



CONGRESSIONAL
MANAGEMENT
FOUNDATION

The Future of Citizen Engagement:

What Americans Want from Congress & How Members Can Build Trust

Written by

Kathy Goldschmidt, Author

and

Bradley Joseph Sinkaus, Co-Author

With contributions by

Steven Kull and Beverly Bell

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FROM DEMOCRACY FUND**



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Congressional Management Foundation

216 Seventh Street Southeast, Second Floor

Washington, D.C. 20003

202-546-0100 | CongressFoundation.org | [@CongressFdn](https://twitter.com/CongressFdn)

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When the governed believe the governing class is not listening to them, it threatens the fundamental precepts this nation was founded upon. A country cannot be of, by, and for the People if the People believe they have no say in how they are governed.

Introduction

“Congress doesn’t care what people think.”

How often have you heard this refrain from pundits or in movies or from your uncle at the Thanksgiving table? Unfortunately, it seems to be a pervasive sentiment in the U.S. In 2019 the Program for Public Consultation at the University of Maryland’s School of Public Policy reported that when asked how strongly they agreed with the statement “Members of Congress do not listen to the people they represent,” fully half of registered voters strongly agreed. Another third agreed somewhat. More than four in five Americans think Congress doesn’t care what the People think.¹ It doesn’t seem likely that this sentiment has improved in the interim. Data like this, including low congressional approval ratings, are often cited as indicators of the ill health of our democracy. When the *governed* believe the *governing class* is not listening to them, it threatens the fundamental precepts this nation was founded upon. A country cannot be of, by, and for the People if the People believe they have no say in how they are governed.

The question that academics, pundits, and Congress have never asked and answered is ... why? Why does the American public think their elected officials are ignoring them? You could blame the media’s framing, Hollywood’s portrayal, or social media’s effect on Congress. While these may be contributing factors to the mistrust the public has of Congress, the institution bears some responsibility, as well. And though Congress can’t change how the Internet and cable news impact trust in our government, it *does* have the power to change itself.

But how? What do Senators and Representatives need to do to convince their constituents they are listening and care about the People’s needs?

1 “Responding to Voters’ Dissatisfaction with Government,” Steven Kull, et. al. Program for Public Consultation, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland. January 2019 (http://www.publicconsultation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Voter_Dissatisfaction_Report_0119.pdf)

The answer to that question is at the heart of this report. In a series of national polls, the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) asked novel questions of voters with the goal of providing Members of Congress and staff with guidance on how they can change their communications practices, habits, and objectives to build greater trust in the institution and convince their constituents that their views genuinely DO matter. Polling companies, researchers, the media, and politicians have relentlessly asked the public what Congress should do. Prioritize health care reform or tax reform? Clean up the environment or streamline business regulations? These questions address *what* Congress should do—but not *how* it should do it.

The guidance CMF provides in this report is more than calculated methods to shrewdly *convince* Americans that Congress is listening to them. It provides insight for developing thoughtful and sophisticated strategies for modern politicians to *actually listen*, demonstrate understanding, and employ empathy with the people they represent. We aim to put forth practical recommendations to legislators who wish do more than mechanically *respond* to constituents, but rather, to genuinely *connect* with them.² And they are part of a broader goal to rebuild trust in our democratic institutions.

This report is part of the *Future of Citizen Engagement* series the Congressional Management Foundation is releasing in 2020 and 2021. The first report released in August 2020, *Coronavirus, Congress, and Constituent Communications*, revealed the results of a survey of congressional staff, and offered predictions on how the pandemic and remote operations will change citizen engagement with Congress. This report, *What Americans Want from Congress & How Members Can Build Trust*, offers specific and practical guidance to Members of Congress and staff based on the first national polls of voters on the *processes and practices* elected leaders can employ to demonstrate they are truly responsive to their constituents.

Much of this research focuses on the *retail* level of democracy, where Congress directly interacts with constituents on a one-to-one or one-to-many basis—through postal mail and email, websites, virtual and in-person town hall meetings, events, etc. Efforts to change the systemic components of our democracy—the *wholesale* elements—have largely failed. Campaign finance reform, hyper-partisanship in media outlets, the tribalization of social media—all these macro challenges remain, and have only worsened in recent years. It might sound impractical in nation of 327 million people to bring about change one interaction at a time, yet in 2019 more than 50 million Americans sent an email to Congress. The opportunity is there, so one has to ask, what would be different if Congress changed the way it received, responded to, reacted to, and integrated those 50 million Americans' views into public policy? Maybe the best way to reform democracy and improve the Congress isn't at the wholesale level, but at the retail level . . . one conversation at a time between Senators and Representatives and those they represent. This report goes a long way to showing Congress how it might be done.

2 Samantha McDonald in "How Congress Turns Citizens' Voices into Data Points," *The Conversation*, September 16, 2019. <https://theconversation.com/how-congress-turns-citizens-voices-into-data-points-120869>

It is impossible to maintain trust in our democracy without effective communications and relationship-building between legislators and those they represent.

Constituent Perspectives

Even before the pandemic, the People did not feel Congress was responsive. In early 2019, more than three-quarters of registered voters said there is not an adequate system in place for the voice of the American people to be heard in Congress.³ It is impossible to maintain trust in our democracy without effective communications and relationship-building between legislators and those they represent. Now as much as ever in the history of our country, we need to trust our leaders, but how can they better facilitate trust through their communications and engagement practices?

To try to answer that question, CMF has been working with the Program for Public Consultation at the University of Maryland to ask national samples of registered voters about their interactions with their elected representatives in Congress. We have been trying for a number of years to gain a better understanding of what voters want and expect and what would improve trust. The full results for the questions CMF included on the national Nielsen Scarborough surveys are included at the end of this report. The key findings from the surveys are below.

³ "Responding to Voters' Dissatisfaction with Government," Steven Kull, et. al. Program for Public Consultation, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland. January 2019 (http://www.publicconsultation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Voter_Dissatisfaction_Report_0119.pdf)

Whether or not they received a response, the majority felt their views were not considered by their Member of Congress.

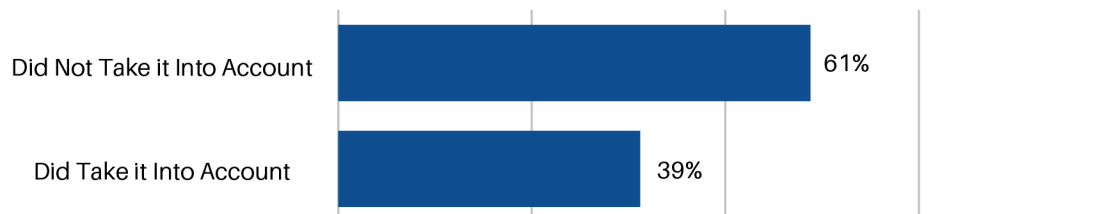
1. Voters who had contacted Congress were not satisfied with response.

We asked registered voters whether they had contacted one of their congressional representatives in the past five years to express their point of view on an issue. Responses were roughly split between those who said they had (48%) and those who said they had not (51%). Those who had were then asked a series of follow-up questions to better understand their impressions of the experience.

When asked if they had received a response, the majority (64%) indicated they had, but about one-third (35%) said they had not. Whether or not they received a response, the majority felt their views were not considered by their Member of Congress. As Figure 1 shows, more than half of those who had sent a message had the impression that their views, together with the views of other citizens, were not even communicated to their congressional representative, and 61% had the impression their views were not taken into account in the Member's decision on what position to take.

Figure 1 | Impressions of Whether Views Taken into Account in Member's Decision

Do you have the impression that your Congressional representative did or did not take your view, together with other citizens' views, into account when deciding how to vote?



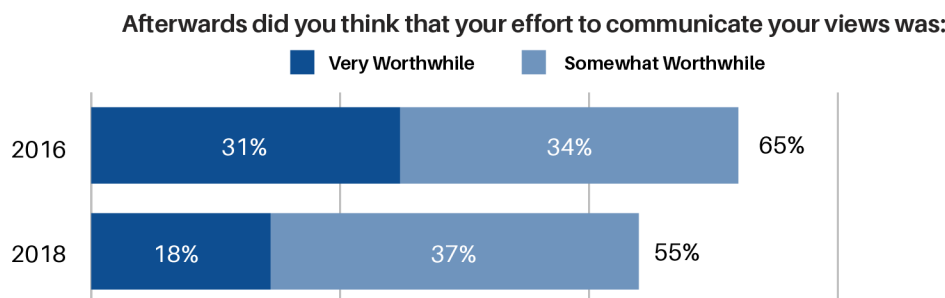
(n = 498 registered voters)

Source: Program for Public Consultation, University of Maryland (2018).

Published in: *The Future of Citizen Engagement: What Americans Want from Congress & How Members Can Build Trust*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2021.

In the end, however, more than half of the respondents (55%) felt their effort to communicate was very (18%) or somewhat (37%) worthwhile. Unfortunately, these percentages were significantly lower than when we asked the same questions of registered voters in 2016, two years previous. The earlier poll showed that nearly two-thirds (65%) felt their effort to communicate their views to their Member of Congress was very (31%) or somewhat (34%) worthwhile.

Figure 2 | Effort to Communicate to Member Worthwhile



(n = 1,157 registered voters in 2016; 498 registered voters in 2018)
Source: Program for Public Consultation, University of Maryland (2016, 2018).
Published in: *The Future of Citizen Engagement: What Americans Want from Congress & How Members Can Build Trust*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2021.

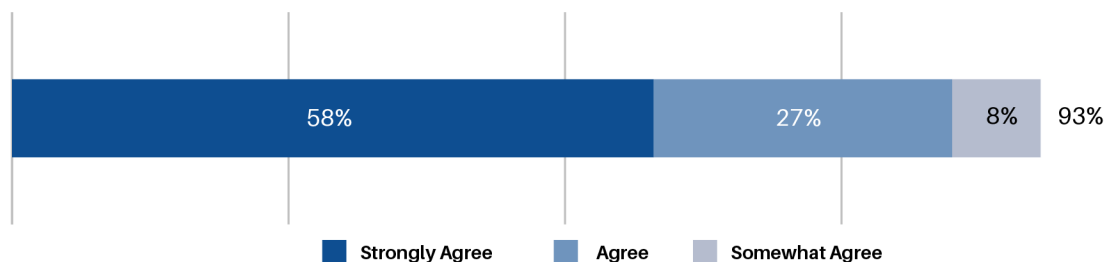
Questions like these are subjective, relying on memories and sentiment that can be influenced by external factors such as negative associations with Congress, in general. We report them because the trends—subjective or not—are telling. They are indicators of a breakdown in the relationship between Members of Congress and those they represent—yet voters still appear hopeful about the value of their democratic communications.

