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Constituent Communication in Representative Democracy: Testing Platforms for  
Deliberation in the U.S. Congress

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Samantha Alison McDonald

Dissertation Committee:  
Associate Professor Melissa Mazmanian, Chair  
Chancellor's Professor Paul Dourish  
Professor Bill Tomlinson  
Assistant Professor Erhardt Graeff



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## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

Members of Congress (also called Members) use a myriad of communications technologies to communicate with their constituents. Yet, growing evidence finds that Members primarily use these technologies to promote one-way and promotional forms of communication. These practices debilitate democratic representation by expanding the communication gap between representatives and citizens. Platforms for deliberation may offer a solution to this communication gap. By providing spaces for informed, direct, and deliberative communication—representatives can improve their ability to connect to the voices of their constituency and include them in their policy decision-making environment.

To empirically explore this possibility, I conducted a week-long, asynchronous, deliberative forum between one Member of Congress and a representative sample of their constituency. As a result of the forum, constituents feeling of impact on the Member's decision-making increased compared to other forms of engagement. The majority of constituents believed the Member should continue conducting these forums like these in the future, preferring the asynchronous and extended method of engagement. The asynchronicity of the forum also opened up novel opportunities for staff collaboration—potentially leading to new pathways for direct policy impact.

The forum also unveiled important institutional barriers to deliberative effectiveness. Although the constituents believed the Member engaged in the forum, communications staff engaged on the Member's behalf. The staff maintained minimal and formal modes of interaction. As a result, many constituents did not find engagement from the Member and staff substantive. There was also no evidence that the forum impacted the decision-making of the Member and their staff.

This forum was a promising first step in testing online, asynchronous, deliberative engagements in Congress. If Members and their staff put in the work to engage constituents in these kinds of forums, these deliberative engagements could improve Members' relationships with their constituency and open new pathways for constituents to impact the legislative process. However, strong institutional norms within Congress may prevent the effectiveness of these deliberative engagements long-term. The institution will need to alter how they come to understand and prioritize constituents in the policy decision-making process for these deliberative engagements to be effective.

## **Chapter 1.**

# **Can Digital Technologies Improve Civic Engagement Between Members of Congress and Constituents?**

### **1.1. Defining the problem**

In 2015, Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers, a Republican from Washington State, told a gathering of civic technology enthusiasts in New York City that “[Congress] is a nineteenth-century institution often using twentieth-century technology to respond to twenty-first-century problems.” (2015) Congressional advocates from both sides of the aisle complain that Congress has fallen behind in their understanding of modern technologies. As a result, representatives cannot effectively manage their everyday operations and tackle the nation’s most important public policy problems.

Critics like Rodgers assert that Congress’s dearth of technical knowledge challenges the civic use of technology to improve democratic governance. This critique is especially true for constituent communication, where Members and their staff take the time to listen to constituent input and requests. “[A]nswering a constituent letter shouldn’t take three weeks,” asserts representative McMorris Rodgers (2015). She sees a direct association between the lack of technology innovation in Congress and a perceived poor state of constituent communication.

The constituent communications process of Congress is indeed broken, but her assertions belie how Congress has grown to use numerous technologies to manage their engagement. Members of Congress and their offices have an increasingly multi-faceted and multi-modal

approach to citizen<sup>1</sup> interactions (Lassen & Brown, 2011). Phone calls, emails, faxes, town halls, in-person meetings, and social media platforms are all used to engage with constituencies. Each Member office purchases customer relationship management software (CRM) to manage constituent correspondence and hires specialized staff to answer calls, letters, and casework (C. E. Abernathy, 2015; Open Gov Foundation, 2017). Staff have also turned to online media production to boost their presence on social media platforms (Brad Fitch et al., 2005). Although Congress may not appear externally tech-savvy, they are adopting a substantial number of tools to communicate digitally with their constituencies.

In return, citizens use an ever-growing number of digital and non-digital platforms to communicate with their Members. From 1995 to 2004, Member offices experienced a four-fold increase in all contact from citizens (Brad Fitch et al., 2005). More recent anecdotal evidence from my communication with staffers suggests that contact has increased by double or triple those amounts. This growth in communication has created an unprecedented volume of information flowing between Members and constituents, changing the way they engage civically. Congress may seem like they've fallen technically behind, but they are rapidly adopting technology to keep up with a flood of the incoming communication.

This increased volume of communication was driven by the introduction of information and communications technologies (ICTs) that make it easier to collect, discern, and disseminate

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<sup>1</sup> Members of Congress represent both U.S. citizens and non-U.S. citizens. For this reason, I use the word "citizens" in this dissertation to denote the people living inside a country boundary, no matter their legal citizenship status. This includes permanent residents, green card holders, and those currently obtaining citizenship and immigration services. Members of Congress also represent U.S. nationals in territories like Guam, American Samoa, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Recently, there has been one seat approved for the Cherokee nation.

information. Yet, it's uncertain how this groundswell of technologies will affect civic practices. As people are communicating more with Congress, they expect more reciprocal engagement. Scholars and practitioners are optimistic that ICTs will improve the practices of representative democracy. Technologies can help decrease the barriers to participation, scale up the size of communication, and improve the transfer of knowledge (P. Shane, 2004). ICTs could also encourage representatives to be more directly accountable and responsive to their constituency by increasing their expectations for engagement (Druckman et al., 2007; Lawless, 2012; Shogan, 2010). The hope is that more digital communication means more inclusion of citizens in the representative process.

Despite this optimism, there is little evidence that Member offices use ICTs to engage with constituent opinion. Some studies find that Member offices use websites and social media platforms primarily for publicity, self-promotion, and policy position-taking (M. E. Glassman et al., 2013; Mergel, 2012; Owen et al., 1999) which establishes little two-way communication with constituents (Golbeck et al., 2010). Recent systematic investigations of the congressional constituent correspondence process have found no indication that Members consider constituent opinion in policy decision-making (Open Gov Foundation, 2017). Political scientist Claire Abernathy (C. E. Abernathy, 2015) emphasizes that the procedures used in to capture incoming constituent opinion in congressional offices fail to utilize correspondence-management practices. Members do not capture constituent opinion through these mediums for policy decision-making.

Institutional practices have also affected communication. Between 2017 and 2019, I conducted six months of ethnographic fieldwork in the House of Representatives. My research found a trend of *institutional isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), where Member offices adopt technologies as symbols of institutional legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) without using them as effective tools for citizen engagement (McDonald et al., 2019). Once collectively adopted, the designs of the information structures configure and constrain the communication available

between citizens and policymakers, limiting their ability to effectively and democratically communicate (McDonald & Mazmanian, 2019). Despite a flood of more communication, it seems that current communications methods in Congress are pushing citizens further away from representatives and their policy decisions rather than closer.

A lack of meaningful citizen engagement has serious consequences for our democracy. Several recent studies have found that elected officials are more responsive to interest groups and elites than their constituents (Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Druckman & Jacobs, 2015; Gilens & Page, 2014; Schlozman et al., 2018). Members and their staff also retain significant misperceptions about the policy preferences of their constituents, perceiving constituents as having far more extreme views than their actual policy preferences (Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019). New channels for constituent engagement are not providing Members and their staff with accurate and representative views of their district—leading to poor understandings of whom representatives are supposed to represent and what they want. By limiting the direct communications pathways available, representatives are limiting their ability to represent their constituents legitimately.

