Online Town Hall Meetings
Exploring Democracy in the 21st Century

A report by
David Lazer, the Harvard Kennedy School and Northeastern University;
Michael Neblo, The Ohio State University;
Kevin Esterling, University of California-Riverside
and
Kathy Goldschmidt, the Congressional Management Foundation
The Madisonian Feedback Cycle

Constituents provide input into current public policy issues

Legislators explain their decisions to their constituents and try to generate support for them

Using constituent input and their own knowledge and judgment, legislators deliberate among themselves and make decisions about law and public policy

• How can Congress make use of the Internet to foster deliberation in an emerging digital democracy?

• How can Members apply the principles of the Madisonian cycle, which is second nature to them off line, to the Internet?

• What impact will online deliberation have on constituents’ perceptions of their Member and of the issue under discussion?

• What impact will online deliberation have on constituents’ views of, and engagement in, politics?
Agenda

I. Introduction
II. Key findings of our research
III. How to conduct an online town hall
IV. Q & A
Research was Conducted Like a Drug Trial

- Recruitment of subjects
- Pre-session survey
- Controls 1 (two-page materials and no session)
- Controls 2 (no session or background materials)
- Two-page materials and participation in session with MC
- Post-session survey (one week after session)
- Post-election survey
Findings

Constituents found the sessions valuable and informative.
Quotes from Constituents

“I believe we are experiencing the one way our elected representatives can here [sic] our voice and do what we want.”

“I think that it was a good way to let our voices be heard.”

“Definitely like to see more discussions like this w/our political representatives.”

Constituents would overwhelmingly do this again

In the future, I would be interested in participating in discussions like this one about other political issues

- Strongly agree: 79%
- Somewhat agree: 16%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 3%
- Somewhat disagree: 0%
- Strongly disagree: 0%
The sessions attracted those not typically engaged

- Younger people
- Racial minorities
- Women
- Individuals with less strong party ID
- Non-church-goers
- Lower income people
- Only education had the same effect

The sessions increased participants’ knowledge about the issue discussed

Correct answers on policy “quiz” increased by 50%
Constituents found the sessions valuable

- Reached a broad array of citizens
- Promoted equal participation
- Arguments by Members and constituents were generally well-supported
- Members and constituents were highly respectful of differing opinions
- Many facts were brought to light
- Participants felt the sessions were of high quality
After the sessions, constituents felt they knew their Member better.

Quotes from Constituents

“I think they gave very good responses and seemed quite knowledgeable of the whole issue.”

“She seemed thoughtful and well informed and on the right path to constructive solutions.”

“It was nice to see that they had some detailed answers to our questions, and not just skip over them or give us one word answers.”
Constituents’ perceptions of Members’ attributes dramatically increased

Thinking about [Member’s Name], in your opinion, how well do each of the following words describe him/her?*

- Accessible: 48% Control, 80% Town Hall Participants
- Compassionate: 54% Control, 62% Town Hall Participants
- Fair: 60% Control, 84% Town Hall Participants
- Hardworking: 65% Control, 88% Town Hall Participants
- Understands People Like Me: 50% Control, 69% Town Hall Participants
- Knowledgeable: 68% Control, 86% Town Hall Participants
- Qualified: 68% Control, 84% Town Hall Participants

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

Notably, trust by participating constituents increased, as well

How much of the time do you think you can trust [Member’s name], your Member of Congress, to do what is right?

- All/Most of the time: 38% Before, 52% After
- Sometimes: 34% Before, 34% After
- Never: 5% Before, 4% After
- Don’t Know: 21% Before, 8% After
After the sessions, constituents felt better about how the Member was handling the job.

Do you approve of the way that [your Member of Congress] is handling his/her job as Congressperson?

- Approve: 46% (Before), 62% (After)
- Disapprove: 17% (Before), 15% (After)
- Don't know/Neither: 36% (Before), 21% (After)
Quotes from Constituents

“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.”

“I like his approach, I think he’s very open-minded and appears to want what’s best for our country’s and state’s economy, as well as for its residents”

“He seemed comfortable and knowledgeable about the subject. I agree that it is extremely complex.”

Constituents undecided about how the Member was handling the issue felt favorably after the sessions

| Do you approve or disapprove of the way [Member’s name], your Member of Congress, is handling the issue of immigration? |
|---|---|---|
| Approve | Before: 17% | After: 20% |
| Disapprove | Before: 17% | After: 17% |
| Don’t Know | Before: 63% | After: 58% |
Constituents were more likely to agree with the Member’s position after the sessions.

If you were faced with this decision, would you vote for or against making it a felony to illegally enter or remain in the US - that is, to be an illegal immigrant?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member Supportive of Felonization</th>
<th>For Felonization</th>
<th>Against Felonization</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member Opposed to Felonization</th>
<th>For Felonization</th>
<th>Against Felonization</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were more likely to be politically engaged after the sessions.
Some of the academic papers on the research . . .

- Who Wants to Deliberate - and Why?  

- Estimating Treatment Effects in the Presence of Noncompliance and Nonresponse: The Generalized Endogenous Treatment Model  

- Networks, Hierarchies, and Markets: Aggregating Collective Problem Solving in Social Systems  

- Explaining the Diffusion of Web-Based Communication Technology among Congressional Offices: A Natural Experiment using State Delegations  

- Website Interactivity & 'Distributional Path Dependence' in the U.S. Congress: An Analysis of Freshmen  

- Means, Motive, & Opportunity in Becoming Informed About Politics: A Deliberative Field Experiment with Members of Congress and Their Constituents  

Your office can do this!
Choose a Meeting Tool

- Text chat functionality
- Audio integration
- Screen sharing
- Robust moderating capabilities
- Polling capability
- Session recording
- Reliability
- User-friendliness

Schedule the Meetings
Plan the Meetings

- Prepare materials
- Test the application
- Establish roles & responsibilities
- Prepare Member & staff

Invite a Broad Spectrum of Participants
Conduct the Meeting

Follow Up
We found it key to . . .

- Include a neutral moderator
- Invite a broad sample of constituents
- Allow unscripted, real-time interaction
- Let them hear the Member
- Provide brief, unbiased information in advance
- Focus on a timely and specific issue
Thank You!

Full report at www.cmfweb.org

David Lazer
The Harvard Kennedy School and
Northeastern University

Kathy Goldschmidt
Congressional Management Foundation