2. Voters value the relationship between Members of Congress and citizens, but feel Members do not share that sentiment.

Despite chronically low congressional approval ratings, voters still strongly felt that interactions between Members of Congress and their constituents are important. As Figure 3 shows, most of the registered voters surveyed agreed—more than half strongly agreed—with the statement “Interactions between citizens and their representatives are very valuable to our democracy.”

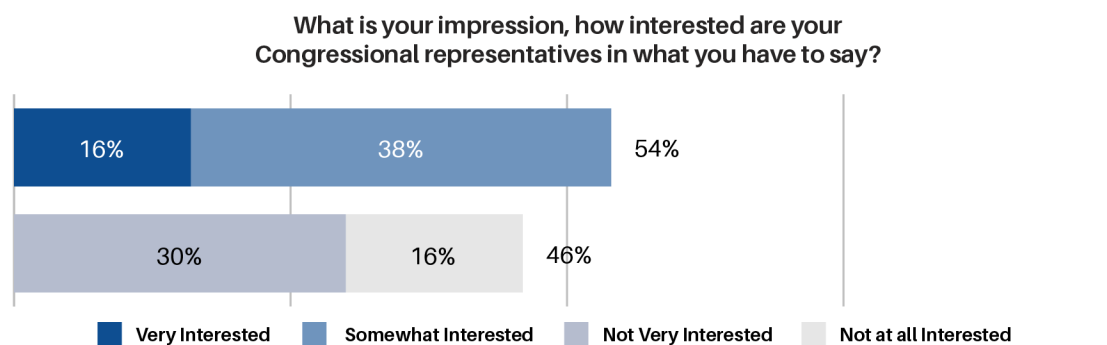
Figure 3 | Value of Interactions between Members and Constituents to Democracy

Interactions between citizens and their representatives are very valuable to our democracy.



(n = 2,511 registered voters)
Source: Program for Public Consultation, University of Maryland (2017).
Published in: *The Future of Citizen Engagement: What Americans Want from Congress & How Members Can Build Trust*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2021.

Figure 4 | Voter Impression of Member Interest



(n = 977 registered voters)

Source: Program for Public Consultation, University of Maryland (2018).

Published in: *The Future of Citizen Engagement: What Americans Want from Congress & How Members Can Build Trust*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2021.

However, as Figure 4 shows, nearly half of the respondents felt Members of Congress were “not very” (30%) or “not at all” (16%) interested in what they have to say.⁴

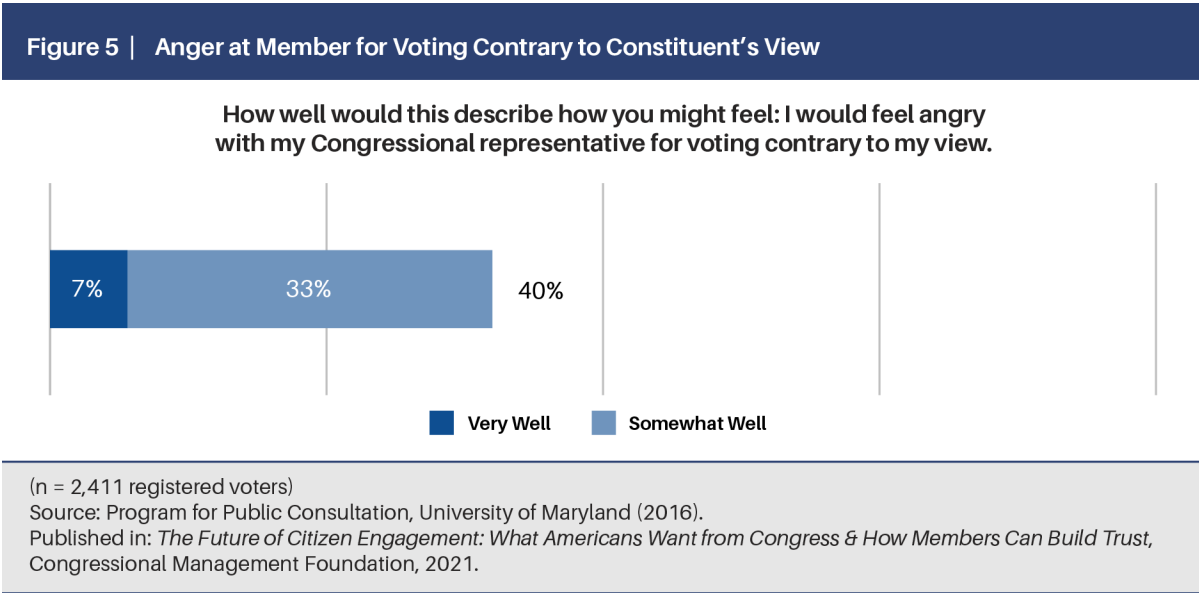
Despite chronically low congressional approval ratings, voters still strongly felt that interactions between Members of Congress and their constituents are important.

3. Voters find it acceptable for Members of Congress to vote contrary to their views if they trust it was for valid reasons.

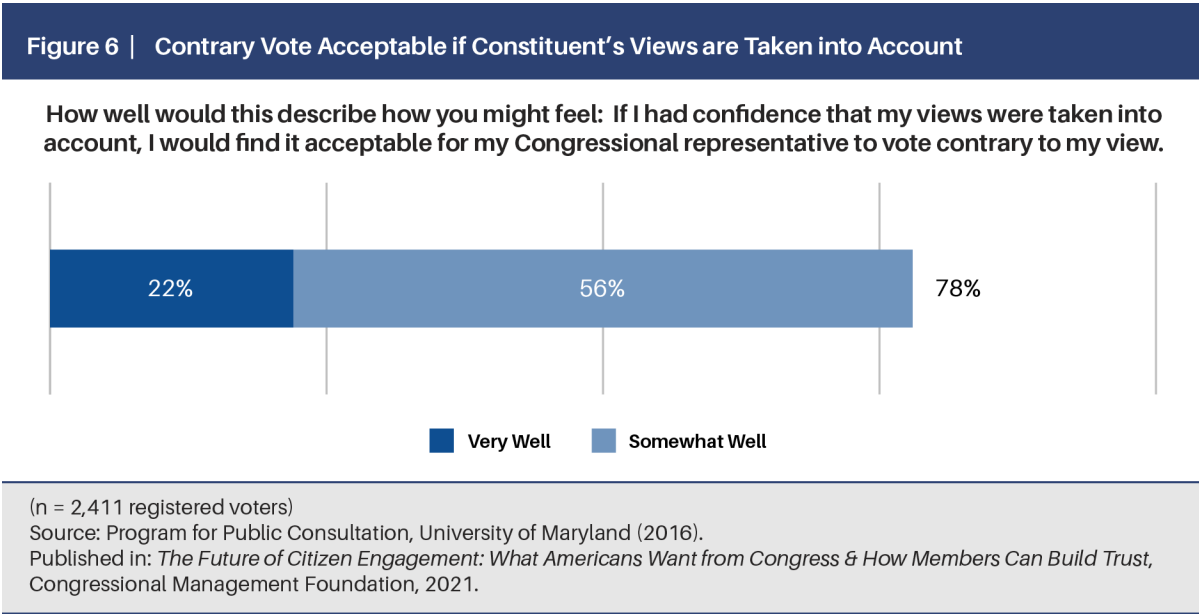
Most politicians think constituents are only satisfied with their performance when they do exactly what a constituent wants them to do. They know they cannot please everybody, and often feel as though they cannot please *anybody*. However, constituents’ expectations appear to be somewhat more nuanced than Members believe. We provided registered voters with a scenario in which they contacted their congressional representatives to express their views and received a reply that thanked them, indicated the Member would vote contrary to their views, and explained the reasons why. We then asked how well three statements would describe how they thought they would feel.

4 Topline data provided at the “Questionnaire with Findings” link on “Responding to Voters’ Dissatisfaction with Government,” Voice of the People, January 2019. <http://vop.org/major-study-finds-2020-voters-seeking-candidates-who-will-be-more-responsive-to-the-people/>

First, we asked if they would be angry with the Member for voting contrary to their views. Less than half of respondents said this would describe their feelings well, and there were no significant differences in sentiment between those who said they had contacted a Member of Congress and those who said they had not.



We then asked if they would find it acceptable for the Member to vote contrary to their views if they had confidence their views were taken into account, and more than three-quarters (78%) said this would describe their feelings well. Here again, there were no significant differences in opinion between those who had contacted Congress and those who had not.

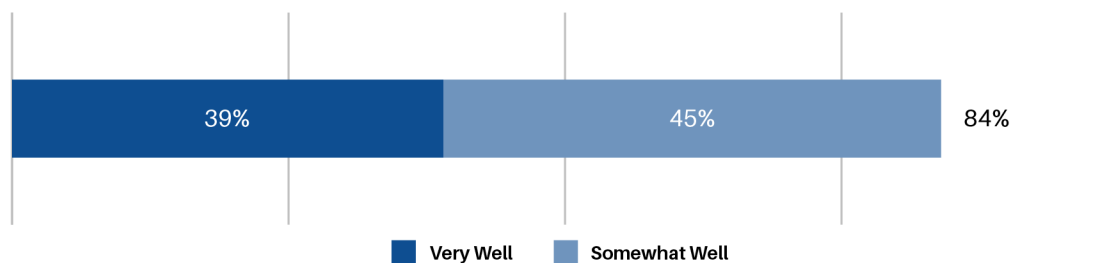


If voters believe their voices are being heard and that legislators are acting in good faith, they will have confidence in those legislators' decisions. It is incumbent on Members of Congress to build that trust and convey to their constituents that they are doing just that.

Finally, we asked if they would find it acceptable for the Member to vote contrary to their views as long as they had confidence the Member was voting based on what they really thought was best, rather than what some outside entity wanted. Most said this would describe their feelings well, but those who had not contacted a Member of Congress were slightly more emphatic that this would describe their feelings very well.

Figure 7 | Contrary Vote Acceptable if Member Thought it Best

How well would this describe how you might feel: If I had confidence that my representative was voting based on what he or she really thought was best, rather than just doing what some special interest wants, then I would find it acceptable for my Congressional representative to vote contrary to my view.



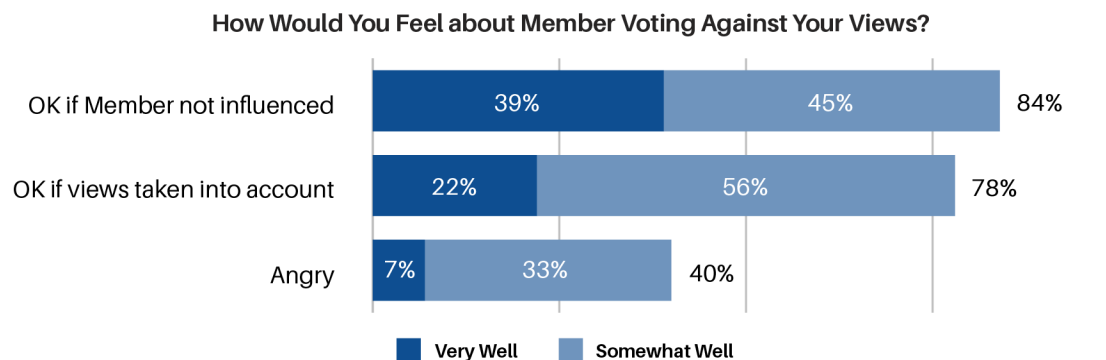
(n = 2,411 registered voters)

Source: Program for Public Consultation, University of Maryland (2016).