Correspondingly, there is a growing sense of disillusionment among citizens, which is related to a lack of participation in governance (Hay, 2007). Citizens’ trust in the federal government to “do what is right” is at a historic low (“Public Trust in Government: 1958-2019,” 2019), and confidence in Congress at an all-time low (Gallup, 2007). In 2016, Voice of the People found that 85% of surveyed citizens believe Congress does not serve the common good and that corporations and lobbyists have too much influence (Kull, 2016). Without significant changes to how representative institutions engage constituents, these threats to democracy and the outcomes of its practice will continue to loom.



## **1.2. Exploring New Platforms for Deliberative Constituent Engagement**

The problem of modern democracy in the information era is not too few spaces for citizens to participate. Rather, the issue is that powerful actors control too many spaces that already have the largest impact on policy decisions outside the purview of the public. Citizens feel little incentive to participate if they regard the methods for engagement as ineffective. In Ethan Zuckerman's words, people are "simply not interested in feeling ineffectual or helpless" (2014, p. 155). But if citizens see their political systems as more rational and receptive, they may be inclined to participate more in civic life in more meaningful and effective ways. Similar to studies of self-expressive/post-materialist culture and political participation, the cultural encouragement of political expression significantly increases the political interest and efficacy of citizens, motivating their political participation between elections (Vráblíková, 2016). If we can create spaces for meaningful engagement between the policymakers and the public, such civic efficacy may flourish.

When designed and used correctly, democracy advocates believe technology could provide those spaces of engagement. There are thousands of projects dedicated to using technology to promote civic participation. Online town halls, e-consultations, digital referendums, neighborhood data-tracking, the opening of government data, digital policy commenting, and e-voting are just some of the many technology developments used to improve civic engagement. Around the world, hundreds of projects are being deployed to bring citizens to the decision-making table.

Amidst this flood of new ideas and projects, I believe deliberative participation platforms—that is, platforms that enable more deliberative styles of engagement between representation and constituents—are the most promising to alleviate the problems plaguing Congress and their constituent engagement. The idea for this kind of participation grew from the deliberative democracy paradigm in political science in which "people come together, on the basis of equal

status and mutual respect, to discuss the political issues they face and, on the basis of those discussions, decide on the policies that will then affect their lives” (Andre Bächtiger et al., 2018a, p. 2). There is an extensive body of literature on the theoretical conception and practices of deliberation<sup>2</sup>. At the heart of this ideal is the notion that informed and reasoned discussion offers the best space for political decision-making among citizens.

I believe such deliberative ideals can be adapted to support the deficiencies of constituent communication in Congress. By integrating deliberative qualities into the constituent communication process within congressional offices, representatives can improve their ability to connect and understand the voices of their constituency.

Despite an extensive body of literature on the benefits of deliberation, there has been little exploration of online deliberative forums as formalized systems that can be embedded within the institutional structures of legislative bodies (Neblo et al., 2018). Deliberative democracy research often focuses on direct democracy for citizens, with a focus on empowering citizens to make the final decision on policies. This research does not tend to focus on processes to improve elected representative decision-making. Yet, some academics have suggested that deliberation may enhance representation (Chambers, 2003, p. 200; Gastil, 2000).

Deliberation could help representatives discuss policy issues with their constituencies, clarify and refine citizens’ opinions, and legitimate representatives’ claims and policy decisions (Brown, 2018; Mansbridge et al., 2010). Neblo et al. (2018) call such a system a “directly representative democracy” where free and equal citizens and their representatives can come together to justify decisions through exchanged reasoning. The hope is that more deliberative

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<sup>2</sup> In this instance, I specifically draw from scholars such as Habermas, 1981; Dryzek, 2002, Bächtiger et al., 2018; and Chambers, 2003.

channels of communication can make representatives more informed of the constituency's views—a primary component of the representative's duties.

Deliberation also promotes diversified inclusion, public justification and reason-giving, and legitimacy through decision-making—all of which can make the processes of constituent engagement more rational and receptive to the people's voice.

In addition to the research gap in deliberative communication for representation, few studies show online deliberation sessions in real sites of policy decision-making (Strandberg & Grönlund, 2018). Most studies of online deliberation focus on political chat forums or social media discussions. This is concerning, considering that the ultimate goal of deliberative democracy is increasing the function and legitimacy of political systems (Fishkin, 2009). Yet, very few studies test deliberation in real-world policy-making venues. These studies would help bridge the gap between theoretical and empirical notions of deliberation (and deliberative democracy).

In this dissertation, I argue that the deliberative online platforms for representatives and constituents can improve engagement, recuperate representation, and close the communication gap between citizens and their elected policymakers. There needs to be more research to understand these representative bodies and test new deliberative systems. Such investigations can help the academic and practitioner communities learn how to integrate digital deliberative systems into policy-making institutions like Congress.

This is an extremely promising time in Congress for tech-enabled deliberative reforms; congressional reform advocates are broadly pushing for new technological developments. In 2019, Congress developed the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, which was tasked with proposing recommendations to improve the internal workings of Congress. Many of the committee's conversations revolved around ways to improve constituent communication

technology.<sup>3</sup> The massive shift towards online work driven by the COVID-19 pandemic has also presented opportunities to explore new forms of remote engagement. Now more than any time in Congress's history, Members and staff have to conduct constituent communication digitally and remotely, highlighting the growing need for new kinds of online engagement.

Public criticisms for the technical incapacities of Congress are on the rise as well. Members repeatedly demonstrate their inability to comprehend the functions of massive media companies (e.g. see the public scrutiny of hearings with social media companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter (Ovide, 2020; Selk, 2019; Tibken, 2018)). As a result of this public scrutiny, Congress is now recognizing their inability to keep regulatory pace with technology innovation externally or modernizing their operations internally (Harris, 2019). The time is thus ripe for innovations and experimentations in this governing institution.

### **1.3. Research Goal**

The goal of this dissertation is to explore the potential of technologies to mediate and strengthen democratic representation in the U.S. Congress. In this dissertation, I first develop a new framework for conceptualizing and developing platforms for representative-constituent engagement. I then test this framework through a real online deliberative forum conducted between a Member of Congress (predominantly their staff) and their constituents. I glean crucial insights into the challenges and opportunities of developing quality methods of digital engagement in a congressional setting. Finally, I evaluate how such forums can promote citizen engagement in representative democracy. My results have implications for the development of civic technologies under political science theories of deliberation. One piece of technology will not solve the long-

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<sup>3</sup> For Example, see Written Testimonies from hearings “Improving Constituent Engagement” on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019, and “Member Day Hearing” on March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019. <https://modernizecongress.house.gov/committee-activity/hearings>

standing institutional pitfalls of Congress. However, experimentation can open pathways to innovations inside an institution that strives to reform itself for the good of the people it serves.

## **1.4. Scope of Dissertation**

The scope of my findings is limited to the United States House of Representatives. Although I highlight international examples and present findings that may be relevant to other countries and jurisdictions, I pay attention to one specific government institution. Thus, generalizations in this research can only be taken so far, as much of the congressional environment shaped the design and outcomes of this work. This research also implements only one engagement with one representative, limiting the ability to generalize to the diverse and broad spectrum of representation seen in the rest of Congress.

