town halls, all of which are reversals from traditional participation patterns. Similarly, women, less partisan people, and non-church goers – also demographics traditionally less represented in political participation – were slightly more likely to want to participate. Perhaps most interesting of all, constituents whose responses to the survey questions indicated they were generally frustrated and cynical about politics were especially eager to participate. By issuing a direct invitation to the session, rather than a district-wide broadcast, the Member communicates that he or she is specifically interested in what the constituent has to say, often affecting a rather dramatic change in attitude toward the Member. Thus, the online town halls appear to be an especially useful way to reach constituents who might be hard to reach via more traditional methods.

We also find additional support for this proposition from a nationally representative survey of Americans we conducted, where we asked whether individuals would be interested in participating in a hypothetical session with their Member of Congress. A large majority of people (83%) expressed at least some interest in participating, and, again, it was under-represented groups that were disproportionately interested.

We do offer one caveat to this finding. Individuals who participated in these sessions were randomly chosen and invited to participate. Alternative means of recruiting participants would likely produce a very different group. If participants were recruited through newspaper stories, posters in libraries, word of mouth, many of the biases in participation mentioned above would likely arise. However, our results suggest that in the push and pull of political deliberation and discussion, should an invitation be directly and personally extended, those least engaged in politics will actually be more likely to accept.

[7] The analysis and findings in this section are described in greater detail in Neblo, Michael A., Esterling, Kevin M., Kennedy, Ryan, Lazer, David and Sokhey, Anand E., "Who Wants to Deliberate - and Why?" (September 15, 2009). HKS Working Paper No. RWP09-027. Available at SSRN: http://ssrn.com/abstract=1476461.

Figure 10. Of the Seven Demographic Characteristics which Predict Political Participation, Six Showed the Opposite Effect for Participation in Online Town Hall Meetings

1. Age	As age increases, political participation usually increases. In the online town halls, there was higher participation among younger people.
2. Racial Minority	Belonging to a racial minority usually predicts lower chance of political participation. We found higher participation among minorities in our online town halls.
3. Gender	Women tend to participate less in politics than men, but in our online town halls, women were more likely to participate than men.
4. Church Attendance	Regular attendance at religious services tends to predict a greater likelihood of political participation. We saw the opposite in the online town halls—non-churchgoers were more likely to attend.
5. Strength of Partisan Identification	Generally, those who more strongly identify with their party tend to be more likely to participate in politics. We saw the opposite. Those with less strong party identification were more likely to participate in the online town halls.
6. Income	As income increases, so does the chance that an individual will participate in politics. In the online town halls, we found individuals of lower income were more likely to participate.
7. Education	Greater educational attainment traditionally predicts greater political participation. This is the only of the eight significant demographic characteristics for political participation that had the same effect in the online town halls. Individuals were more likely to participate the greater their educational attainment.

5. Participation in the town hall increased citizen engagement in politics

As noted previously, town hall participants had a higher level of voter turnout than nonparticipants. Individuals in our control group turned out at a high level of 77%, but participants turned out in even higher percentages, with 82% turning out to vote. To explore more deeply how the online town halls affected engagement with the political process, we asked citizens in our post-election survey whether they followed the election closely and whether they tried to persuade other citizens on how to vote. In both cases, constituents who participated in the session with their Member of Congress showed dramatic increases. For example, participation in the session increased the likelihood by 50% that constituents would try to persuade others to vote for the Member of Congress. Similarly, the fraction of individuals in the control group who did not follow the election was almost twice that of town hall participants.

Figure 11. Online Town Hall Participants were Significantly More Likely to Follow the Election than the Control Group