Published in: *The Future of Citizen Engagement: What Americans Want from Congress & How Members Can Build Trust*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2021.

Figure 8 combines these three data points into one chart that clearly shows the nuances of voters' opinions about Members voting contrary to their views. Here, again, voter sentiment comes down to trust. If voters believe their voices are being heard and that legislators are acting in good faith, they will have confidence in those legislators' decisions. It is incumbent on Members of Congress to build that trust and convey to their constituents that they are doing just that.

Figure 8 | Comparison of How Voters Would Feel About Member Voting Contrary to Views



(n = 2,411 registered voters)

Source: Program for Public Consultation, University of Maryland (2016).

Published in: *The Future of Citizen Engagement: What Americans Want from Congress & How Members Can Build Trust*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2021.

4. Members of Congress can convey accountability through a variety of methods, not just in face-to-face meetings.

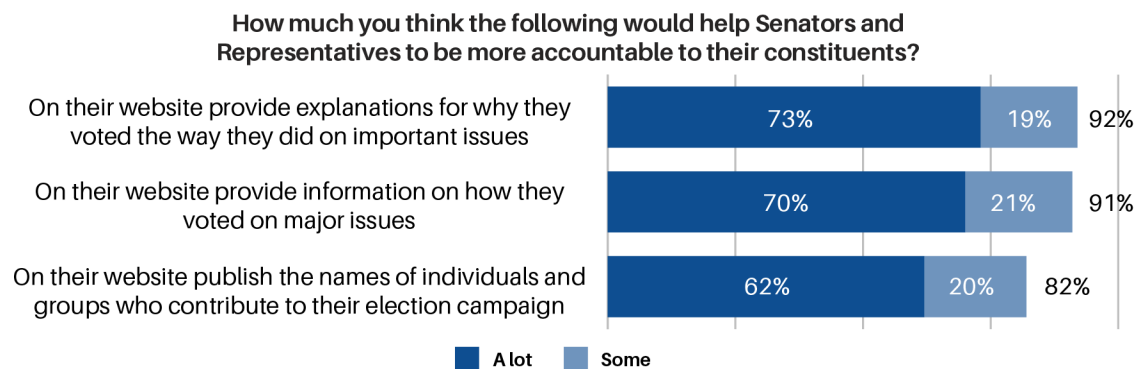
That voters would support Members' decisions when they are confident Members are acting on what they thought best, not on outside influence, raised questions about how to build that confidence. We tried to better understand how Senators and Representatives can convey accountability to their constituents. We asked about a number of activities, some of which many Members already do, others of which were experimental ideas we wanted to test.

The respondents felt that it would help Senators and Representatives a lot to be more accountable to their constituents by including on their websites how they voted on major issues and why. As Figure 9 shows, almost all of the registered voters thought Members' explanations for their votes on important issues would help them be more accountable, and almost three-quarters of them thought it would help Senators' and Representatives' accountability "a lot." The numbers were similar for providing on their websites how they voted on major issues, with 91% of the respondents saying it would help them be more accountable, and 70% saying it would help them "a lot."

The respondents felt that it would help Senators and Representatives a lot to be more accountable to their constituents by including on their websites how they voted on major issues and why.

Another website activity we offered also had fairly strong backing by the respondents: providing transparency in their donors. Almost two-thirds (62%) of the voters felt publishing donors on their websites would help Members “a lot” to be more accountable to their constituents.⁵

Figure 9 | Website Content for Conveying Accountability to Constituents



(n = 1,000 registered voters)

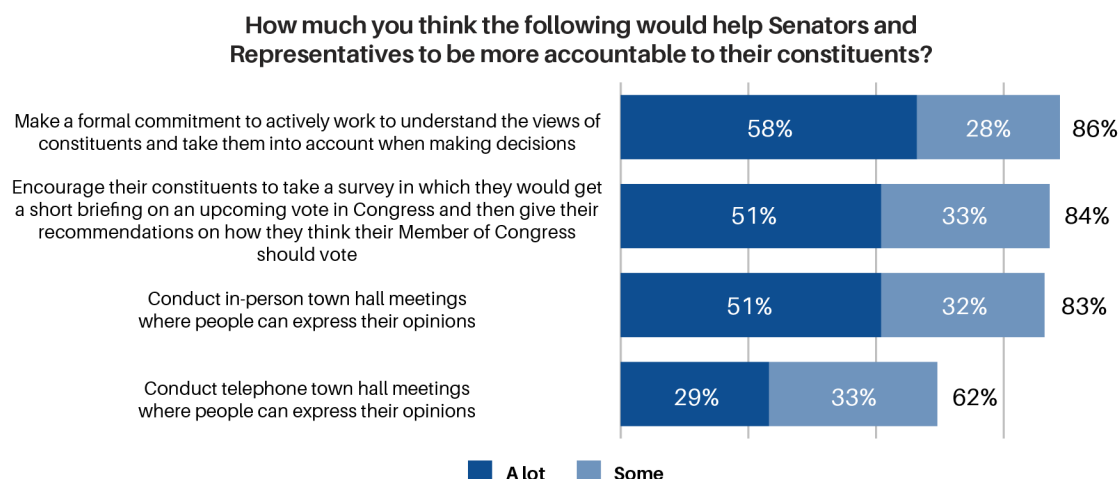
Source: Program for Public Consultation, University of Maryland (2018).

Published in: *The Future of Citizen Engagement: What Americans Want from Congress & How Members Can Build Trust*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2021.

As Figure 10 shows, other activities also had strong backing, with some differences in the strength of respondents’ opinions. More than half said it would help “a lot” to be more accountable to constituents if Members would: make a formal commitment to engage constituents (58%); engage constituents in informed policy surveys (51%); and conduct in-person town halls to listen to constituents (51%). The activity that fell far below the rest was conducting telephone town hall meetings to listen to constituents. Though the 29% of respondents who felt this would help Members be more accountable to their constituents “a lot” seems low in comparison to the strength of the other options, having more than one-quarter express strong sentiment is still significant.

⁵ Feeling confident that this would be of interest to constituents, we included this option on our survey despite the fact that Members of Congress are forbidden from providing any campaign information on their websites.

Figure 10 | Non-Website Methods for Conveying Accountability to Constituents



(n = 1,000 registered voters)

Source: Program for Public Consultation, University of Maryland (2018).

Published in: *The Future of Citizen Engagement: What Americans Want from Congress & How Members Can Build Trust*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2021.

We suspect voters' opinions of in-person and telephone town hall meetings have been changed by COVID-19 since we collected this data. Senators and Representatives across the country relied heavily on telephone and online town hall meetings to communicate with their constituents during the pandemic and became more open to virtual meetings.⁶ Just as Congress has become more comfortable with them, we suspect voters have, as well.

5. Voters want to know their views are heard and taken into account.

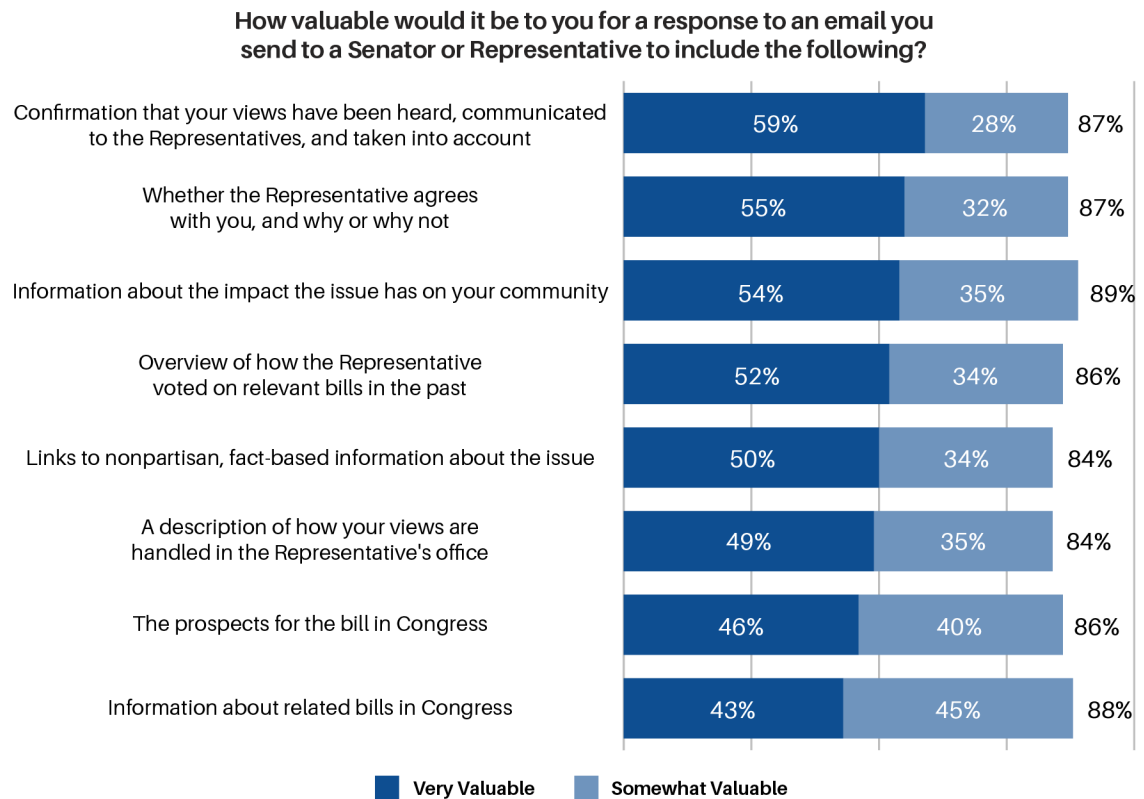
Realizing that voters wanting to have confidence that their views are being taken into account could have significant implications for how Members communicate with constituents, we decided to probe further. In March 2020—around the time the first COVID-19 shutdowns were starting in the U.S.—we asked registered voters how valuable they felt different content would be for Senators and Representatives to include in their response emails to constituents.

As Figure 11 shows, the respondents were very interested in substance, considering “very valuable” information about: whether the Member agreed with them and their reasons (55%); the impact of an issue on the community (54%); how the Member voted on relevant bills in the past (52%), and others. In fact, significant percentages of the respondents considered all of the content we asked about to be “very valuable.”