## **1.5. Roadmap**

Chapter 2 explores political theories of representation. I outline what representation is, what a representative's relationship to their constituency should be, and what that representative-constituent relationship looks like in practice. I also unpack theories of representation and conceptualize representatives as constant interpreters and educators, who are ideally constantly interpreting the views of the constituency and informally educate citizens on current legislative agendas. Despite my claim that representatives should be good interpreters, empirical evidence shows that legislators are not accurately interpreting the views of constituents. I believe representative institutions can become better interpreters using deliberation in their constituent communications processes. The rest of the chapter outlines theories of deliberation and explains how Members and their staff can use deliberation to become good interpreters and educators of their constituencies, arguing that deliberation offer additional democratic benefits of increased civic participation, trust in representatives, and democratic legitimacy.

In Chapter 3, I discuss communication technology's role in representation and deliberation. There is a shift happening in scholarly understandings of representation that are a direct result of changes in technology development. This shift is one towards the *demos* where scholars believe constituents and their input should become recursive components to the practices of policymaking. These citizen-centric shifts bring opportunities to test new technology in spaces of representation, and I argue that tools specifically designed to promote the ideals of deliberative democracy in online platforms can improve representative-constituent engagement. However, there are important institutional barriers to the success of these systems, and it's important to emphasize that long-standing norms of constituent engagement in Congress will not change overnight. These institutional norms are demonstrated further in the next chapter.

In Chapter 4, I dive deeper into the context of this dissertation—the U.S. Congress. I discuss what Congress is, what Members of Congress and their staff do, and what kinds of institutional and cultural structures surround the institution. This chapter draws on findings from my ethnographic fieldwork employed before this dissertation that explains how Congress historically and currently uses technology for constituent communication. As I will demonstrate, the current constituent communication methods of Congress reinforce institutional practices that de-value constituent engagement. They push citizens further away from representative decision-making. They also emphasize the importance of staff in the discussion of constituent communication. As a result of many of these realities of Congress, congressional advocates such as academics, non-profit, and for-profit companies are testing new systems for constituent engagement, including the experimental platform discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 introduces the deliberation forum intervention where I test the viability of an asynchronous, online, deliberative forum between the office of a Member of Congress and their constituents. I present my methodology for evaluating online representative-constituent

engagement, using survey measures, recruitment methods, and discourse data to evaluate the use of the forum to improve representative-constituent engagement.

Chapter 6 reports on the findings from the deliberative forum, detailing both the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the experiment. I found some promise for these kinds of digital forums to be useful for constituent engagement. The online forum provided a deliberative space for engagement between constituents and the Member's office. The constituents offered robust and engaged viewpoints that could help the Member interpret the views of the constituency. However, a lack of engagement from the Member's team, and little not no engagement from the Member themselves, made it hard to determine the ability of these forums to impact constituent feelings of efficacy or impact over the Member's decision-making. The forum made constituents feel like they had an impact on the Member of Congress's decision-making, but the actual impact was little. That being said, constituents wished that Members would continue having forums like these in the future. The constituents and the Member's staff also preferred the slow-moving dialogue, findings that the forums should continue for one week or longer. This suggests that if Members and their staff put in the work to engage constituents in these kinds of forums, their ability to gain valuable insight from the constituency and further their democratic legitimacy could increase.

Lastly, Chapter 7 reflects on the insights and implications of the proposed deliberative forums based on the results from the study. I outline the learnings from the forum results and discuss the institutional factors that affect the implementation of deliberative forums. I also provide a discussion of the design considerations for this forum and future forum iterations, focusing on the current state of Congress and what deliberative forums could look like in the institution going forward.

## **Chapter 2.**

### **The Importance of Civic Engagement in Representative Democracy**

In this chapter, I explain the concept of democratic representation and the importance of constituent engagement. I argue that the most important role of constituent engagement in representation is to help representative institutions be good interpreters of the views of the citizenry. Unfortunately, as this chapter details, current U.S. representatives do not accurately interpret their constituency's policy views and preferences.. A way to improve such communication is through the use of deliberative democracy methods. Such deliberations can improve the effectiveness of citizen engagement, increase representative receptiveness to constituent input, and improve citizen trust and participation in the political process. If representatives provided these formalized deliberative methods, they could improve the legitimacy of the legislative process by becoming a more democratic and inclusive space for citizens in democratic decision-making. In other words, they could more democratically represent their constituents in political processes.

#### **2.1. The Concept of Democracy**

Before going further, it's important I define what I mean by "democracy". Political scientists do not recognize one definition of democracy. All discussions of democracy center on the demos—the propensity of the people to rule. Beyond this commonality, there are competing philosophies, practices, and models of democracy. From the Athenian ideals of democracy to the complex nature of representative, parliamentary, and direct democracy systems, there are many ways to understand this term.

I pull from two scholars to define my understanding of democracy: Robert Dahl and Douglas Schuler. In 1955, Political theorist Robert Dahl envisioned democracy as a polyarchy (e.g.,



rule by many) (Dahl, 2006). He envisioned a system of decision-making where leaders are more or less responsive to the preferences of the non-leaders (Krouse, 1982). Although Dahl's theory is essential reading in academic political spheres, his conception of democracy is hotly debated. The theory of polyarchy presumes mass apathy and empowers a minority of elite decision-makers. Dahl explicitly says that extensive citizen participation is not a necessary condition for democracy (Krouse, 1982). While Dahl focuses on leaders and their reactions to the people, other scholars believe democracy rests upon citizens' ability to take actions in government. For example, in Schuler's discussion of the ability of technology to support democracy, he defines democracy as an approach to governance "in which people meaningfully and intentionally participate in the decisions that affect them and other members of the group" (2020, p. 4). He notes that this ideal can never be fully achieved in practice, but the efforts towards it are what distinguish political practices as "democratic."

Dahl and Krouse demonstrate how the idea of democracy is a spectrum of participation dependent upon political actors and the power of the people they govern. When I refer to democracy in this dissertation, I am interested in the shades of gray between Dahl and Schuler. Schuler claims people should be able to meaningfully and intentionally participate in decisions that affect them. However, there are moments when democracy needs to succeed within the absence of citizens when they are less engaged. Dahl focuses on the responsiveness of leaders, but what responsiveness looks like in practice has been defined differently by various scholars with much wiggle room for what it means to take citizen's preferences into account. I believe Schuler is essentially correct that democracy must grow from citizen practice. However, it must do so to assist the decision-makers that Dahl emphasizes, whether they be the citizens or not. Thus, **when I refer to something as being democratic, I refer to the avenues for citizens to meaningfully participate in government in a way that allows for the accountability and representativeness of the decision-makers in government.**

Democracies are unnatural, fragile, rich, and textured (Schuler, 2020). They require substantial vigilance, maintenance, and a strong civic infrastructure to survive frequent attacks. The processes by which democracy is enacted and institutionalized are where representation enters the democratic fold.

## 2.2. What is Representation?

An elected representative is chosen to perform one duty: to represent. But what does that mean? In her foundational work on representation, Pitkin describes representatives as “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 209–210). Although helpful at establishing the boundaries of representation, Pitkin leaves concepts like “interests” and “responsive” open to interpretation. Representatives may “act in the interest of the represented,” but the way they capture and interpret the interest of their constituency vary, as do their reactions to those interests. Representatives may also act in ways they believe are in constituent’s interest, but those actions may not appear explicitly within constituent preferences. This ambiguity has led highly cited scholars of democratic representation to recognize several models of representation, rather than just one (Hobbes, 1904; Mansbridge, 2003; Pitkin, 1967; Rawls, 1971; Shapiro, 2009). Thus, there are many ways in which a representative can represent.