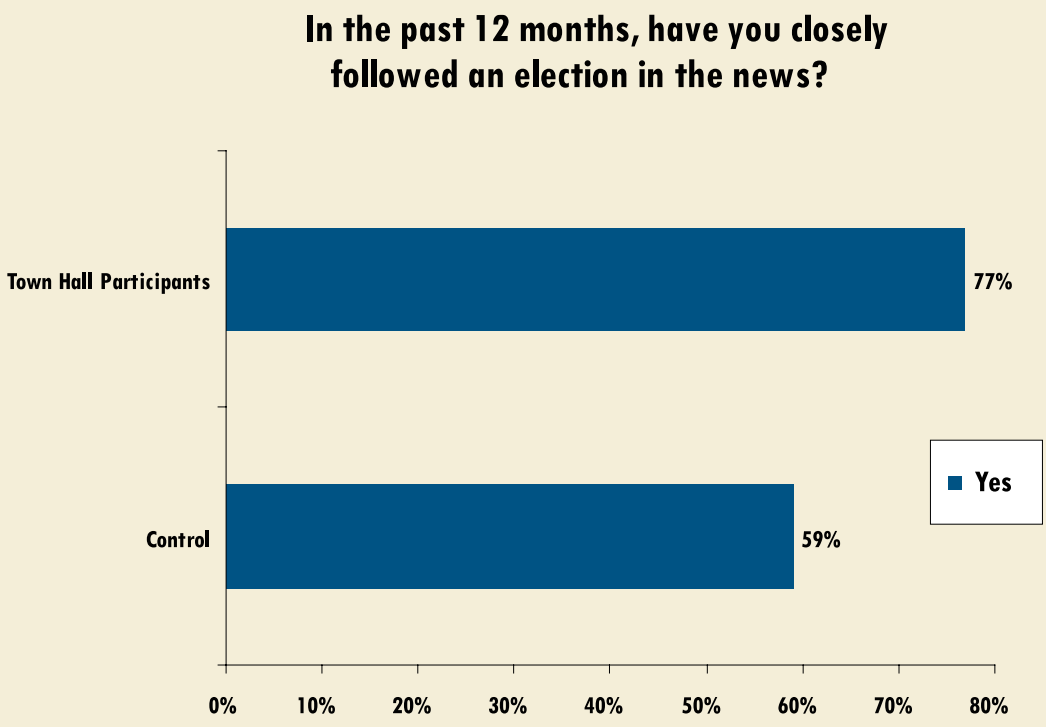
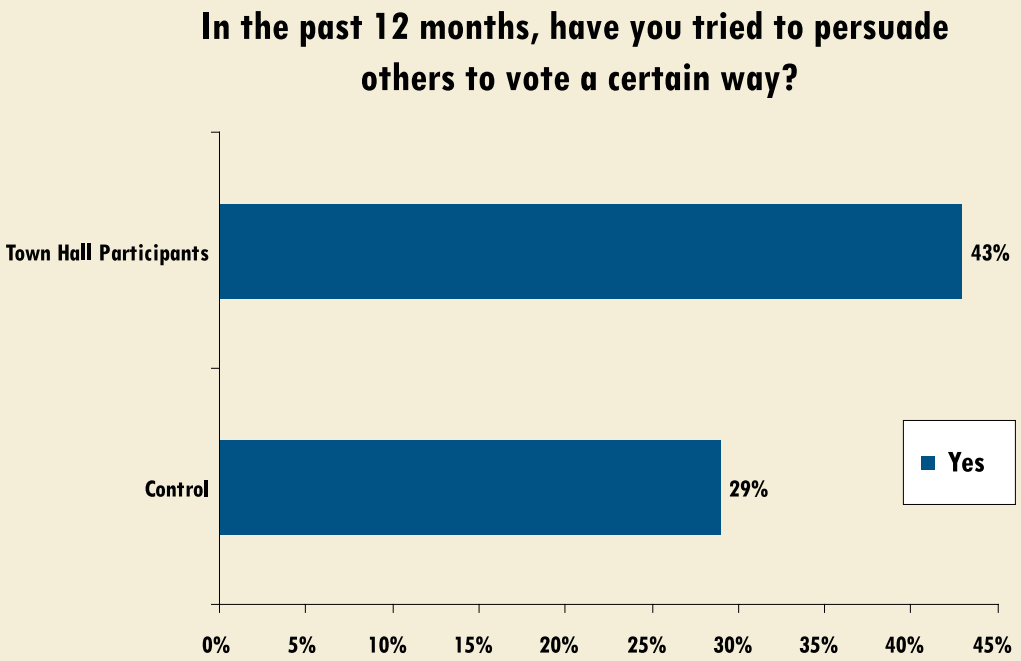


Figure 12. Online Town Hall Participants Were Significantly More Likely than the Control Group to Try to Persuade Others on How to Vote



In addition, in the larger-scale session with the Senator, we asked subjects a series of questions about the individuals with whom they talked most about politics, and what political topics they talked to those individuals about.[8] In the control group, the probability of a subject talking to any one of those individuals about the Senator was 17%. For the town hall participants, this probability almost doubled, to 30%. Similarly, there was an enormous jump in the probability of talking about detainee policy, from 13% to 31%. Interestingly, the impact on the probability of talking to a spouse about the Senator and detainee policy was especially large, with significant effects three months later, after the 2008 election.

The sizable impact on voting numbers reported above therefore actually underestimates, perhaps dramatically, the impact of these sessions. The people who attended these sessions created a "ripple" effect with other constituents because of the participants' enthusiasm for talking about their experience with other citizens. The number of people indirectly touched by these online town halls almost certainly exceeded those who directly participated.