⁶ *The Future of Citizen Engagement: Coronavirus, Congress, and Constituent Communications*, Kathy Goldschmidt and Bradley Joseph Sinkaus, Congressional Management Foundation, 2020. <https://www.congressfoundation.org/coronavirus-report-2020>

The *most valuable* content, however—with 59% saying it would be very valuable—was simply confirmation that their views were heard, communicated to the Member, and taken into account. Voters want substance, but above all they want to know their voices matter.

Figure 11 | Preferred Content for Responses from Members



(n = 3,421 registered voters)

Source: Program for Public Consultation, University of Maryland (2020).

Published in: *The Future of Citizen Engagement: What Americans Want from Congress & How Members Can Build Trust*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2021.

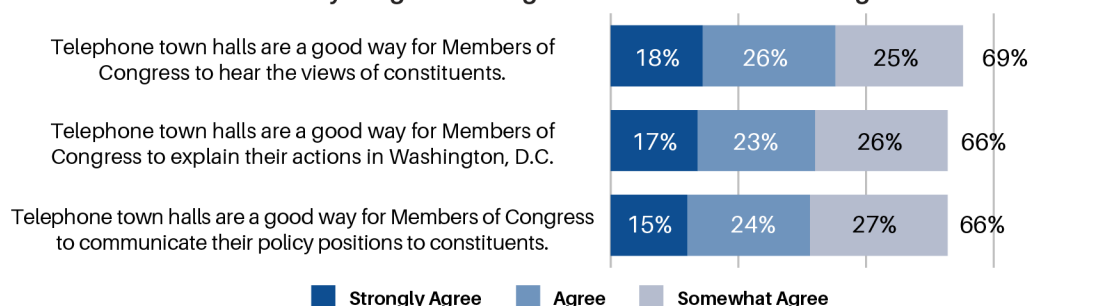
Voters want substance, but above all they want to know their voices matter.

6. Voters prefer in-person town hall meetings but still value remote town halls for listening to constituents.

In the mid-2010s, when telephone town halls began to be used by Senators and Representatives, they became increasingly criticized by the media as means to “avoid” constituents.⁷ In 2017 we decided to explore what voters thought about them. As Figure 12 shows, we asked the respondents to agree or disagree with several statements about telephone town hall meetings. About two-thirds of the respondents agreed that telephone town halls are good ways for Members of Congress to: hear from their constituents; explain their actions in Washington, D.C.; and communicate their policy positions to constituents.

Figure 12 | Telephone Town Halls for Listening and Communicating to Constituents

Here are some questions about citizens and their elected representatives in government.
Please indicate if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.



(n = 2,511 registered voters)

Source: Program for Public Consultation, University of Maryland (2017).

Published in: *The Future of Citizen Engagement: What Americans Want from Congress & How Members Can Build Trust*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2021.

We later explored these responses further by asking voters how effective different town hall meeting formats would be and how likely they would be to attend each. We had been experimenting with moderated deliberative online and telephone town hall meetings at the time, and the results of sessions with independent moderators were extremely promising for engaging and informing constituents. They also increased trust and approval of the Member and led to greater civic engagement and likelihood to vote.⁸

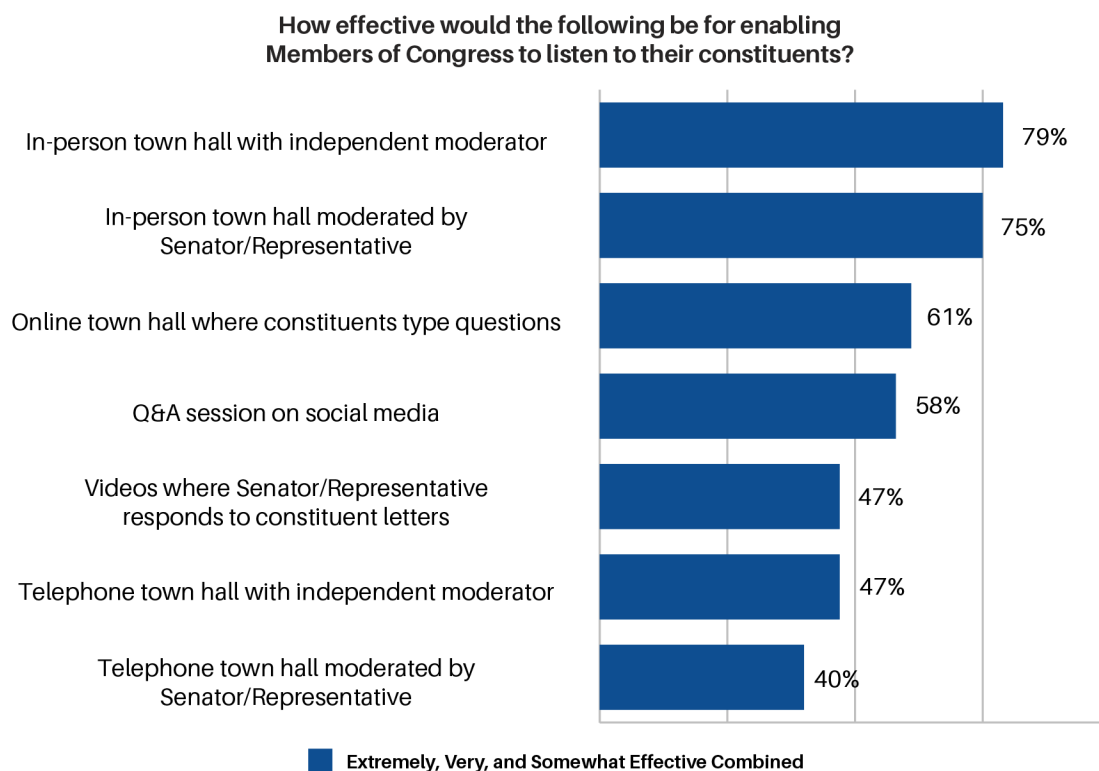
7 “Tele-Town Halls Help Members of Congress Screen their Constituents,” Charles Bethea, *The New Yorker*, July 18, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/tele-town-halls-help-members-of-congress-screen-their-constituents>

8 *Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy*, Michael A. Neblo, Kevin M. Esterling, and David M. J. Lazer, Cambridge Studies in Public Opinion and Political Psychology, 2019 (<https://connectingtocongress.org/politics-with-the-people-2>) and the 2009 CMF guide for Congress “Online Town Hall Meetings: Exploring Democracy in the 21st Century” (<https://www.congressfoundation.org/projects/town-hall/online-town-hall-meetings-exploring-democracy-in-the-21st-century>).

Though Congress is still being criticized for holding remote meetings, research indicates they can be effective means to increase engagement, especially with people who would not—or cannot—attend such meetings in-person.

As Figure 13 shows, at the time, in-person town hall meetings were considered most effective for enabling Members of Congress to listen to their constituents. It was also the format respondents said they would be most likely to attend, although CMF’s work with individual congressional offices shows that in-person town hall meetings are often sparsely-attended, usually with fewer than 50 people, unless there is a highly-contentious issue in the forefront of the news. The survey respondents considered in-person town hall meetings with an independent moderator to be slightly more effective than those moderated by the Member of Congress, and they indicated they would be slightly more likely to attend a town hall meeting with an independent moderator.

Figure 13 | Effectiveness of Different Town Hall Formats



(n = 1,011 registered voters)

Note: Response language has been shortened.

Source: Program for Public Consultation, University of Maryland (2018).

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Figure 13 also shows that the registered voters considered remote town hall meetings less effective than in-person, and they had less interest in attending them. Telephone town hall meetings were of least interest. Our impression is that—given that voters’ primary interest is to be heard by their Members of Congress—they perceived in-person, moderated sessions as the best opportunity for that to occur. However, more recent CMF research indicates that COVID-19 likely changed both congressional and constituent attitudes toward remote town hall meetings. Many Members of Congress conducted more online and telephone town hall meetings during the pandemic than they had in the months prior, and both they and their constituents became much more comfortable with remote meetings than they previously had been.⁹ Though Congress is still being criticized for holding remote meetings,¹⁰ research indicates they can be effective means to increase engagement, especially with people who would not—or cannot—attend such meetings in-person.¹¹

9 *The Future of Citizen Engagement: Coronavirus, Congress, and Constituent Communications*, Kathy Goldschmidt and Bradley Joseph Sinkaus, Congressional Management Foundation, 2020. <https://www.congressfoundation.org/coronavirus-report-2020>

10 “Congress Returns from Its August Recess with America on Mute,” *Roll Call* Opinions, Patricia Murphy, September 9, 2020. <https://www.rollcall.com/2020/09/09/congress-returns-from-its-august-recess-with-america-on-mute/>

11 *Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy*, Michael A. Neblo, Kevin M. Esterling, and David M. J. Lazer, Cambridge Studies in Public Opinion and Political Psychology, 2019 (<https://connectingtocongress.org/politics-with-the-people-2>) and the 2009 CMF guide for Congress “Online Town Hall Meetings: Exploring Democracy in the 21st Century” (<https://www.congressfoundation.org/projects/town-hall/online-town-hall-meetings-exploring-democracy-in-the-21st-century>).

As representatives of the People, Members of Congress are responsible for facilitating the relationship between Americans and government and incorporating their needs and interests into government decisions. If Congress does not fulfill this responsibility, it is allowing American democracy to falter. It must do better.

Developing a Strategic Constituent Engagement Plan

What can Congress do with these findings? For starters, individual Senators and Representatives—and their staffs—can adopt new mindsets and practices in their engagement with constituents that better convey accountability and build a sense of trust in the Member, Congress, and democracy. That may seem like a tall order, but Congress is the only place this work can occur. There is no other institution than Congress, and no other individuals than Senators and Representatives, who hold our democracy so closely in hand. As representatives of the People, Members of Congress are responsible for facilitating the relationship between Americans and government and incorporating their needs and interests into government decisions. If Congress does not fulfill this responsibility, it is allowing American democracy to falter. It must do better.

Through our *Future of Citizen Engagement* series, we will be exploring new ideas for an entirely new model for how Congress can consult and engage with the public. The first step is for Members and staff to change their approaches to constituent engagement.

Fortunately, building constituent trust and doing a better job of engaging and communicating does not necessarily mean applying more resources or devoting more Member and staff time. In fact, CMF believes that being more strategic and focusing on those tactics that build trust can actually take less time and fewer resources and be more satisfying to everyone. CMF is a strong proponent of congressional offices developing strategic plans in all aspects of their work.¹²

¹² CMF provides extensive guidance on setting up an effective mail system in the “Mail Management” (<https://www.congressfoundation.org/office-toolkit-home/improve-mail-operations-menu-item-new/107>) and “Office Toolkit” (<https://www.congressfoundation.org/office-toolkit-home/improve-mail-operations-menu-item-new>) sections of our website. We also have a chapter on mail in *Setting Course: A Congressional Management Guide* (<https://www.congressfoundation.org/publications/setting-course>).

Constituent engagement is no different. Only by thoughtful consideration and planning can an office use their strengths to build better, more trusting relationships with constituents.