Analyzing these multiple interpretations of representation, Jane Mansbridge (2003) outlines four general types of democratic representation in the U.S. that vary by normative criteria, temporal voting features, and systems for accountability. *Promissory representation* is a traditional type of representation in which representatives keep their promises to actively consider the will of constituents. *Anticipatory representation* involves representatives anticipating the future wants of voters, assuming that voters can be educated before voting. This type of representation undermines traditional forms of accountability because it looks towards the future for present actions. *Gyroscopic representation* focuses on the representative’s internal choices. Representatives are

chosen by constituents who expect them to act on their behalf without external incentives or a constant intake of constituent opinion. Lastly, *surrogate representation* is the act of representing someone with no electoral relationship. This non-institutional/informal mode of engagement provides a sense of representation when voters lose in their districts or if representatives are looking towards larger roles such as the presidency. There is no formal accountability in surrogate representation. All these types depict a variety of ways in which the people can be represented.

Mansbridge's representation typology offers a democratic spectrum of representation, and in practice, representatives often demonstrate a mixture of all these forms. For example, when running for an election, a representative may promise to push for a certain policy that their constituents want (promissory) while advocating for other policies that reflect their values and expertise (gyroscopic). All Members of Congress that hope to run for president someday will aim for increased feelings of surrogacy as they reach out towards larger constituencies they don't currently represent. Each form changes the kinds of constituent engagement valued in the legislative process. At any given time, there is more than one way for representatives to represent legitimately.

Although there is great flexibility within this spectrum, all representatives cannot represent legitimately without understanding whom they represent and what those representees want. Without this information, they will have little knowledge about how to approach the legislative process in a way that can both garner positive approval from voters and benefit their constituency. For Mansbridge (2003), this means that each form of representation demands communicative exchanges between citizens and representatives that lead to "constituent-representative congruence" (p. 526). Despite their differences, all forms of democratic representation require interactions between citizens and their representation.

Pettit (2010) reinforces this need for interaction by describing elected representatives' relations to the constituency as needing to fulfill a role of *responsive representation* where the representor continuously looks to the representees for guidance. Responsive representation fits under Mansbridge's idea of promissory representation. The shared assumption is that representees track the representors' actions, giving representees a sense of control over how the representor acts.

The practices of responsive representation are thorny. Representees always cede some control to their representor, especially when representors are acting in a congenial fashion. The constituency may only threaten to act if the representor is no longer acknowledging and responding to their constituency's wishes. Representees also rarely provide representors a fully formed and detailed demand. For example, in Congress, there were over 15,000 bills introduced between January 2019 and October 2020 alone (GovTrack, 2020)—more than anyone person could understand. There is little time or incentive for representees to stay updated on all of the legislative actions their representor takes—such a task would require a full-time job and heavy monitoring. As a result, there is a constant ebb and flow of power from the constituents over their representor's priorities, opinions, and legislative actions.

Often representors must “speak for them, even though [representees] do not provide the representors' with words to use” (Pettit, 2010, p. 74). They are continuously interpreting the character expected by the representees to understand if and when they should embody different kinds of representation. This is where my framework for understanding representation in Congress comes into view. **I argue that conceptualizing elected representatives as continuous interpreters of their constituency is useful for discussing the relationships we might expect between representatives and their constituents.**

It is not the duty of representatives to directly act on the opinions and actions of those they represent<sup>4</sup>. Immediate responsiveness would be infeasible within diverse constituencies and illogical considering that representatives have their own opinions and expertise. Representatives also work within an elaborate network of pressures, demands, and obligations outside of the constituency and need to consider demands from their parties and colleagues (Pitkin, 1967). Thus, when unpacking the role of constituent engagement in representation, we can say that it is the representor's job to obtain a most accurate depiction of constituent views and weight those views against their judgments and incentives to make informed decisions and representative actions.

Framing representatives as interpreters creates a reference for how constituent engagement should be realized within the representational process. By offering their voice, citizens help representatives make informed decisions by interpreting constituency priorities, opinions, and preferences. Increased public input also diversifies the information available to representatives to help them make decisions on public problems (Flinders, 2016). Lastly, such information helps the representatives understand whom they represent—making it easier to empathize and respond to the concerns of their constituency.

My focus on the interpretations of representatives contrasts with more individualized perspectives on civic engagement. As Nelimarkka and Harding bring up, too often, studies of engagement—especially in the digital engagement realm—take a citizen-centric focus and are concerned with amplifying the voices of everyday people (Harding et al., 2015; Nelimarkka, 2019). These citizen-centric approaches are important towards increasing grassroots power and governance, but they can also neglect representative actors in democratic decision-making processes, who are often the final decision-makers of many policy decisions (Harding et al., 2015).

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<sup>4</sup> Legally speaking, no law in the U.S. requires representatives to listen. On the contrary, the Supreme Court has clearly stated that the right to petition government does not require said government to listen or respond to individual grievances (Spanbauer, 1993).

By taking the perspective of representatives, I use citizen inclusion to assist representatives in fulfilling their democratic duties, thus focusing on the needs and expectations of the primary actors within the legislative process.

### **2.3. Representative Interpretations**

Although it is normatively helpful to think of representatives as interpreters, the realities of representation leave much to be desired. If representors must serve as interpreters, how does that work in practice? Are representors accurate interpreters of constituency views? The unfortunate reality is that many legislators, particularly in the United States, are poor interpreters. Although legislators may wish to remain representative of constituency opinion, they work in spaces of incomplete information, rely on imperfect cues (Arnold, 1990; Fenno, 1978; W. E. Miller & Stokes, 1963), and accrue informational biases from their own beliefs and experiences (Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Butler & Dynes, 2016; Miler, 2010). Much of their communication with constituents is also mediated by staff, who are central figures to the collection and interpretation of constituent opinion (McDonald & Mazmanian, 2019; Open Gov Foundation, 2017). As a result, biases in political information are common.

Across different issues and legislative spaces, there is empirical evidence why legislators and their staff have difficulty accurately depicting the views of their constituency. Their ability to understand the actual interests of the constituency is limited by resource and cognitive limitations. In a multi-survey study of 101 senior legislative staffers in Congress, Hertel-Fernandez et al. (2019) found that staffers do not accurately identify their constituency's preferences. In four policy domains (increasing minimum wage, increasing infrastructure spending, background checks for gun sales, regulating CO<sub>2</sub> emissions) staff underestimated constituency support. These scholars also asked staffers about constituency support for repealing the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Although a less clear pattern was present, there was a clear partisan divide: "...every Democratic

staffer underestimated support for repeal and nearly every Republican staffer over-estimated support for repeal” (2019, p. 9). Election competitiveness and staffer time in Congress did not affect these misperceptions. Instead, egocentric biases from staff and a greater reliance on corporate campaign contributions for member re-election created mismatches in accurately identifying preferences.

David E. Broockman and Christopher Scovron (2018) found similar findings across candidates and legislators in state representation in surveys from 2012 and 2014. In their 2014 survey of 1,858 state legislative politicians, there was a consistent overestimation of constituency conservatism across the issues of same-sex marriage, gun control, immigration, and abortion. Although Democrats and Republicans both overestimate constituency conservatism, Republicans do so to a greater extent. “Republicans overestimate support for the conservative position on every issue by over ten percentage points and often by over 20 percentage points” (Broockman & Skovron, 2018, p. 553), pointing to similar gaps in inaccurate interpretations.