[8] Lazer, D. , Neblo, M. , Esterling, K. and Sokhey, A. "Second Hand Deliberation: Deliberative Sessions and Social Networks" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association 67th Annual National Conference, The Palmer House Hilton, Chicago, IL.

6. The discussions were of generally high deliberative quality

One of our objectives of this research was to evaluate the quality of the discussions, and we tried to construct sessions that would foster high-quality deliberation. To determine the quality of deliberation, we explored a number of questions. Were online town hall sessions thoughtful? Did they promote respect among individuals with opposing points of view? Did a wide variety of individuals participate? In principle, the dramatic effects we describe throughout these findings could have been possible without particularly high-quality deliberation. These sessions could have been rife with posturing without content; collisions of opposing view points; or strident domination of a single perspective more akin to what occurred at some Members' in-person town hall meetings in August 2009, during the height of the healthcare reform debate.

Instead, these sessions might have been thoughtful, respectful, and fact filled. Consider this exchange between a constituent and her representative (a Member who supported much-tightened controls on immigration):

> ***Constituent (in written comment):*** I think that as one of the most prosperous countries in the world it is important that we do our part to share those blessings with those less fortunate, and allowing increased immigration would afford more people the opportunities that are available in this country.
>
> ***Representative (in oral response):*** _____,[9] thanks for that comment. Much of the rhetoric that surrounds this topic, whether it's the people wanting to talk about border security, or those wanting to talk about immigration and illegal immigration has over the past year gotten very heated and sometimes in some instances has gotten incredibly harsh and mean spirited. This is a concern for all of us. It is an arena in which it is okay for we Americans to operate in our own best interest. We are a country of immigrants. But we are also a country of law abiding citizens. So, somehow we have to craft a good public policy that protects the taxpayers in the United States, but also recognizes that this country is built, has been built by immigrants and that future immigration is going to be very important to the progress of the United States.
>
> My view is to kind of get this thing started, my view is a three legged stool that we should be working on. First leg is border security, and all that that represents. Second leg would be what do we do, or how do we deal with the 11 to 12 million people that are reported to be in this country illegally. And the third leg of the stool would be rational immigration reform, and that refers to the policies that relate to the way we immigrate people into this country. The bureaucracy that provides those services currently is not doing a good job in many of the instances.

[9] Constituent's name has been removed to ensure privacy.

We would evaluate an exchange like this to be reflective of generally high deliberative quality, because: (1) respect is implicit in the statements by both the constituent and Member; (2) the Member's argument is grounded in the broad public good; and (3) the Member's rationale is supported using a logical undergirding and accurate facts.

More generally, we qualitatively evaluated the sessions from a variety of criteria developed in the political science literature on deliberation. These criteria are centered around participation (who was in the session, and who contributed to the discussion), content (the quality of the arguments by participants), and norms of discourse (e.g., did participants respect alternative points of view). We summarize these criteria on the next page and offer a summary of our evaluation of these sessions by each criterion.

Across all dimensions, the online sessions were of strikingly high quality, which likely contributed to the substantial impact they had on participating constituents.

Figure 13. Qualitative Criteria for Evaluating Sessions

Deliberative Criterion	Explanation of Criterion	Evaluation
Participation	Does the forum reach a wide array of citizens, or does it amplify existing inequalities?	While online town halls raise a significant issue around access to the Internet, we found that generally the people who chose to participate over-represented groups that tend not to participate in politics, which means that Members have the capacity to reach people they do not usually communicate with.
Equality	Did the forum promote equal participation among those present?	By design, the Members dominated the discussions. However, citizen participation was notably equitable because of the rule that questions from those who had not asked any yet received priority by the moderator. Constituents were placed on an equal footing with one another.
Justification	Are assertions about good policy supported by rationales, and were those rationales grounded in the broader public interest, as compared to the interests of particular individuals or groups?	Generally, the arguments of both the Members and constituents were supported by a broader logic around what was good policy, supported by particular facts. The argumentation was almost always grounded in a motivation around the broader public good.
Respect	Do the participants in the session indicate respect for each others' views, even when they are in opposition?	Members were quite respectful of the opinions of constituents who disagreed with them. In turn, constituents were highly respectful of the Member and of other constituents even when there was disagreement.
Quality of Information	Do discussions bring important facts relevant to the issue to the surface?	All of the sessions brought many facts (generally accurate based on third party criteria) to light.
Participants' Perception of Quality	Did constituents believe that these events were of high quality?	Overwhelming majorities rated every single session highly.