Too many offices rely on reactive engagement—responses to email messages—as their primary interactions with their constituents. House offices receive and reply to between 50,000 and 150,000 messages annually from constituents. CMF has studied the use and effectiveness of email since 1995, and we can confidently say that neither the public, nor Members and staff are satisfied with these interactions. Clearly, constituents continue to think their voices do not matter, and congressional offices continue to believe that mass form email campaigns (the lion’s share of the volume of incoming constituent messages) are sent without their constituents’ consent or knowledge.¹³

Only by thoughtful consideration and planning can an office use their strengths to build better, more trusting relationships with constituents.

We believe offices would be better served by creating an overall constituent engagement plan that allows them to be more in charge of their message and to better demonstrate to constituents that they are listening and accountable. Developing such a plan should involve communications, legislative, and district/state staff. After all, the end user is always the constituent, so why not coordinate efforts and messaging to define and accomplish your goals? The following is a process congressional offices can use to strategically develop an engagement plan for building trust with, and better engaging, their constituents.

1. Define the Senator’s/Representative’s Strengths and Preferences

Members of Congress are as varied as the people they represent, and not all are equally good at all forms of communication. To build trust with constituents, Members need to be comfortable so they can convey authenticity and better connect with the people they are engaging. Sometimes comfort will come with practice or training on the part of the Member and/or the staff who support them. In developing a Strategic Constituent Engagement Plan, it is important to answer the following questions about the Member’s strengths and preferences:

- Is the Senator/Representative comfortable speaking before large groups? Or do they prefer smaller groups?
- Is the Senator/Representative comfortable speaking on camera? On the phone?
- Is the Senator/Representative comfortable talking with reporters? Do they need a lot of preparation or can they respond in the moment?

¹³ "Citizen-Centric Advocacy: The Untapped Power of Constituent Engagement," Bradford Fitch, et. al. Congressional Management Foundation, 2017. <https://www.congressfoundation.org/citizen-centric-advocacy-2017>

- Is the Senator/Representative comfortable engaging with those who disagree with them and those who do not normally interact with politicians? What will it take to prepare them to engage with those who are not supporters and “usual suspects?”
- Will the Senator/Representative draft their own social media content and have staff review before posting? (CMF recommends a second pair of eyes review anything public, even when it’s written by the Senator/Representative.) Are they confident in allowing staff to post content in their voice without their review? What policies and training must be in place for them to be comfortable with staff posting?
- Is the Senator/Representative comfortable operating computers and technology on their own or do staff need to provide hands-on support?
- What tone and voice does the Senator/Representative want to convey in written materials? Will they vary depending on the medium or platform?
- What are the Senator’s/Representative’s preferences for preparation and talking points?
- What is the impression the Senator/Representative wants to leave with constituents and how best can that be conveyed? Do they want to come across as authoritative, friendly, compassionate, partisan, statesmanlike, disruptive, etc.?
- What role does the Senator/Representative most want to play in Congress and how can constituent engagement support that?¹⁴

To build trust with constituents, Members need be comfortable so they can convey authenticity and better connect with the people they are engaging.

2. Understand Your Constituents

To connect with constituents, you need to understand who they are and what they want from their engagement with the Senator/Representative. This involves more than intuition and assumptions. It involves research about the district/state and clarity about who the Member believes they represent. It also involves asking constituents. Often a constituent’s interaction with a congressional office ends when a meeting ends or the office replies to a call, letter, or email. But how do constituents view these interactions and what is their overall satisfaction with the office? By inviting feedback after an interaction, offices can better understand what influences

¹⁴ See chapter 9 of *Setting Course: A Congressional Management Guide*, “Defining Your Role in Congress,” to learn more about the different roles Senators and Representatives play in Congress (<https://www.congressfoundation.org/publications/setting-course>). CMF’s “Job Description for a Member of Congress” also provides information to help Members consider the emphasis they will place on different aspects of their job. https://www.congressfoundation.org/storage/documents/CMF_Pubs/cmf-member-job-description.pdf

constituents' satisfaction and trust.¹⁵ Moreover, marketing research suggests that seeking feedback, in itself, improves satisfaction.¹⁶ However you collect the information, some of the key questions to answer about your constituents are:

- Has the office conducted any constituent surveys to determine: policy issue interests; constituent satisfaction with casework, mail/email responses, and other engagement practices; or preference for type and timing of engagement with the office? Who responded and what do the results tell the office?
- Has the office collected data and analyzed trends in who is reaching out, who is requesting assistance, who is attending meetings and events, and who the office is proactively engaging? What does this information tell you? Who is the office missing?
- Has the office reviewed the trends in open, click through, and forward rates of different email responses and outreach? Website analytics? Social media analytics? What do they tell the office?
- What are the demographics and key elements of the district/state? What are the implications of average age, education level, income, race/ethnicity, employment bases (i.e., agriculture, military, heavy industry, professional services, etc.), urban/suburban/exurban/rural mix, political ideological breakdown, computer and broadband access, etc.?¹⁷
- Who are the key stakeholders and constituencies in the district/state?
- Has the office sought engagement and/or feedback from a representative sample of constituents or reached out to groups and individuals who do not normally engage? What have you learned?

To connect with constituents, you need to understand who they are and what they want from their engagement with the Senator/Representative.

15 In the "Conduct a Constituent Satisfaction Survey" section of our website, CMF provides guidance and insight based on the experiences of offices who have conducted customer satisfaction surveys with their constituents. <https://www.congressfoundation.org/office-toolkit-home/constituent-satisfaction-home>

16 "How Surveys Influence Customers," Paul M. Dholakia and Vicki G. Morwitz, Harvard Business Review, May 2002. <https://hbr.org/2002/05/how-surveys-influence-customers>

17 Most of this information can be found in the *Almanac of American Politics* (https://www.thealmanacofamericanpolitics.com/index.aspx?gclid=CjwKCAiA-f78BRBbEiwATKRRBMZguxRaPdm5C9oMyMbDhYMhhsH4WL2BLcnLJgp4CKPB_RkYb7qSI5xoCsiwQAvD_BwE). The Census Bureau also generally produces helpful district (<https://www.census.gov/mycd/>) and state (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219>) profiles.

3. Assess Your Current Practices

Most offices handle constituent engagement in a reactive way, with the vast majority being conducted through responses to constituent correspondence. In many offices, managing constituent correspondence represents about 50% of office resources, but is the value to constituents, the Member, and democracy commensurate with the effort required? Are the responses facilitating trust, demonstrating accountability, and affirming the Senator/ Representative is listening? Are there ways to engage constituents that are more satisfying and more productive for everyone and better for democracy? To determine the answers to these questions, it is important to assess your current practices. Following are questions you can use to help do that.

- What methods of engagement does the office use? How does each perform in a Constituent Engagement Assessment (see worksheet at the end of this report)?
 - Reactive email, phone calls, and mail
 - Targeted mailings, including newsletters (paper or electronic)
 - Constituent satisfaction surveys
 - Website
 - Ads
 - Town hall meetings—in person or virtual
 - Meetings and events hosted by the office
 - Meetings and events by invitation
 - Facebook
 - Instagram
 - Twitter
 - Reddit
 - YouTube
 - Others?
- Has the office looked at open rates for email responses, e-newsletters, and other targeted emails? Has the office tested different subject lines and delivery days and times to see if it would improve open rates? What seems to be most effective? Are there ways to make them more engaging and interactive?
- How much has the office spent in the past on constituent engagement (mass mail production and postage, telephone and online town hall meetings, advertisements, travel, etc.)? Is there room in the budget to increase spending? Is current spending meeting goals and helping connect to constituents? Where is current spending leading to gaps in engagement?

In many offices, managing constituent correspondence represents about 50% of office resources, but is the value to constituents, the Member, and democracy commensurate with the effort required?

- Has the office considered shifting resources from activities which do not engender trust (e.g., responding to identical mass email campaigns, or postal mailings with limited public policy substance) to those which are more likely to engender trusts (e.g., online town hall meetings with independent moderators)?
- How much time is spent on the different methods currently? Can time be allocated elsewhere from less productive to more productive?
- What tone is conveyed through your constituent engagement practices, and is it the tone you want to convey?
- Who are you hearing from and not hearing from?
- What are the Senator's/Representative's strategic goals and are your current practices helping to achieve them?
- Are your current practices demonstrating the Senator/Representative is listening and accountable to constituents? Are they helping to foster trust in the Member and in democracy or are they largely political and/or technical, focusing on the minutiae of legislation?

Offices will always need to manage constituent mail, answer the phones, intake casework requests, and respond to meeting and event invitations, so a plan needs to take this into account.

4. Develop a Strategic Constituent Engagement Plan

Once you have a handle on how your current practices are, and are not, working for the Senator/Representative and constituents, you can develop a six-month to one-year Strategic Constituent Engagement Plan. As you do so, it is important to remember that a high percentage of constituent engagement is reactive. Offices will always need to manage constituent mail, answer the phones, intake casework requests, and respond to meeting and event invitations, so a plan needs to take this into account. If you are too ambitious with proactive strategies, the plan is likely to fail due to lack of Member and staff time and resources. However, the plan can and should address how to make the reactive engagement more satisfying and productive for both the Member and constituents.¹⁸ In developing a strategic engagement plan, offices should answer the following questions.

- Who should take the lead and be involved in developing the plan? How will you ensure that the D.C. and district/state staffs are coordinated and working toward the same goals?

¹⁸ CMF provides guidance on developing a coordinated agenda in *Keeping It Local: A Guide for Managing Congressional District and State Offices* that may be useful to offices as they develop a strategic communications plan. <https://www.congressfoundation.org/publications/keeping-it-local>

To ensure the Strategic Constituent Engagement Plan is successful, it should be regularly reviewed, assessed, and revised to respond to changes in the environment, feedback from constituents, changes in staffers, and unanticipated occurrences.

- Are there specific upcoming initiatives, issues, or bills on which the Senator/ Representative will want constituent feedback, assistance, or support?
- How will the plan support the Senator's/Representative's goals, engage constituents in ways that build trust, and ensure constituents' views and needs are represented in public policy?
- How will the office reduce time and resources spent on less productive engagement methods and increase time and resources for more productive ones? How will you get the Member, staff, and constituents on board?
- How will the office determine the venues, processes, logistics, and content of the various communications and engagements?
- What policies, deadlines, and expectations need to be developed and communicated to staff to ensure the plan is successful? Will staff require training or assistance?
- If you are changing or deprioritizing certain practices, how will you manage constituent expectations during and after the change?

5. Assess the Results and Revise the Plan

To ensure the Strategic Constituent Engagement Plan is successful, it should be regularly reviewed, assessed, and revised to respond to changes in the environment, feedback from constituents, changes in staffers, and unanticipated occurrences. Be sure to involve staff with different roles in constituent engagement, generate buy in and approval from the Senator/ Representative, and communicate any changes in strategy or policy to all staff. To help assess the results and determine if revisions are necessary, answer the following questions.