When looking at the resulting actions of representatives, we also see little influence from constituents. Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page (2014) assess the interest group influence of over 1,700 policy cases in the U.S. between 1981 and 2002 using a national survey. They found that the impact of average citizen’s preferences and mass-based interest groups on policy is nearly zero, while economic elites have a more substantial impact. It’s important to note that Gilens and Page’s findings have been challenged by a handful of scholars who have argued that middle-income Americans and rich Americans agree on an overwhelming majority of topics (Matthews, 2016). Reviewing the findings, other scholars argue that middle-income and wealthy Americans can block policies supported by the poor while agreeing on policies that align with each other. Nonetheless, Gilens and Page still found evidence that the wealthy and elite have a much larger impact on policy

outcomes than the average American, bringing further attention to the lack of influence from a diversified collection of the constituency.

Elected representatives and their staff are not doing a great job of interpreting the views of their constituents. Scholars have proposed that this lack of interpretation stems from representatives and staff coming into contact more with special interest constituent groups, lobbying groups, and campaigns than the public. Representatives are also more likely to hear conservative views, especially if that representative is Republican (Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019). If democracy requires representatives to accurately interpret constituency views, then our systems for interpretation and communication aren't doing a very good job.

### **2.3.1. Is It Their Fault?**

If legislators are not doing a good job at interpreting the views of the constituency, is it entirely their fault? Multiple external factors affect their ability to understand and interpret the constituency, such as societal opportunities for citizens to engage and the methods that mediate their communication. But even with a direct source of citizen input, relying on the raw opinion of typically engaged constituents can be worrisome. The majority of people who participate in all forms of political participation are white, educated, and wealthy (Dalton, 2017; Miler, 2010; Verba et al., 1995; Vráblíková, 2016). Education is the single strongest predictor of all forms of political participation, except when it comes to U.S. voting, which is more closely tied to one's socio-economic status (Dalton, 2017; Teorell et al., 2007; Verba et al., 1995; Vráblíková, 2016). Protests are performed by more educated persons (Norris et al., 2005; Teorell et al., 2007; Verba et al., 1995). Thus, who participates civically today is often skewed by structural forces outside of the control of Members.



Citizens are also not rational political actors. Most people are apathetic about politics, justifying their political decisions with low-quality information (Hardin, 2004). Typically, voting turnout in the United States is low and less than 50% of citizens know their House Members' names (Haven Insights, 2017). Most citizens focus on one or two salient national issues to judge the effectiveness of their congressional representatives (Lapinski et al., 2016). Their narrow interest could be because modern policy development is highly technical and difficult for the layperson to understand. It is also easier and potentially more effective to only prioritize a few personal policy interests.

Given this evidence, there is a strong argument to be made that citizen participation is skewing the perceptions of representatives. Using cognitive heuristics, Miler (2010) highlights how congressional representatives rely on information accessibility; people who interact more frequently with congressional offices are more likely to be perceived by legislators during their decision-making. These more resource-rich and active constituents gain “mental access” to Members, systematically biasing which constituents the Member perceives (Miler, 2010).

Town halls are a primary space where constituent bias is put into action. Although many venerate the town as a symbol of community deliberation and participation, the idea of a quintessential town meeting—where the community comes together to respectfully debate and listen to concerns—is a myth (Mansbridge, 1983; Schudson, 1998). Qualitative studies show that town halls are not used to engage in discussion. Rather, only the highly motivated constituents show up and use the platform to promote their agendas (Fenno, 1978; Mansbridge, 1983). For a more recent example, take the 2009 and 2017 town halls on health care reform. These town halls turned into shouting matches interspersed with threats and, occasionally, actual violence (Kaplan, 2017). Although town halls certainly provide a form of discourse as well as meaningful avenues

for the most personally affected and/or motivated persons to make their claims—such venues can skew Member perceptions of the constituency they represent.

### **2.3.2. Why Listen?**

If Member offices only listen to privileged groups with generally unimpactful information, then why should they bother to listen or interpret the views of their constituents at all? Although this question seems far-fetched, there are many congressional staff who feel this way. The overload of constituent contact has not made them confident in the capacity of constituents to provide useful information. The knowledge of who is talking and where their information comes from has dissuaded Members and their staff from paying attention.

My problem with this framing of the problem is that it focuses too little on the methods in which constituent opinion is gathered. The cause of the disconnect between representatives and constituents is rooted in the absence of meaningful values that could enable diverse constituencies of the public to participate. It is not the people who are a concern, but the methods in which their interactions are captured.

There are a variety of ways that legislators can alter their constituent engagement channels to address problems of illegitimacy, injustice, and ineffectiveness (Fung, 2006). Neblo et al. (2018) have argued that the cause of a disconnect between representatives and constituents is rooted in the absence of meaningful venues that could enable diverse constituencies of the public to participate. Thus, it is a question of methods in which constituents are engaged that can tremendously impact the quality of interactions.

On an aspirational note, it is also the responsibility of representatives to ensure barriers to engagement are prevented. As Thomas Jefferson remarked, “I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society, but the people themselves: and if we think them not enlightened

enough to exercise their controul [sic] with a wholesome [sic] discretion, the remedy is, not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education” (Jefferson, 1820). To Jefferson, education alleviates the problem of participation. Citizens should be engaged as contributors in need of education and guidance to most effectively support the practices of government.

Journalist Walter Lippman also presents a vital facet of the expectations of citizens: individuals should not be expected to be the omniscient citizen since an expectation for an all-knowledgeable citizenry undermines democracy (Lippmann, 1922). Even if citizens are educated, the complexity of government, and society in general, is too large for any one human to rationally understand. Philosopher John Dewey, an advocate of Lippman’s initial theory, takes the idea a step further. He argues the need to recognize collections of individuals as the analysis of political participation (Dewey, 2012). Unlike Lippman, who believes the public should rely on administrative expertise, Dewey believes that when citizens are collectively educated, they can act in intelligent ways without the expectations of omniscience (DeCesare, 2012). Thus, democratic societies have a duty to provide expertise to their citizens, so they can participate effectively.

The argument that citizens are too naïve to participate presumes that constituent communication is a one-way street, where representatives merely listen to constituents. However, representatives play a role in informally educating citizens just as much as listening to their views. Constituent engagement allows representatives to justify their actions, set the record straight, and help guide the public towards actions they may have otherwise perceived as not in their best interest. Although rare, this educative role does happen. As seen in the Instagram image from one of Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s [NY-14] town halls (see *Figure 2.1*), Members of Congress and their staff can educate the public to help them better understand the issues at hand.



*Figure 2-1 Representative Ocasio-Cortez Instagram Story—On Educating the Public at Town Halls. September 4th, 2019. Instagram.*

It is important to note that citizen’s ability to be “informed” is a tricky thing to measure. Most people don’t know the details of every bill or policy relevant to them, but they know what they value and what has been a struggle for them and their community. It is not the job of citizens to know everything. Rather, it is their responsibility to make their grievances known so representatives can interpret their pain points into concrete actions. Assuming constituents are not valuable for policy decision-making is a slippery slope towards the ignorance of public will. Thus, it is the responsibility of representative institutions to be educators of their constituencies just as much as interpreters of constituency views.