7. The positive results of the smaller sessions were also seen in the larger session

A key question raised by our initial sessions was whether the dramatically positive effects exist if the session is larger, or if the small size of the groups contributed to their success. It is a more efficient use of a Member's time to run Internet-based events with 200 constituents than with 20. As noted above, we therefore ran a single event with a U.S. Senator on the issue of detainee policy in the summer of 2008. A direct comparison is difficult, since the event with the Senator focused on a different issue and used a very different type of constituent recruitment technique than the smaller sessions. However, all of our results were consistent with those reported above and generally comparable in magnitude. For example, the Senator's net approval ratings jumped from a +16 to a +30, the margin voting in favor of the Senator (who was re-elected) in November went from +5 to +25 (an effect even larger than we observed in the smaller sessions), and there were comparable shifts in opinions toward the Senator's position regarding waterboarding (from 48% opposing to 61%) and holding detainees indefinitely (from 45% opposing to 58%). Remarkably, only one participant (< 1%) indicated disinterest in participating in a similar session in the future. As a result, we are confident that Senators and Representatives can achieve high-quality deliberation with similarly positive impact on constituents even with larger groups.

8. The sessions were extremely popular with participants

Constituents almost uniformly described the experience as positive. As one participant stated, "I think this was a great learning experience for me." Another said, "I believe we are experiencing the one way our elected representatives can here [sic] our voice and do what we want." The numbers tell the same story: 95% Agreed (72% Strongly Agreed) that such sessions are "very valuable to our democracy" and 95% Agreed (79% Strongly Agreed) that they would be interested in doing similar online sessions for other issues. This level of agreement is rare on any survey, and is extraordinary in this climate of apathy – and sometimes of antipathy – toward government and Congress.

Figure 14. Online Town Hall Participants Found the Sessions Helpful and Informative

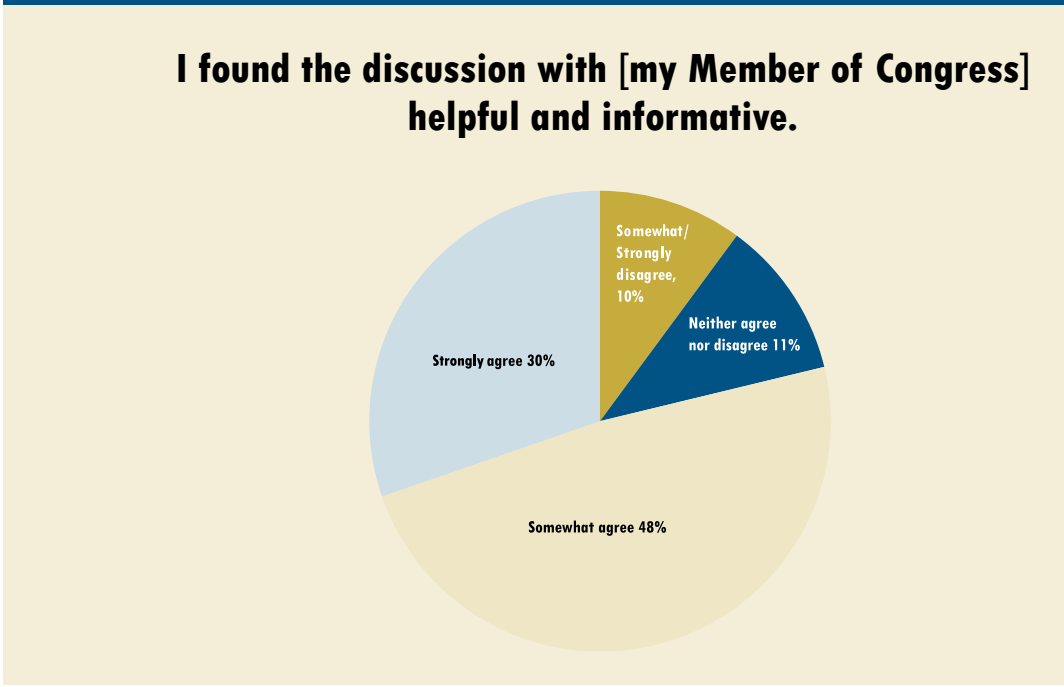
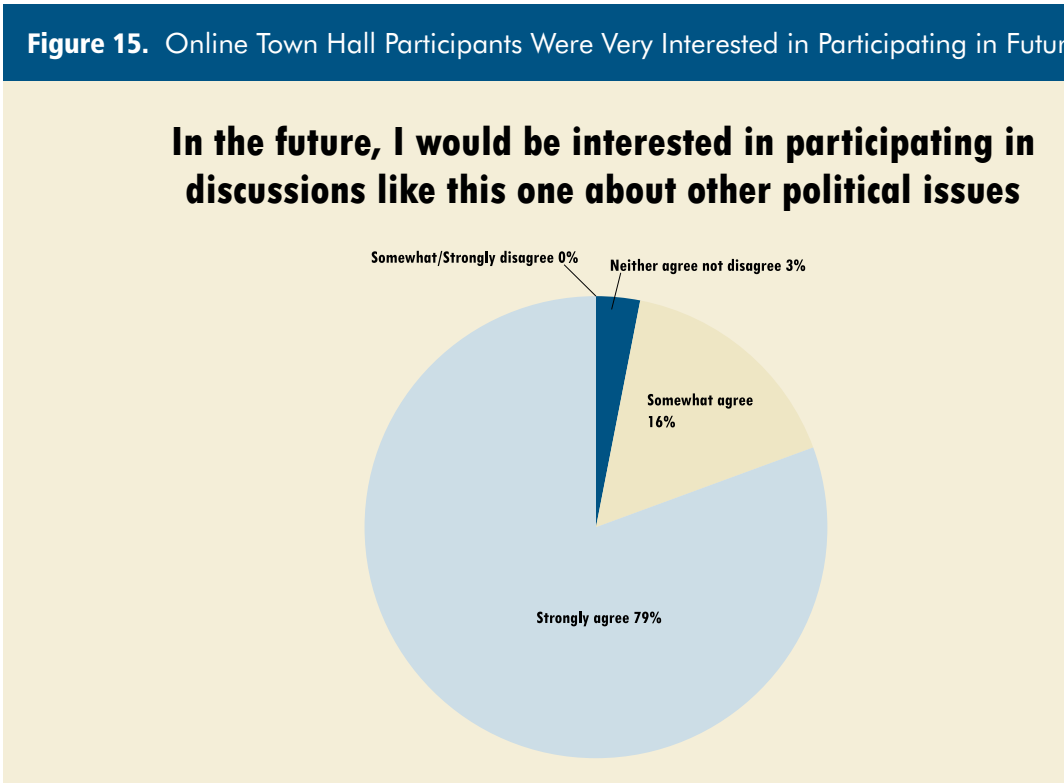