- What metrics will you track and how will you collect Member, staff, and constituent feedback to inform revisions?
- How often will you review reports on the communications plan (weekly? monthly)? Who will create and distribute them? Who will review them?
- What processes will you use to adapt the plan based on what the metrics and feedback tell you?
- What has changed in the local, state, and national environment that could impact how the office engages constituents?
- Is the plan helping to foster constituent trust and better inform the Member, staff, and public policy about constituent views and needs?

There are, of course, political and electoral reasons to deliver the Member's message, talking points, and accomplishments. But there are representational, democratic, and legislative reasons to hear what constituents have to say and affirm that you are listening.

CMF Tips for Building Constituent Trust

Following is some of the key advice CMF has developed through recent research combined with our decades of studying and helping congressional offices better engage with constituents. Implementing these recommendations will lay a solid foundation for building trust and improving relationships with constituents.¹⁹

1. Listen, Affirm, and Connect

Clearly, constituents want to be heard. To do this, Senators, Representatives and their staffers must listen. There are, of course, political and electoral reasons to deliver the Member's message, talking points, and accomplishments. But there are representational, democratic, and legislative reasons to hear what constituents have to say and affirm that you are listening. Members of Congress and their staffs also must integrate what they learn into decisions and public policy. By communicating to constituents their voices are heard, politicians are demonstrating they have built a connection between the People and the Congress.

The format and platform of the engagement can help determine whether you should be listening or speaking. As a general rule, when constituents reach out to express their views and concerns or request help, that is an important opportunity to listen. This includes constituent meetings, responses to email and phone calls, casework, and town hall meetings. Replying to constituents with political talking points, argumentation, or treatises on legislation does not demonstrate you are listening. Affirming they have been heard and making a connection does. Instead of giving lengthy policy explanations or legislative status updates, provide shorter responses that focus

¹⁹ CMF's website (<https://congressfoundation.org>) contains a multitude of resources and publications to help congressional offices with mail and email management, constituent engagement, strategic planning, developing a coordinated agenda, and many other strategic decisions that impact the relationship between Senators and Representatives and their constituents.

on the Member's views and actions or tie the issue to the constituent or to the district/state. If necessary, coach the Senator/Representative to talk less and listen more during in-person and town hall meetings so constituents feel heard.²⁰

2. Provide New Opportunities to Engage

As you assess your current practices and develop a Strategic Constituent Engagement Plan you will find there are some types of engagement that are taking significant effort to manage without much benefit to the Member or constituents. These are ripe for change or scaling back to free resources for other more productive and/or substantive engagements.

Remember that building trust and serving constituents are the ultimate goals and that the Member represents everyone who lives in the district/state, regardless of whether or not they agree politically.

The key is to be both creative and strategic. Consider your goals and your constituency and determine how best to engage. Use the tools available to you, including technology and online platforms, but also think about how they can be used differently to better meet the needs of the Senator/Representative and constituents. Remember that building trust and serving constituents are the ultimate goals and that the Member represents everyone who lives in the district/state, regardless of whether or not they agree politically. Hearing from as representative a sample of constituents as possible—and asking questions that are not leading—will help gain a less biased picture of the needs, interests, and expectations of the broad spectrum of the district/state. However, it requires proactive outreach and concerted effort to do so. Reactive engagement tends to result in hearing only from those who are most politically active and most likely to agree or disagree with the Senator/Representative. It takes creativity to hear from those who are less inclined to reach out, but possibly more in need of the Member's attention.²¹

3. Help Constituents Understand Congress

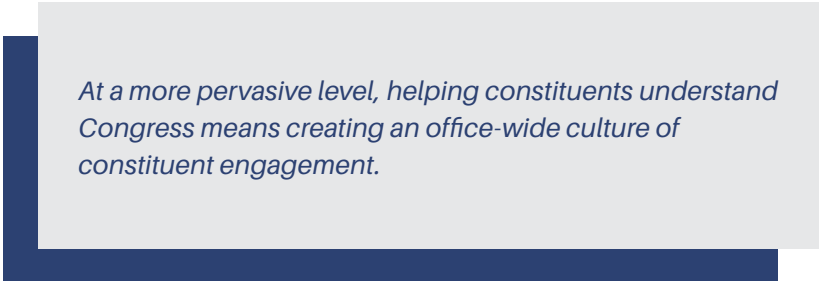
It is a common lament that civic education seems to have fallen by the wayside, leaving Americans with a lack of understanding of, or appreciation for, democratic processes, Congress, and civic engagement. While educational institutions bear the bulk of this responsibility, helping constituents better understand Congress and the Senator/Representative can go a long way toward building trust. This can include using your website to link to the many great resources

20 CMF's Office Toolkit provides manageable, actionable, bite-sized guidance on improving casework, mail operations, telephone town hall meetings; strategic scheduling; and soliciting constituent feedback through satisfaction surveys (<https://www.congressfoundation.org/office-toolkit-home>).

21 New ways of thinking about constituent engagement are discussed in the book *Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy* by Michael A. Neblo, Kevin M. Esterling, and David M. J. Lazer. The book grew out of an ongoing collaboration between CMF and the authors. https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07GNM4SM6/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1

from the Library of Congress and the House and Senate. You can also provide your own, easy-to-understand context for how and why Congress functions as it does, offer insight into the Member's day-to-day work, and offer guidance to help manage constituents' expectations. Social media can also help Senators and Representatives create brief windows of understanding into what it is like to work in Congress.²²

Helping constituents understand Congress can also mean considering, as part of each engagement, what constituents might need to know to best participate. They almost certainly will not benefit from a detailed dissertation on the legislative process, but they might need some basic and brief information to make the interaction successful. Consider how your office can



At a more pervasive level, helping constituents understand Congress means creating an office-wide culture of constituent engagement.

make it easier for constituents to provide what the office needs. For example, focusing on a single issue in a town hall meeting and providing some information ahead of time can help constituents feel more prepared and focused. Brief phone calls with “pen pals/frequent fliers” can help guide them toward more productive engagement in the future. And providing a little insight into how Congress works during a local speech can help the Member connect with constituents and educate them at the same time.

At a more pervasive level, helping constituents understand Congress means creating an office-wide culture of constituent engagement. When staff know that helping constituents make sense of Congress is a fundamental component of their job, they will approach constituent engagement differently.

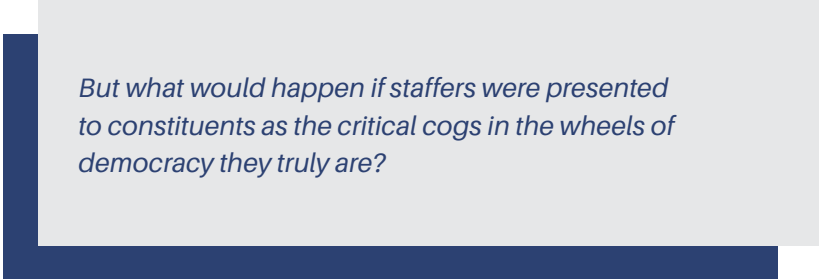
4. Let Staffers Come Out from Behind the Curtain

Most congressional offices approach constituent engagement as though the Member is performing all the work of the office and staff are merely dutiful subordinates. All responses go out with the Member's signature. All meetings are with the Member until they are delayed by votes or competing meetings. All appearances are by the Member until a surrogate is apologetically offered. But what would happen if staffers were presented to constituents as the critical cogs in the wheels of democracy they truly are?

When staff are empowered to respond—when appropriate and with clear guidance—to constituents under their own signatures on matters within their purview, those engagements

²² Examples of offices providing exemplary constituent service can be found in CMF's Democracy Award winners and finalists. Those in the “Constituent Service” category are especially relevant, but there are also good practices in the “Transparency and Accountability” and “Innovation and Modernization” categories. (<https://www.congressfoundation.org/projects/democracy-awards>)

help build relationships rather than serving as mere transactions. Some offices have found that when constituent meetings are scheduled with staff because they have the relevant expertise, constituents are less inclined to view themselves as being fobbed off and more inclined to feel they are being heard by the right person. Others have found that when events and activities are planned around staffers, their important roles are legitimized, and the office can extend its reach farther into the district/state because the Member's time is not the limiting factor. And many offices found during the pandemic that when staffers are empowered to phone constituents to respond to confusing or non-standard issues, constituents felt richly acknowledged. Moreover, office time is saved by not having to research, write, and review written responses.



But what would happen if staffers were presented to constituents as the critical cogs in the wheels of democracy they truly are?

Of course, empowering staffers in these ways requires considerable trust on the Member's part and considerable planning and training to ensure staffers engage appropriately and reflect well on the Member. Once the infrastructure and culture are in place, constituents, the Member, and the office will continue to benefit from it as long as the Member serves. It also helps professionalize and legitimize the role of congressional staffers by holding them out as authorities and experts in their own rights rather than simply assistants to the Senator/Representative. This can improve their job satisfaction and make it more likely they will stay in the office or in Congress longer because they are being acknowledged as more than just assistants.

The Congress is where local concerns—the needs and interests of the People—and federal policy connect. When that connection atrophies so, too, does our democracy.

Conclusion

Our voter survey data conveys a very important message to Congress: Constituents are accepting of Members voting against their views, so long as they are confident the Member has taken their views into account. We also saw that voters value their interactions with their Senators and Representatives, whether they be through in-person, telephone, or online town hall meetings; social media live-streams and Q&A's; or email. At the root of these findings is that the People want to feel like their voices are being heard by the Members who represent them. And it is in the best interest of Members of Congress for those voices not to fall on deaf ears, for you cannot adequately represent without understanding, and you can't understand without listening.

Though our concept of whose voices are included have evolved—and continue to evolve—in a representative democracy, the People's voices should be heard and understood. Social media and advances in technology facilitate this engagement, for better or worse. While some may decry social media and the Internet as detrimental to democracy, research and innovative practices in the U.S. and around the world demonstrate it also can be a vital tool for engagement, especially now as the country navigates a global pandemic that prevents in-person interaction. Through Facebook town halls, Instagram livestreams, and Zoom meetings with constituents, Members have ample opportunity to substantively engage with their constituents in ways the Founding Fathers could never have imagined. By embracing these tools with a thoughtful Strategic Constituent Engagement Plan, elected officials can create the type of robust democratic dialogue most Members of Congress and constituents long for.

But as we have heard time and time again: the more things change, the more they stay the same. How can Members avoid falling back into the comfortable, outdated ways of engagement and instead continue to foster trust with their constituents through innovative methods for substantive engagement?