At the same time, there is some evidence of appetite from constituents for more engagement with representatives. In a recent national poll by the Congressional Management Foundation, they found that in a policy decision-making scenario, 84% of surveyors agreed that it would be ok for their Member of Congress to vote contrary to their views as long as they had confidence the Member was voting based on what they thought was best. 74% of participants

agreed that it would be ok as long as they had confidence the Member took their views into account (Goldschmidt et al., 2021). Constituents want avenues to know their representatives are acting in good faith and listening to their views.

## **2.4. Utilizing Principles of Deliberative Democracy**

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, George Gallup revolutionized the use of public polling. Writing a piece entitled “The Pulse of Democracy”, Gallup argued that Americas should be polled about their opinions on public issues to obtain an accurate image of public opinion. The hope in capturing this image is that the information could “bridge the gap between the people and those responsible for making decisions in their name” (Gallup & Rae, 1940, pp. 63–64). If representatives would just listen to what the polls said, as Gallup presumed, they could more easily ascertain and interpret the public view of important issues.

Gallup’s introduction of citizen participation through opinion polling is not a bad idea to helping inform the representative, but it contains some major holes. Gallup was unable to see the fault of capturing public opinions, which are quick-witted reactions taken at face value. Although political statistical polling has been used to captured citizens’ preferences around elections since Gallup’s work in the 1930s, polling can be riddled with survey and selection biases. Not even the best presidential election polls accurately predicted who would be president in 2016 or which party would win the majority of seats in the House in 2020 (D. A. Graham, 2020).

Opinions reflected by individuals in their own privatized spaces are not the same as public opinion. As Schudson highlights, “truly public opinion does not exist until it is arrived at through discussion and in deliberative assemblies” (Schudson, 1998, p. 228). What is needed for public input to be truly reflective of public opinion is good deliberation.

### **2.4.1. What is Deliberation?**

Deliberation is “mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interest regarding matters of common concern” (Dryzek, 2002, p. 76). It denotes a careful consideration in a formal discussion or debate of the reasons for and against a measure by individuals or groups (Andre Bächtiger et al., 2018b). It is also generally perceived as communication that is “reasoned, purposeful, and interactive” (Davies & Gangadharan, 2009, p. 2) on “preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern” (Andre Bächtiger et al., 2018b, p. 2). The goal is to bring productive and rational reasoning, mutual respect, listening, and informing into the decision-making spaces of the public sphere.

Deliberative democracy takes the ideals of deliberation and puts them into the context of democratic values and governance. It is used to promote discussion as a meaningful form of democratic participation where “free and equal citizens [and their representatives], justify their decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible” (Gutmann & Thompson, 2009). Deliberative democracy is a paradigm and an ideal with the ultimate goals to clarify individual thinking, build an understanding of alternative views, and improve the legitimacy of decision-making in government (Chambers, 2003). By putting qualities of deliberative democracy in government decision-making, the hope is that the decisions will make governing overall more democratic.

Deliberative democracy is proposed as a solution to a plethora of democratic deficiencies that currently plague politics. Methods promoting deliberative ideals claim to better engage the electorates by encouraging public perspectives on public issues through listening and deliberating (Gutmann & Thompson, 2009), thus rebuilding lost social capital of citizens (Price, 2009), and reforming the press through increased debate and discussion (Price, 2009). Deliberative democracy is also believed to foster understanding and tolerance of alternative perspectives and mutual respect

and trust while rendering laws and policies legitimate by popular sovereignty and stimulating further engagement from the constituencies (Dryzek, 2002). Indeed, there is much hope for deliberative engagement to help the issues that democracy faces today.

#### **2.4.2. Deliberative Democracy in Practice**

In practice, the ideas of deliberative democracy are seen within a variety of approaches to democratic engagements. Empirical investigations of site-specific deliberative democracy include citizen assemblies such as those used in Ireland, Canada, and Belgium (Lang, 2007; Quadflieg et al., 2020; *The Citizens' Assembly*, 2021); participatory budgeting in Brazil and India (Fung & Wright, 2003); and deliberative polling which is used globally (Fishkin, 2009).

In Canada, large citizen assemblies have been institutionalized on a provincial level to promote citizen engagement in government. For example, a sample of British Columbia residents were selected using randomized selection with representative gender, age, and geographical distribution to propose changes to the provincial electoral system (Lang, 2007). The proposals for the electoral reform developed by this citizen's assembly led to province-wide referendums.

In Ireland, a citizen's assembly consists of 99 randomly selected Irish citizens that debate issues such as abortion, fixed-term representation, and climate change. The Irish government is required to officially respond to each of the assembly's topic deliberations.

Lastly, James Fishkin (2009) has integrated deliberative democracy principles into opinion polling globally, where a random sampling of stakeholders representative of the community, what Dahl coined "mini-publics" (1989), deliberates and then votes on current issues as a way for policymakers to understand how people would decide on a topic.

These are just three examples of the different ways deliberation has been integrated into governing systems. According to the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), there are now over 300 instances of deliberations integrated into policymaking at the local, state, and federal level (*Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*, 2020).

### **2.4.3. Deliberative Democracy's Critiques**

The theories of deliberative democracy have its critiques. Feminist political scholars highlight that deliberations can mask certain forms of power and control, such as male domination (Mansbridge, 1998) and dominant interests that will pursue their goals by coercive means (Shapiro, 1999). Fraser critiques Habermas' notion of a "public sphere" of deliberation where citizens come together to deliberate common affairs in an institutionalized arena (1990). She emphasizes that powerful informal pressures often limit engagement from marginalized groups, making it hard for these voices to stand up in deliberations.

According to Benhabib, the idea of public reason and rationale towards all public issues is also flawed because our most contentious issues, such as abortion and immigration, are not argued from a place of rationality but of personal choice (1997). There is no "right" answer to many of our most important policy questions. Thus, deliberations will not make it easier to address all topics of importance.

Mouffe also emphasizes that consensus—as a goal for many deliberations—isn't possible, nor should it be an ideal. Closing a conversation is always a personal choice and it's important to acknowledge who has the power to close conversations (1999). Legitimacy and power also go hand in hand, as legitimacy requires some sense of power. Yet, theories of deliberative democracy tend to avoid grappling questions of power.



Even with deliberation's deficiencies, the process of articulating ideas in public is still, as Benhabib highlights, "the only means by which civic imagination can be cultivated" (1997, p.19). Deliberation brings something unique to democracy by emphasizing mutual understanding and inclusive accommodation across diverse actors (Bächtiger & Beste, 2017). Practitioners of deliberation must remain aware of deliberation's deficiencies and limitations of equity while it strives towards providing spaces that support a flourishing civic culture.

#### **2.4.4. Deliberation for Representatives**

Despite the extensive literature on the theoretical benefits of deliberation, there has been very little exploration of deliberative forums for representation (Neble et al., 2018). Deliberative democracy research has either focused on direct democracy for citizens that often leave out representative decision-making or focus on representatives and their own internal deliberations. The recently published Oxford Handbook on Deliberative Democracy (2018b), which includes a chapter on "Representation and Deliberation," did not address what it would entail to create spaces for citizens and representatives to communicate in a deliberative setting. Rather, the chapter on representation explores the "representativeness" of citizens as they represent themselves within a deliberative space, with no mention of the larger representative democracy system.