Figure 15. Online Town Hall Participants Were Very Interested in Participating in Future Sessions



Do It Yourself: Suggestions for Successful Online Town Halls

Congressional offices have had mixed success over the years with online town halls, tele-town halls, and in-person town halls. In the process of planning and executing the town halls studied here, we learned many lessons from which congressional offices can learn so that they can conduct similar – and similarly successful – events for themselves. We made several choices in designing the sessions – unrelated to the technology – which likely affected the success of the events. We cannot rigorously test this proposition because we did not vary the presence of these features; however, we can make educated guesses based on comments by constituents after the session. As a result, we believe the following choices were particularly important to the success of the events:

- **Include a neutral moderator and clear ground rules.** The fact that our sessions were moderated by someone who clearly had no stake in making the Member look good and that our ground rules were designed to demonstrate fairness and equality increased the effectiveness of the event. The moderator explained the basic rules for choosing questions at the beginning of the session, and constituents clearly did not feel that questions were being cherry picked. As one constituent commented, "I thought they really tried to address the issues we were bringing up instead of steering the conversation in any particular direction, which was cool." Further, participants were not alienated when their questions were bypassed, which was necessary since typically there were more questions than time available for the Member to answer them (in the Senate session there were far more questions than could be answered).
- **Invite a broad sample of constituents.** The sessions we conducted with the Representatives used a rigorously scientifically-generated random sample of constituents representative of national demographics. Generating such a sample would be prohibitively expensive for an individual congressional office. However, congressional offices can approximate a random sample by directly and personally inviting a broad sample of constituents to participate, rather than relying on traditional methods of outreach (e.g. newsletters, newspaper ads, e-mail messages to individuals who have written to them, etc.). In terms of creating a session that offered the Member insight into where his or her more typical constituents stood on the issue of the day, there was a clear advantage of a broad sample, which attracted participants beyond the typical activists that might show up to an in-person town hall. The nature of the sample may have also contributed to the fact that out of 600+ constituents, not one posted an offensive question or comment.
- **Allow unscripted, real-time interaction.** It was clear from the comments after the session that constituents especially valued what they perceived as the genuine and unscripted feel of the sessions. While there were sometimes blunt questions, participants were uniformly respectful of the Member, and the direct nature of some of the questions actually enhanced the authenticity of the event. As one constituent commented, "He answered the questions clearly and did not try to duck the issue."