Our next report in the *Future of Citizen Engagement* series, to be released later in 2021, seeks answer this question with a grander objective: to envision a new paradigm of the democratic dialogue between Congress and the American public. The workflows, practices, and metrics Congress utilizes to interact with constituents have largely remained unchanged since the 1970s, and the intellectual underpinnings date back to the 1940s. While Congress has added new technologies and tools to provide more efficiencies, the foundations of an outdated and largely administrative public engagement process persist. In this upcoming report, CMF will propose 10 principles upon which a modern, 21st century constituent engagement system can be built, offer new metrics to measure engagement, and advocate for a new standard of success in the democratic dialogue. This new standard is not based on whether a congressional office has responded to a constituent, but rather, on whether that Member-constituent interaction has contributed to public policy and trust in our democracy.

With that report, we will have laid the foundation on which to build a vision for how Congress could modernize Member-constituent engagement and public consultation. By identifying ongoing problems that have plagued the institution, describing the unique challenges and opportunities presented by COVID-19, and proposing a set of principles for meaningful engagement between Members of Congress and their constituents, we offer insight into how we might rebuild the much-needed trust and effectiveness in our First Branch of government. The Congress is where local concerns—the needs and interests of the People—and federal policy connect. When that connection atrophies so, too, does our democracy. It is our fervent hope that the Congress will adapt in ways that reverse that atrophy, and embrace a vision and practice of citizen engagement that help renew the People’s faith in our democratic institutions.

Voter Survey Methodology & Selected Data

In 2016-2020, the Program for Public Consultation at University of Maryland collaborated with CMF to include questions on telephone surveys of registered voters fielded for them by Nielsen Scarborough. CMF is deeply appreciative of this collaboration. Following we provide information about each survey, as well as the CMF questions and topline results for each. Note: Numbers may be slightly different than those shown in report figures because of rounding.

2016

Fielding Dates: June 30, 2016 – July 5, 2016

Sample Size: 2,411 registered voters

Margin of Error: +/- 2%

[FULL SAMPLE]

Q27. What is your impression, how interested are your Congressional representatives in what you have to say?

	Very	Somewhat	Not very	Not at all	No answer
National	5.7%	35.9%	38.8%	19.2%	0.5%

Q28. In the past five years have you contacted one of your Congressional representatives, expressing your point of view on an issue?

	Yes	No	Don't remember/ Refused
National	48.2%	50.9%	1.0%

[Those who answered yes in Q28 were asked Q29-33]

Among those who answered no or skipped, a random subsample was asked Q34-35]

Q29. Did you receive a response from the Congressional office?

	Yes	No	Don't remember	No answer
National	60.8%	30.4%	8.4%	0.5%

Q30. Did you have the impression that your views, together with the views of other citizens, were or were not communicated to your Congressional representative?

	Were	Were not	No answer
National	45.0%	54.0%	1.0%

Q31. Do you have the impression that your Congressional representative did or did not take your view, together with other citizens' views, into account when making the decision about what position to take?

	Did take it into account	Did not take it into account	No answer
National	33.5%	65.0%	1.5%

Q32. As far as you know, what position did your Congressional representative take:

	The one you favored	The one you favored	Some other position	No answer [from the Congressional representative]	No answer [from the survey respondent]
National	23.0%	32.7%	22.9%	21.1%	0.2%

Q33. Afterwards did you think that your effort to communicate your views was:

	Very worthwhile	Somewhat worthwhile	Not very worthwhile	Not at all worthwhile	No answer
National	13.1%	33.8%	31.4%	21.3%	0.4%

[Sample that said they did not contact Member in Q28 or did not answer]

Q34. Imagine you want to contact your Congressional representative on an issue important to you. What is your impression? How hard or easy would it be to contact your representative?

	Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy
National	14.6%	41.7%	38.0%	5.7%

Q35. Do you think your Representative would or would not take the time to get a report on your views, together with those of other citizens?

	Would	Would not	No answer
National	37.1%	62.0%	0.9%

Q36. Now imagine that you were to send a letter or email to one of your Congressional representatives expressing your point of view on an upcoming Congressional vote. You then receive a letter or email thanking you for your opinion, but explaining that the Member will vote in a way contrary to your point of view, giving you his or her reasons for doing so. Here are some different ways people might feel in this situation. For each one please select how well it describes how you might feel.

Q36a. I would feel angry with my Congressional representative for voting contrary to my view.

[Sample that said they DID contact Member in Q28]

	Very well	Somewhat well	Not very well	Not well at all	No answer
National	8.4%	32.5%	41.8%	12.7%	4.7%

[Sample that said they DID NOT contact Member in Q28 or did not answer]

	Very well	Somewhat well	Not very well	Not well at all	No answer
National	5.1%	33.2%	45.4%	10.9%	5.4%

Q36b. If I had confidence that my views were taken into account, I would find it acceptable for my Congressional representative to vote contrary to my view.

[Sample that said they DID contact Member in Q28]

	Very well	Somewhat well	Not very well	Not well at all	No answer
National	22.5%	54.8%	15.0%	4.0%	3.7%

[Sample that said they DID NOT contact Member in Q28 or did not answer]

	Very well	Somewhat well	Not very well	Not well at all	No answer
National	20.8%	56.4%	15.1%	2.2%	5.4%

Q36c. If I had confidence that my representative was voting based on what he or she really thought was best, rather than just doing what some special interest wants, then I would find it acceptable for my Congressional representative to vote contrary to my view.

[Sample that said they DID contact Member in Q28]

	Very well	Somewhat well	Not very well	Not well at all	No answer
National	36.3%	45.7%	10.7%	5.3%	2.0%

[Sample that said they DID NOT contact Member in Q28 or did not answer]

	Very well	Somewhat well	Not very well	Not well at all	No answer
National	41.0%	43.3%	10.9%	2.6%	2.2%

2017

Fielding Dates: Dec 14 - 21, 2017

Sample Size: 2,511 registered voters

Margin of Error: +/- 2%

Here are some questions about citizens and their elected representatives in government:

Please indicate if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

Q16: Interactions between citizens and their representatives are very valuable to our democracy

	Strongly agree	Agree	Some-what agree	Total agree	Neither agree or disagree	Total disagree	Some-what disagree	Dis-agree	Strongly Disagree	Refused / Don't know
National	57.5%	26.9%	8.0%	92.4%	4.4%	2.8%	1.3%	0.7%	0.8%	0.3%

Q17: Telephone town halls are a good way for Members of Congress to hear the views of their constituents

	Strongly agree	Agree	Some-what agree	Total agree	Neither agree or disagree	Total disagree	Some-what disagree	Dis-agree	Strongly Disagree	Refused / Don't know
National	17.7%	26.3%	24.8%	68.8%	15.7%	15.2%	7.2%	4.6%	3.4%	0.3%

Q18: Telephone town halls are a good way for Members of Congress to communicate their policy positions to constituents

	Strongly agree	Agree	Some-what agree	Total agree	Neither agree or disagree	Total disagree	Some-what disagree	Dis-agree	Strongly Disagree	Refused / Don't know
National	14.8%	23.7%	26.9%	65.4%	17.2%	17.1%	7.6%	5.8%	3.7%	0.3%

Q19: Telephone town halls are a good way for Members of Congress to explain their actions in Washington, D.C.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Some-what agree	Total agree	Neither agree or disagree	Total disagree	Some-what disagree	Dis-agree	Strongly Disagree	Refused / Don't know
National	16.6%	22.7%	25.9%	65.4%	16.3%	18.0%	7.1%	6.3%	4.6%	0.4%

2018-1

Fielding Dates: Mar 9 - 23, 2018

Sample Size: 1000 registered voters

Margin of Error: +/-3.1%

Now, we would like to ask you some questions about your relationship to your Representatives in Congress.

Suppose your Senators or Representative were to want to make an effort to be more accountable to their constituents. For each of the following steps, please select how much you think it would help them to be more accountable to their constituents.

Q32a. On their website provide information on how they voted on major issues

	A lot	Some	A little	Not at all	Refused / Don't know
National	70.3%	21.4%	5.0%	2.6%	0.6%

Q32b. On their website provide explanations for why they voted the way they did on important issues

	A lot	Some	A little	Not at all	Refused / Don't know
National	72.5%	19.2%	5.1%	3.0%	0.2%

Q32c. On their website publish the names of individuals and groups who contribute to their election campaign

	A lot	Some	A little	Not at all	Refused / Don't know
National	61.8%	20.4%	11.5%	5.6%	0.7%

Q32d. Conduct in-person town hall meetings where people can express their opinions

	A lot	Some	A little	Not at all	Refused / Don't know
National	51.3%	31.6%	12.9%	3.8%	0.3%

Q32e. Conduct telephone town hall meetings where people can express their opinions

	A lot	Some	A little	Not at all	Refused / Don't know
National	28.7%	33.1%	26.4%	11.6%	0.2%

Q32f. Make a formal commitment to actively work to understand the views of constituents and to take them into account when making decisions

	A lot	Some	A little	Not at all	Refused / Don't know
National	57.5%	28.0%	9.3%	4.5%	0.7%

Q32g. Encourage their constituents to take a survey in which they would get a short briefing on an upcoming vote in Congress and then give their recommendation on how they think their Member of Congress should vote

	A lot	Some	A little	Not at all	Refused / Don't know
National	51.4%	33.0%	10.9%	4.6%	0.3%

2018-2

Fielding Dates: Oct 15—Nov 5, 2018

Sample Size: 1011 registered voters

Margin of Error: +/-3.1%

Here is a list of activities or actions that allow Members of Congress to better listen to their constituents. For each please select how effective you think this activity or action would be in enabling Members of Congress to listen to their constituents.

Q52a. A traditional town hall meeting, in which constituents attend an in-person, public forum moderated by the Member of Congress

	Total effective	Extremely effective	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not so effective	Not at all effective	Total not effective	Refused / Don't know
US-National	74.9%	10.3%	19.4%	45.2%	19.3%	4.4%	23.7%	1.4%

Q52b. A traditional town hall meeting, in which constituents attend an in-person, public forum moderated by an independent moderator, such as a college professor or reporter

	Total effective	Extremely effective	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not so effective	Not at all effective	Total not effective	Refused / Don't know
US-National	78.9%	13.3%	27.8%	37.8%	13.5%	6.4%	19.9%	1.3%

Q52c. A telephone town hall meeting, moderated by a Member of Congress, in which constituents participate in a live conference call, allowing them to ask questions which are first vetted by the staff of the Member of Congress

	Total effective	Extremely effective	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not so effective	Not at all effective	Total not effective	Refused / Don't know
US-National	39.9%	2.8%	7.2%	29.9%	38.2%	20.3%	58.5%	1.6%

Q52d. A telephone town hall meeting, moderated by an independent moderator, such as a college professor or reporter, in which constituents participate in a live conference call, allowing them to ask questions which are first vetted by the moderator

	Total effective	Extremely effective	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not so effective	Not at all effective	Total not effective	Refused / Don't know
US-National	46.6%	3.1%	11.1%	32.4%	31.1%	20.8%	51.9%	1.6%

Q52e. An online town hall meeting, in which constituents interact with Members of Congress using Web-based software. Constituents can type in questions and the Member of Congress responds in real-time

	Total effective	Extremely effective	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not so effective	Not at all effective	Total not effective	Refused / Don't know
US-National	60.5%	6.4%	18.7%	35.4%	25.6%	12.2%	37.8%	1.7%

Q52f. Videos in which the Member of Congress answers a representative sampling of letters from constituents. These videos could be posted to YouTube, the Member's website, or other social media channels, such as Facebook and Instagram

	Total effective	Extremely effective	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not so effective	Not at all effective	Total not effective	Refused / Don't know
US-National	46.8%	3.5%	13.1%	30.2%	31.5%	20.3%	51.8%	1.5%

Q52g. Question and answer sessions on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, in which constituents post questions online that the Member of Congress answers in real-time

	Total effective	Extremely effective	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not so effective	Not at all effective	Total not effective	Refused / Don't know
US-National	58.1%	6.1%	18.3%	33.7%	23.6%	17.1%	40.7%	1.1%

Now for this same list of activities for each one please select how likely it is that you would want to participate in such an activity.

