

Connecting to Congress



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Connecting to Congress is a research initiative with almost two decades of experience facilitating and studying online Deliberative Town Halls. The research team has organized 30+ Deliberative Town Halls for both individual Members and congressional committees in the U.S., as well as with multiple committees in the U.K. House of Commons, with delegates to Chile's constitutional reform process, and with the Deputy Speaker of the Nigerian National Assembly. Deliberative Town Halls are an evidence-based, established method of re-establishing trust between citizens and their elected officials, and research based on these town halls has won numerous political science research awards. Moreover, the research team has further developed its own capacity and funding for this work, so that collaborating on a Deliberative Town Hall is a turn-key process for the offices of elected officials requiring minimal staff time and effort.

The Connecting to Congress research team is a non-partisan team of political science researchers, led by Dr. Michael Neblo of the Ohio State University, studying how deliberative constituent engagement can impact policymaking and improve the relationship between citizens and their elected officials. Detailed information about the full team is available upon request.

What is a Deliberative Town Hall?

All Deliberative Town Halls follow 5 key principles:

1. Special outreach to get a representative cross-section of constituents
2. Single issue to ensure focus, depth, and substance
3. Non-partisan background information on the issue in advance
4. Neutral third-party moderator
5. Candid, real-time participation by Member(s)



The research team independently organizes and neutrally moderates each deliberative online town hall. Members participate in the sessions live via streaming audio and video. Constituents can easily join the sessions using desktop or laptop computers, tablets or mobile devices, and high-speed internet is not

What are the results?

On average, Members of Congress who participated in Deliberative Town Halls forums saw several positive outcomes, including:

- 35% increase in job approval
- 290% increase (from 20% to 58%) in approval of how the Member was handling the issue under discussion
- Participating constituents were 9% more likely to vote in the next election and 10% more likely to vote for the Member who participated in these forums.

Full reports that provide detailed data and summarize the results of recent Deliberative Town Halls are available upon request.

How does a Deliberative Town Hall work?

Once a Member (or bipartisan pair of Members on a committee) decides to participate, the research team coordinates with staff on key high-level decisions, but then handles all execution independently, to reduce the demands on staff.

1. The research team coordinates with the office to schedule their online town hall and select the topic that the session will focus on.
2. The research team recruits a representative sample of constituents to attend the session using a variety of recruitment strategies (discussed with and approved by participating offices) and administers a pre-survey with questions about constituents' opinion of Member/committee, issue, and potential policy actions. The team also provides participating constituents with non-partisan briefing materials scaled to a 9th grade reading level on the topic before the online town hall. (Participating offices review and approve these materials.)
3. On the day of the session, the Connecting to Congress team assists the Member's office in getting set up and handles all technology. The one-hour session itself is streamed live to constituents who will be submitting their questions and comments to research team members. The Connecting to Congress research teams screens questions for representativeness and deliberative quality, then relays high-quality questions verbally to the Member for response. Only on-topic questions are passed on to the Member, and format of the event has been shown to prompt high-quality questions.
4. The research team administers a post-survey to constituents who participate, and then conducts analysis showing the impact of the Deliberative Town Hall on constituents' opinions before and after the event.
5. The research team provides the office with an in-depth report that analyzes the session as well as survey data from participating constituents taken before and after the session.
6. In order to understand how these Deliberative Town Halls meet the needs of Members of Congress in their individual and committee work, our research team asks staff in participating offices to complete brief interviews and surveys to inform the development of best practices for deliberative constituent engagement.

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I've met with a lot of constituents and one topic that consistently comes up is what Congress can do to strengthen the workforce. It's not a partisan issue. It's important for us all to keep an open mind and assess what is working and what is not... I just think it's important that this is truly a conversation.

REP. DAN CRENSHAW
(R, TX-02)