- **Provide oral communication from the Member.** The use of audio had the advantage of demonstrating that the Member was really participating, rather than a staff person answering in his or her stead. Constituents appreciated being able to hear the Members' voices in addition to seeing the Members' words transcribed on the screen, which personalized the sessions. To minimize the chances of technical difficulties, we used audio only, not video of the Member. However, video would likely amplify that sense of personal interaction and assurance that the Member is directly participating.
- **Provide brief, unbiased information on the issue in advance.** It helps to provide constituents with advance information on the issue so they can prepare for the session and ask informed questions. However, constituents want some sort of reassurance that the information is balanced.
- **Focus on a timely and specific issue.** Focusing online sessions on a specific topic appears to help both the Member and constituents prepare for the discussion and allow the discussion to move forward in a way that multiple topic changes cannot.

We note that these features of the forums – which helped facilitate a genuine, real-time interaction between a Member of Congress and constituents – can also be incorporated in many other venues for Member-constituent conversations.

For those congressional offices interested in setting up and holding their own online town halls, what follows are the steps taken to conduct the online town halls described in this study.

1. Choose an Online Meeting Tool

There are a multitude of vendors and platforms to choose from when hosting an online meeting. All have a variety of features and different functionalities. While you should choose the vendor that best meets your office's needs and preferences, here are the key features of the tools used to facilitate the online town halls we conducted:[10]

1. **Text chat functionality.** The ability for participants to type in their questions, which the moderator (or an assistant to the moderator) can then sort through and place in the order in which they will be posed to the Member.
2. **Audio integration.** The ability for participants to listen to the online town hall through their computers.
3. **Screen sharing.** The ability for participants to view the screen of one of the moderators (e.g. for a presentation or for the real-time captions we provided).
4. **Robust moderating capabilities**. The ability for multiple moderators to serve different roles from different locations, to review and queue questions, to manage flow of discussion, etc.
5. **Polling.** The ability to solicit feedback from participants.

[10] We used Macromedia Breeze (now Adobe Acrobat Connect) for the sessions with the Representatives. For the session with the Senator, we used Microsoft LiveMeeting.

6. **Recording of session.** The ability to capture the entire text and audio, as well as data about participants (e.g. when they logged in, when they left, answers to poll questions, etc.).

7. **Reliability.** Assurance that the application would not fail during any of the sessions and that the system would operate lag-free with both broadband and dial-up connections using voice over IP capabilities.

8. **User-friendliness.** Any software downloads required were small and novice-proof (e.g. instructions were clear, firewalls and pop-up blockers would not interfere with the operation, the application did not require a specific browser or browser version, etc.) and the interface was easy for both moderators and participants to understand and use.

The tool should also be able to accommodate the number of participants expected, and the vendor should provide excellent technical support.

After some practice, these sessions were easy to run. The mechanics of running an online town hall session is a little complicated the first few times, so testing them before conducting the first live session is extremely important. We found, however, that there was a fairly short learning curve. By the third or so session, the preparatory work to set the session up was fairly minimal.

2. Schedule the Meetings

We generally scheduled the meetings in the early evening in the time zone of the Member's district because that seemed to be the most convenient time slot for constituents, who would be home from work and school and more likely to attend. We recruited constituents about one week before the event, though, as previously mentioned, we were recruiting from a pool of constituents who had previously indicated an interest in participating in an online town hall with their Member of Congress.

We found the timing of the town halls to work well for both constituents and Members, although if a Member used online town halls extensively, we would recommend varying the timing so as to not exclude particular groups that might systematically be unavailable at one time slot or another.

3. Plan the Meetings

We found planning to be a critical part of facilitating successful online town halls. Our planning centered around preparing materials to distribute to constituents in advance of the sessions, becoming familiar with and testing the online meeting application, clearly establishing the roles and responsibilities of those involved, and helping to prepare the Members and their staffs for the interactions. The work we conducted for each of these steps included:

- **Preparing materials.** We provided information on the topic to be discussed to participants ahead of time. The information was adapted from reports by the Congressional Research Service and the Congressional Budget Office because of the accessible way in which these organizations' reports are written and the impartiality of their information. Care was taken to make sure the information was straightforward, short, and clear. The fact that these materials

were from credible sources, and were obviously not weighted by a single point of view clearly made the event more persuasive. In this case, the materials were limited to two pages.