Q53a. A traditional town hall meeting, in which constituents attend an in-person, public forum moderated by the Member of Congress

	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Total likely	Not at all likely	Not at all likely	Total not likely	Refused / Don't know
US-National	18.5%	39.0%	57.5%	27.1%	14.1%	41.2%	1.3%

Q53b. A traditional town hall meeting, in which constituents attend an in-person, public forum moderated by an independent moderator, such as a college professor or reporter

	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Total likely	Not at all likely	Not at all likely	Total not likely	Refused / Don't know
US-National	21.7%	38.0%	59.7%	25.9%	13.3%	39.2%	1.0%

Q53c. A telephone town hall meeting, moderated by a Member of Congress, in which constituents participate in a live conference call, allowing them to ask questions which are first vetted by the staff of the Member of Congress

	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Total likely	Not at all likely	Not at all likely	Total not likely	Refused / Don't know
US-National	4.5%	22.7%	27.2%	41.5%	29.8%	71.3%	1.6%

Q53d. A telephone town hall meeting, moderated by an independent moderator, such as a college professor or reporter, in which constituents participate in a live conference call, allowing them to ask questions which are first vetted by the moderator

	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Total likely	Not at all likely	Not at all likely	Total not likely	Refused / Don't know
US-National	5.3%	26.5%	31.8%	37.2%	28.5%	65.7%	2.5%

Q53e. An online town hall meeting, in which constituents interact with Members of Congress using Web-based software. Constituents can type in questions and the Member of Congress responds in real-time

	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Total likely	Not at all likely	Not at all likely	Total not likely	Refused / Don't know
US-National	15.4%	34.7%	50.1%	25.9%	22.3%	48.2%	1.7%

Q53f. Videos in which the Member of Congress answers a representative sampling of letters from constituents. These videos could be posted to YouTube, the Member's website, or other social media channels, such as Facebook and Instagram

	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Total likely	Not at all likely	Not at all likely	Total not likely	Refused / Don't know
US-National	10.1%	26.1%	36.2%	31.1%	30.8%	61.9%	1.9%

Q53g. Question and answer sessions on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, in which constituents post questions online that the Member of Congress answers in real-time

	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Total likely	Not at all likely	Not at all likely	Total not likely	Refused / Don't know
US-National	14.4%	30.3%	44.7%	23.7%	29.7%	53.4%	1.9%

2020

Fielding Dates: March 5-25, 2020

Sample Size: 3,421

Margin of Error: +/- 1.7%

[QUESTIONS RANDOMLY PRESENTED IN GRID PATTERN]

Q24. Suppose you were to send an email to one of your Representatives in Congress to express your opinion on a bill or an issue you care about, and you were to receive an emailed response. How valuable would it be to you for the response to include the following?

Q24a. Confirmation that your views have been heard, communicated to the Representatives, and taken into account

	Very valuable	Somewhat valuable	Total Valuable	Not very valuable	Not valuable at all	Not valuable	Refused / Don't know
National	59.3%	28.4%	87.7%	8.1%	3.7%	11.8%	0.4%

Q24b. Whether the Representative agrees with you, and why or why not

	Very valuable	Somewhat valuable	Total Valuable	Not very valuable	Not valuable at all	Not valuable	Refused / Don't know
National	54.9%	31.6%	86.5%	8.5%	4.3%	12.8%	0.7%

Q24c. Overview of how the Representative voted on relevant bills in the past

	Very valuable	Somewhat valuable	Total Valuable	Not very valuable	Not valuable at all	Not valuable	Refused / Don't know
National	51.8%	34.4%	86.2%	9.6%	3.8%	13.4%	0.5%

Q24d. The prospects for the bill in Congress

	Very valuable	Somewhat valuable	Total Valuable	Not very valuable	Not valuable at all	Not valuable	Refused / Don't know
National	46.3%	40.4%	86.7%	8.9%	3.7%	12.6%	0.6%

Q24e. Information about the impact the issue has on your community

	Very valuable	Somewhat valuable	Total Valuable	Not very valuable	Not valuable at all	Not valuable	Refused / Don't know
National	53.8%	34.7%	88.5%	7.5%	3.5%	11.0%	0.5%

Q24f. Links to nonpartisan, fact-based information about the issue

	Very valuable	Somewhat valuable	Total Valuable	Not very valuable	Not valuable at all	Not valuable	Refused / Don't know
National	49.9%	33.7%	83.6%	10.4%	5.0%	15.4%	0.9%

Q24g. Information about related bills in Congress

	Very valuable	Somewhat valuable	Total Valuable	Not very valuable	Not valuable at all	Not valuable	Refused / Don't know
National	42.7%	44.6%	87.3%	8.2%	3.8%	12.0%	0.7%

Q24h. A description of how your views are handled in the Representative's office

	Very valuable	Somewhat valuable	Total Valuable	Not very valuable	Not valuable at all	Not valuable	Refused / Don't know
National	49.3%	35.1%	84.4%	10.7%	4.3%	15.0%	0.7%

Q25. How would you feel if the following were also included in the response?

Q25a. An invitation to subscribe to the Representative's e-newsletter

	Total Positive	Very positive	Somewhat positive	Neutral	Somewhat negative	Very negative	Total Negative	Refused / Don't know
National	47.9%	21.1%	26.8%	38.4%	6.6%	6.5%	13.1%	0.7%

Q25b. Information about upcoming town hall meeting or telephone town hall meeting with the Representative

	Total Positive	Very positive	Somewhat positive	Neutral	Somewhat negative	Very negative	Total Negative	Refused / Don't know
National	68.9%	33.7%	35.2%	25.7%	1.7%	3.2%	4.9%	0.5%

Constituent Engagement Assessment Worksheet

Place each constituent engagement method your office uses on a row below (add pages, as necessary). Include the different social media platforms, proactive events and mailings, responses to constituents, town hall forums, etc. If you would like to explore potential new methods, include those, as well. Then rate each on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being lowest and 5 being highest. Determine ahead of time what metrics your office will use for each (What, specifically, does a 1 stand for? What does a 5 stand for?) and whether any of the criteria should be weighted.

[illegible]

* Best defined by constituent satisfaction surveys or other research, not by intuition.

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Thank you.

Kathy Goldschmidt & Bradley Joseph Sinkaus

About the Authors

Kathy Goldschmidt

Director of Strategic Initiatives

Kathy is a strategic thinker who has been engaged in plotting the Congressional Management Foundation's course for more than 20 years. She joined CMF in 1997 after working in the House of Representatives. She has been involved in much of CMF's research during her tenure, and her focus has been on legislative capacity, strengthening and technology use. She has been integral to seminal CMF projects, including the [Resilient Democracy Coalition](#) and the [Congress 3.0](#) project, which considered different aspects of congressional capacity-building and modernization. She was co-creator and lead researcher for the Congress Online Project—through which CMF developed the [Gold Mouse Awards](#) for congressional websites and social media practices—and the National Science Foundation-funded Connecting to Congress project. She was also instrumental in envisioning and planning for the [Partnership for a More Perfect Union](#).

Kathy has led a number of contracts with the Congress to develop strategies for legislative information and communications technologies. One of these was an intensive, two-year project to develop a 10-year vision and strategy for technology in the House of Representatives, on which she [testified before the Committee on House Administration](#).

Kathy also co-created the *Communicating with Congress* project and has authored or contributed to dozens of research reports, publications and articles on Congress, including: [The Future of Citizen Engagement: Coronavirus, Congress, and Constituent Communications](#), [Job Description for a Member of Congress](#); [State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate](#); [Citizen-Centric Advocacy: The Untapped Power of Constituent Engagement](#); [Face-to-Face with Congress: Before, During, and After Meetings with Legislators](#); [#SocialCongress 2015](#); [113th Congress Gold Mouse Awards: Best Practices in Online Communications on Capitol Hill](#); and [Life in Congress: Job Satisfaction and Engagement of House and Senate Staff](#).

Bradley Joseph Sinkaus

Associate Manager of Congressional Operations

Bradley plays an instrumental role in improving [congressional operations](#) by performing research and analysis, developing content, and providing writing and editing support for CMF reports, publications, and projects. He project manages and leads communications efforts for the [Democracy Awards](#), CMF's honors program for Members of Congress and their staff, and manages and participates in the production and development of content for CMF website and social media presences, including drafting posts, tweets, releases, and blogs. He also assists in planning and content preparation for congressional staff training programs and oversees CMF's research assistant program. He is the co-author of [The Future of Citizen Engagement: Coronavirus, Congress, and Constituent Communications](#) and the [Job Description for a Member of Congress](#).

Previously, Brad interned on the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources as a key component of his graduate studies. Through research and communication efforts, he is proud to have supported the Senate's 2016 passage of the first comprehensive, bipartisan energy bill in nine years. Before attaining his master's degree, Brad spent two years at Nexight Group, where he assisted the National Infrastructure Advisory Council in examining the resilience of the nation's transportation infrastructure to both manmade and natural threats. Brad also interned in the Australian Parliament in Canberra and the Australian Embassy here in Washington, gaining valuable, firsthand experience in comparative politics. Additionally, Brad has worked as a research supervisor at a local startup company and interned in the Mayor of Philadelphia's communications office.

Brad earned his B.A. in Political Science from the University of Pennsylvania and his M.A. in American Government from Georgetown University. While at Georgetown, he presented his paper, "The Vice Presidency and Foreign Policy: A Balance of Institutional Evolution and Personal Experience" at the New England Political Science Association's annual conference. A native of Scranton, Pennsylvania, Brad resides in D.C.'s renowned Dupont Circle neighborhood and enjoys exploring the many restaurants, museums, and coffee shops the city has to offer.



The Future of Citizen Engagement:

What Americans Want from Congress & How Members Can Build Trust

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@CongressFdn

Written by

Kathy Goldschmidt, Author

and

Bradley Joseph Sinkaus, Co-Author

With contributions by

Steven Kull and Beverly Bell

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