There is work on deliberative consultations in which citizens influence legislation in countries such as Austria and Greece (Loukis & Wimmer, 2010). However, these deliberative consultations do not include representatives and provide no context where citizens can address policymakers. They emphasize bypassing pre-existing representative institutions through a citizen-centric form of participatory legislating where citizens are at the heart of the democratic system (Parvin, 2018). Democratic theorists Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright have offered a conception of *Empowered Participatory Governance* (Fung & Wright, 2003), which focuses on methods for citizens to effectively influence policies. They address the central conundrums of power that are

often neglected in research on deliberative settings. However, Fung and Wright focus on giving citizens direct influence over policies rather than empowering influence over the policymakers. Again, the investigation of representative deliberation is yet to be explored in-depth in these spaces.

Even more extreme, there are scholars such as Phil Parvin and Hélène Landemore that say deliberative democracy and representative democracy are oppositional (Landemore, 2017; Parvin, 2018). Parvin argues that the ideals of deliberative democracy do not work in the modern world, and it does not provide a strategy for viable democratic reform. It places the onus on citizens, whose participation in formal and informal modes of politics over the last few decades has drastically declined, especially in low-socioeconomic classes. Parvin argues that “Instead of focusing on how we can improve participation, therefore, I suggest we focus on how to improve representation,” (2018, p.45), emphasizing that representation allows the government to function within the absence of citizens.

Meanwhile, Landemore believes that deliberative democracy should disassociate itself from the paradigm of representative democracy because representative democracy has the power to completely disconnect the people from power. Landemore also believes Representative democracy is also undergoing a democratic crisis in which deliberative democracy should stay away to maintain its legitimacy as a method directly for governance *with* the people (Landemore, 2017). Landemore and Parvin come from different sides. Parvin wants more representation, Landemore wants less, but neither wants to see the concept of representative democracy associated with deliberative democracy.

Although Parvin and Landemore have strong preferences for the theoretical boundaries of representation and deliberation, they recognize that practical aspects from one theory can support the other. For example, despite his strong and lengthy disagreements with deliberative democracy, Parvin does note at the end of his paper that there are aspects of deliberation he believes could

enhance representation (2018). Representatives could use mini-publics or formal consultative processes as a way for citizens to be part of the legislative process. They can help inform representatives as they fulfill their duties. In other words, although deliberation may not feasibly replace representation, Parvin believes that there are features of deliberation that could enhance these pre-existing representative structures.

Parvin brings up an essential point about deliberation and its apparent conflicts with representation. Because the idea of deliberation is often motivated by an end-goal of collective decision-making by the public, it appears erroneous to many scholars—like the feminist critiques mentioned prior—to introduce deliberation between citizens and their representatives into representative systems where the power dynamics are unequal. If representatives are the final decision-makers, they could theoretically ignore the will of the people in its practice, making citizen-representative deliberation unimpactful to policy decision-making.

The problem with this critique is that it focuses on a singular end goal rather than the process. Although constituents may not have the final say on the decisions of representatives, their capacity to influence widens with deliberation and could enhance the legitimacy of representatives (Brown, 2018; Chambers, 2003; Gastil, 2000; Gutmann & Thompson, 2009; Hendriks & Kay, 2019; Kuyper, 2015; Neblo et al., 2018). Within a deliberation, representatives can be transparent about their actions, publicly justify their decisions, educate constituents on the current legislative standings, and hear from a diverse and representative group of their constituency (Brown, 2018; Mansbridge et al., 2010). These discussions act as beneficial information filters that address concerns by the general public and offer a diverse pool of epistemic arguments from constituents to their representatives (Hendriks & Kay, 2019). And injecting new voices into policy decision-making also assists the public in scrutinizing policies before they are brought to other parties (White, 2015). Thus, there are characteristics of deliberative democracy that make it tremendously

valuable to representation. And bringing it back to my argument, I believe these features of deliberation should be integrated practices of constituent-representative communication.

If we, the collective representees, want to make representatives uphold their democratic duties by being better interpreters of constituent opinion, inviting a representative body of constituencies to deliberate policy choices with their representatives seems to be a good option.

## **2.5. The Benefits of Citizen Engagement**

In addition to helping representatives become better interpreters, there are other benefits to increased representative-citizen engagement. Deliberation can create significant “side-effects” such as increased engagement and changing attitudes towards consensus and mutual understanding from citizens (Friess & Eilders, 2015). They can improve the equality of participation in governance and the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic institutions and policies, as well as improve the education, participation, and trust of citizens. I focus on these three categories below to highlight the benefits of engagement.

### **2.5.1. Informal Legislative Education**

An informed citizenry is paramount to democratic participation. Without meaningful pathways for citizens to be informed about political information and opportunities, it is difficult for them to participate. Thus, many scholars agree that it is the duty of political institutions to educate and inform citizens and to provide spaces for civic discourse (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Proponents of increasing civic engagement in government emphasize that instances of political participation have an educative effect on citizens (Pateman, 2000; Rousseau, 2014), in which the understanding of civil liberties and channels for engagement fosters the qualities necessary for engagement. A lack of understanding of policy issues also produces inequalities in political

knowledge that shape collective opinion and action (Althaus, 2003). Thus, increasing political knowledge can create more stable and consistent opinions.

When citizens engage with their representatives in environments that encourage two-way communication, both parties educate each other. Representatives learn about the views of issues facing the constituency, while citizens better understand the decision-making, logic, and views of the representative. The representative can use these discussions to educate the public about matters that may be ill-defined or unclear. In turn, the citizen can clarify their views concerning the representative's current stance. Thus, citizen engagement is valuable for mutual understanding.

### **2.5.2. Participation Begets Participation**

Educating citizens not only increases their political knowledge but also translates knowledge into political participation (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). In these democratic contexts, participation is vital to the health of a democracy because it can help make government work better (Dalton, 2017). In the context of political representatives, more political engagement from constituencies creates increased feelings of political efficacy which can incentivize representatives to be receptive to issues relevant to the constituency. However, to participate, often the first step is to be asked to participate. According to Vráblíková (2016), “recruitment is probably the single most important mechanism explaining how political discussion increases political activism in non-electoral politics” (p. 105). Inclusiveness of a government and its propensity for public contestation can create greater activism and a greater sense of political efficacy. Thus, if we see governing institutions as inviting more citizen engagement, then more political participation may occur.

Trust is also an important outcome of increased citizen engagement. Laws and policies cannot be rendered legitimate if representatives lack the trust and respect necessary for compliance and cooperation. An increase in trust also increases room for representative power, also known as

“voter leeway” (Fenno, 1978). When representatives of Congress emit a sense of qualification, identification (“I am one of you”), and empathy, they then have more flexibility in their policy decisions. Trust in the process increases policy satisfaction, even when the outcome is not as the citizen wanted (Esaiasson et al., 2017). This process of approval does not always replace constituent input but is a natural outcome when citizens see representatives being more receptive to their requests. That is, if representatives explain how they are responsive to constituency opinion, constituents will trust that future decisions will align with previous ones.

There are numerous ways in which deliberation can help the problems currently facing representative democracy. If Members of Congress incorporate such deliberative systems into their constituent engagement process, they can improve their interpretive abilities, improve their relationship to the constituency, and strengthen their legitimacy as representatives in the federal legislative body.