- **Testing the meeting application.** We conducted several tests and dry runs of the online town halls before we conducted the first session because we wanted to ensure that all of the research team members were familiar and comfortable with the tool. We also wanted to be able to anticipate and recover from anything that might go wrong. We used interns and undergraduate students as our audiences for our tests. Congressional offices should consider using interns and staffers for theirs.
- **Establishing roles and responsibilities.** Our test sessions had the added advantage of helping us more clearly establish the roles and responsibilities of the team members who would be involved in the online town hall meetings. As the testing progressed, we had clear definitions of what the moderator, moderator's assistant, and technical person (explained in "Conduct the Meeting" on the next page) would and would not do during the sessions and who would handle different types of questions and issues.
- **Preparing Members and their staffs.** We provided the Members of Congress and their staffers with clear information about what to expect from the sessions and how to use the tools, as well as the two-page briefing materials we had provided participants. We wanted them all to be as comfortable as possible during the actual session, and, during the session, members of the team were present in the Members' offices to provide support to the Member and staff, as needed. We found that Members did not need to be overly concerned about being full-blown experts on the issue being discussed. Constituents, based on comments in the post-session chats, actually valued it when Members admitted they did not have an answer to a specific question.

4. Invite a Broad Spectrum of Participants

The representative nature of the participants in the sessions we ran made the events especially powerful. From a deliberative point of view, it made the event powerful because it exposed the Member to a broader, more representative range of viewpoints from his or her district than he or she would get from a less diverse cross-section of constituents. This is a stark contrast from the audience that standard town halls tend to attract, as evidenced by the experiences of Members during the August 2009 healthcare town halls. This can make an event more useful to the Member because it enables him or her to hear from a broader array of constituent perspectives. It can also make for a more useful and compelling event to constituents, who are exposed to what, for them, are novel perspectives on the issue. Beyond that, arguably, the psychological impact of the event was amplified because the variation in viewpoints made it obvious that this event was real, and not simply staged by the Member to make him or her look good. Even constituents who disagreed with the Members (or were from a different political party) found the sessions valuable and positive, and those who knew little about the Member ahead of time found them especially so.

These experiments therefore highlight the value of proactively recruiting a diverse audience. In this particular case, it required a high-quality list of voters from the district, and a personal (in

this case, e-mail) invitation to participate at a particular point in time. While the medium can only reach constituents with computers, these sessions demonstrated that varied outreach can touch many individuals who do not take advantage of traditional means of communicating with their Members of Congress. Additionally, this method of recruiting can also be applied to other Member-constituent interactions, including in-person and tele-town hall meetings, where there is interest in hearing more diverse perspectives than traditional recruiting methods allow.

5. Conduct the Meeting

The format of our sessions was relatively straightforward. Discussion was limited to one topic and participants were provided with brief information about the topic ahead of time. They were also notified ahead of time that off-topic questions would not be answered.

Participants logged on at the designated time. They were greeted with a screen of introductory information, and the moderator verbally greeted people as they "arrived" and directed them to ways they could get help if they were having technical difficulties. They listened to brief remarks by the Member and submitted questions in writing. A moderator's assistant queued the questions with minimal interference; only prioritizing questions of those who had not yet asked and removing vulgar, profane, redundant, or off-topic questions, if necessary. The moderator then orally presented the questions to the Member, who responded orally. All audio was provided using voice over IP rather than a phone teleconference. A captionist captured the question and the Member's words in real-time. The captions and a picture of the Member were all participants could see on their screens. There were neither additional graphics nor any graphical presentation. A technical person stood by to resolve any technical issues that arose. Each session lasted 30 minutes.

While all four people played key roles in the session, moderator and a technical person are necessary, but a moderator's assistant and real-time captionist are less so. A moderator is important to have because it would be difficult for the Member to review and sort the questions and answer them at the same time. A technical person is key because, when relying on technology, there is always the chance for a glitch, and it is important to have someone designated to troubleshoot, solve, or work around the problem. Having a moderator's assistant queue the questions while the moderator read them was helpful, but a single person could serve both roles.

Having a real-time captionist added cost and complexity, at the benefit of excluding fewer people who showed up to the event (because their audio did not work or because they were hearing-impaired). The continued spread of broadband since 2006 has likely significantly reduced the need for a captionist, since broadband can enable streaming audio far more easily than dial-up Internet connections can. Additionally, dictation software has improved and more online meeting applications include it than in 2006, so it is possible to have a real-time transcript without the cost of a human captionist.

In our sessions, participants saw only the captions and a photo of the Member on their screens. Congressional offices may want to consider including other graphics or a presentation to enhance

the experience, especially if no captioning is being provided. However, we would caution against content and graphics that would appear biased or self-serving to participants. As previously discussed, participants genuinely valued the sense that many views were represented and discussed rather than having the sessions dominated by one perspective.

We did not use video in our sessions because we wanted to ensure they were as accessible as possible, including to people using dial-up Internet connections. Video is increasingly viable, and it is possible to provide real-time video of the Member with fairly inexpensive equipment. However, video does still largely depend on participants having broadband Internet connections. Though broadband is increasingly prevalent, it is not ubiquitous, so video could, therefore, limit access and participation in online events. If Members seek to include as broad a spectrum of constituents as possible, video content should probably be limited.

It is not necessary that the moderator, moderator's assistant, technical person, captionist (if there is one), and the Member be in the same location. Indeed, for all of the sessions we conducted, these five individuals were in five different locations, spread across the country. Notably, the Member can be anywhere where there is reliable telephone access (participation simply required the Member calling an 800 number).

We found constituents to be forgiving, to a point. A few sessions were slightly delayed because of the Member's previous commitments, including one session when the Member had to step out and vote. A couple of the early sessions also had minor technical glitches. There were no significant effects in terms of constituents' experiences or reactions based on these issues. The one exception was a case where the Member cancelled the session, without explanation, right before it was scheduled to take place. This was the one case where the Member who participated suffered from a drop in approval in the group (a very large drop in this case).

6. Follow Up on the Meeting

So that we could better control the environment for the purposes of our research, we did not encourage Members who participated in our sessions to follow up with their constituents. However, we observed that there were more questions offered than could be responded to during the short sessions. We suggest that Members and their staffs consider following up with participants in some fashion, perhaps by providing responses to unanswered questions, a summary of the discussion, or a thank you note. It was our sense that participants in our town halls, who almost unanimously indicated a strong interest in participating in similar discussions in the future, would have appreciated follow up on the sessions. However, our study was not able to incorporate follow up by the Member, since it would potentially have skewed our data.

Though it was not part of our research design or intent, we also suggest that offices incorporate online town halls like these into a larger communications strategy that would involve future opportunities to remain engaged. For example, offices might consider directing participants to information on the Member's web site, offering the opportunity to subscribe to the Member's e-newsletter or alerts about future opportunities to interact with the Member, or encouraging participants to invite others to sign up to hear about or be invited to future discussions.

There is a multitude of ways – both online and off line – to facilitate interactions between Members of Congress and their constituents. We do not mean to suggest that online town halls such as those we conducted should replace other means of doing so. Instead, we encourage offices to incorporate online town halls into their repertoires. We also encourage offices to incorporate into some of their other interactions with constituents techniques we used to make the online town halls so successful.

Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that online town halls offer dramatic positive benefits both to citizens and Members of Congress. The sessions increased involvement in politics, knowledge and engagement on the policy issues under discussion, and understanding of the Member's position. Participating in an online town hall with their Members of Congress significantly improved constituents' views of government, in general, and of their Member, in particular. The changes in attitudes were striking. The participants in these meetings reported not only an increased feeling of trust, agreement, and satisfaction with the government, but also an increased involvement in their own communities through their discussions of the issue and politics with others, their persuading others to vote, and their own increased likelihood to vote. Additionally, it appears as though participation in this type of online session, even with small groups of constituents, has political benefits to Members that extend well beyond the actual participants, through discussions that participants had with other constituents. Finally, our results suggest that online town halls offer an effective way to reach voters who might be frustrated with the political process.

All of these results come with a caveat. These sessions were designed in a way to maximize their credibility. They had a neutral moderator, a recruitment strategy that guaranteed a representative set of constituents, and discussion ground rules that guaranteed that a variety of voices would be heard and that participation would be evenly spread. These sessions were clearly not staged to make the Member look good, which, paradoxically, may have made them a more effective means to that end.

Online town halls also save congressional offices time and resources, are practical to implement, can allow them to engage more and different constituents than traditional means, and significantly reduce the difficulty of meeting with constituents for a Member. They required only half an hour of the Member's time, where the Member simply needed to be some place with a reliable telephone connection. That is, all of the travel time involved in regular town halls was eliminated. The time and resources necessary to arrange the logistics and venue for an in-person town hall were also eliminated, since all were able to participate from the comfort of their own homes or offices. Further, the medium potentially allows individuals who otherwise might not get involved in politics to become engaged.

Remarkably, we found many of the demographic groups that tend to be under-represented in politics to be more likely to agree to participate in these sessions. We also found that most of these effects scale up in a larger scale session we ran with a U.S. Senator in 2008, with close to 200 participants. It is certainly practical for a Member to directly reach many thousands of constituents, and tens of thousands over a year at the cost of perhaps a couple of days of his or her time scattered throughout the year.

While we would certainly not recommend that traditional means of communication with constituents be abandoned, it is clear that these sessions offer a very effective way to reach many constituents and, combined with traditional means of communication, can help further strengthen the ties between Members of Congress and those they represent.

We plan to perform comparative research between the different types of town hall meetings – online, over the telephone, face-to-face – in order to provide data on the strengths and limitations of each to help Members of Congress determine the best strategies for constituent outreach.

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