## **Chapter 3.**

# **The Role of Communications Technology in Civic Engagement and Representative Democracy**

Without a doubt, developments in information and communications technology have created opportunities for political engagement in America over the last three decades. From political discussions and participation online to open data and information transparency initiatives, technology has engendered new possibilities to experiment with novel forms of political engagement and governing practice. As a direct result of these technological developments, academic scholars and public practitioners have fostered aspirational rhetoric around citizen-centric modes of governing. The hope captured by this rhetoric is that communications technology—with its lower-cost, semi-ubiquitous, and flexible temporal properties—can increase opportunities for citizens to be part of governing processes.

The current push for more digital and citizen-centric modes of governing provides an opportunity to test new practices to help representatives alleviate their current deficiencies. So far, there hasn't been much research around how to build technology for spaces of representation. If platforms for online deliberation are introduced into spaces for constituent-representative communication, those deliberations might help representatives become better interpreters of the voices of their constituencies and improve the quality of citizen engagement.

### **3.1. The Rhetoric of Technology-Enabled Citizen Engagement**

Over the past three decades, technology has provided new opportunities for democratic engagement by (1) opening new pathways for information to travel and (2) lowering barriers to participation.

Information is a powerful tool for democracy, and technology has provided new pathways for information access and dissemination. Information molds citizen preferences over policies and determines their behaviors by outlining what we can even imagine are the facts of a matter. Information also molds formal procedures in government and influences decision-making for laws and regulation because what people know about an issue determines the kinds of actions they take. Any technology that affects the flow of such information is crucial to democratic function (Bimber, 2003).

Consider the open data movements. Starting in 2009, the Open Data Initiative of the Obama administration strived to make information more accessible and transparent to the public. This led to legislation like the Open, Public, Electronic and Necessary (OPEN) Government Data Act of 2017, which eventually came into law under the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (H.R.4174 - Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018, 2019). The “Open Data Act,” as it’s known colloquially, requires all non-sensitive government data to be made available in machine-readable formats.

Because technology provides the infrastructure for information to move freely among systems, the U.S. federal government now expects all information to be available as data. The Open Data act makes “failure to utilize open data legally questionable” (Data Coalition, 2018), and forces every federal government agency to have a Chief Data Officer (CDO). The collected data are used by the executive branch to support websites such as Data.gov which makes it easier for the public to track federal spending. The push for open data was a direct result of technology changing the opportunities for information accessibility and transparency, pushing an ethos of accountability where anyone in the public should obtain and monitor government information.

The second reason why technology provides new opportunities for democratic engagement is that it increases the ability for people to participate across time and space, thereby helping



democracies overcome problems of scale (Bimber, 2003; Hacker & van Dijk, 2000). These new opportunities for participation led Smith to propose “democratic innovations,” that is, when institutions design systems to increase and deepen citizen participation (Smith, 2009). Smith imagined technology used for situations such as twenty-first-century town hall meetings where citizens can use technology to efficiently engage in discussion with policymakers or direct democracy initiatives that provide online voting. Beth Noveck, an ex-Deputy Chief Technology Officer (CTO) in the Obama White House, proposes similar innovations by developing expert management systems that document, find, and contact expertise in citizen bodies (Noveck, 2015). The goal is to invite more diverse expertise from the citizenry in order to improve policymaking in government.

In practice, governments around the world are using technologies to promote citizen engagement online. For example, there are digital town halls and open public commenting on regulations in America (Neblo et al., 2018), digital participatory budgeting processes in Brazil (De Sousa Santos, 1998; Gilman, 2016), and online deliberations in Taiwan (Aragón et al., 2017; C. Miller, 2019). The rise of these civic-focused systems is spreading around the world as democracies try to bring the people closer to the governing process.

These democratic efforts with technology are part of a larger umbrella concept called Civic Tech, a field of practice dedicated to designing, regulating, and using technology to expand citizen engagement. In his book “Civic Tech,” Andrew Schrock describes the rise of Civic Tech in the United States as a fire lit by the spark of growing economic inequalities of the early 2000s (Schrock, 2018). The economic crisis of 2007 then brought a drop in government funding to vital services. Meanwhile, technology design grew as a potential idea to lower the bar for participation in civic spaces.

Cyd Harrell (2020) calls today the “teenage years” of Civic Tech. Still in its adolescence, the community is growing rapidly with programmers, designers, and academics hoping to use technology to open new opportunities for access, inclusion, collective action, and government decision-making. According to The Civic Tech-Field Guide, a crowd-sourced database of tech for good projects around the world, there are currently over 4,000 projects related to civic tech in some way (Civic Hall, 2021). Not all of these projects are successful; the Civic Tech Field Guide has an entire page dedicated to a graveyard of failed projects. But there is a growing interest across the globe to make technology work for civic society.

### **3.1.1. A Shift in Rhetoric**

What becomes abundantly clear given this growth of civic tech is a rhetorical shift in the expectations of citizen engagement. Some of this shift is supported by normative changes happening to democracy, but much of it is merely rhetorical. Given the rise in information dispersion, lower barriers to collective participation and communication, these technologies afford more opportunities for people to engage civically. As a result, more opportunities should emerge to improve citizen inclusion in governing practice. Technology has pushed the political rhetoric towards the demos, even as it is often unclear how effective these efforts are.

This increase in a citizen-centric rhetoric comes at a time where the legitimacy of representative institutions is in crisis. The center of this maelstrom of American governance is often in Congress. In the book *They Don't Represent Us*, Lawrence Lessig recounts how U.S. representatives no longer represent the people but rather private interests and elite minorities (Lessig, 2019). Congress has been called “the broken branch” of government, in need of major repair and democratic rejuvenation (Mann et al., 2006). Although there are valid debates about whether our governing institutions were always broken, there is no denying that the recent discussions intensify latent feelings of dissatisfaction. It is thus no coincidence that the public

failings of our major political institutions coincide with calls for more citizen-centric governing. If major institutions no longer reflect the people, the solution seems to be bringing the people back to the table.

Technology often seems the obvious way to open new avenues to test alternative means of governing, led by citizen engagement. The combination of failing representative institutions and a push for new technologies for citizen inclusion has resulted in powerful rhetoric about reinventing the practice of government in the United States.

### **3.1.2. What Does This Mean for Representation?**

The reason why I describe this shift in citizen-centric rhetoric from technology is because it has a direct influence on the practices and expectations of representation. In the scholarly community, there is hope that new software tools and online platforms will promote direct forms of representative-constituent engagement that make it easier for legislators to discern and respond to policy views of the constituency (Lazer et al., 2012) and to bolster legitimacy through ongoing communicative relationships with constituents (Coleman, 2017). Some predict that communications technology will alter forms of representation, with larger online constituencies engaging in more delegate forms of representation (Shogan, 2010; Straus et al., 2013; Straus & Glassman, 2016). Most importantly, technology has also engendered theories about a new kind of representation.

Let's look at an important example. In the last chapter, I discussed Jane Mansbridge's (2003) taxonomy of representation. Interestingly, in 2017 Mansbridge followed the same shift in the citizen-centric rhetoric, now believing that representation and lawmaking are no longer legitimately taking place in the legislature because these systems are under severe strain. Mansbridge calls this a crisis of legitimacy. To Mansbridge, the modern era requires a new form

of representation called recursive representation—cyclical communication between citizens and representatives to maintain legitimacy, with ideals of deliberation set up throughout an entire representative system (2017). Through recursive representation, “...both citizens and individual representatives or political parties should hear one another, communicate well with one another, and change one another for the better through their interaction” (Mansbridge, 2017, p. 7).

Mansbridge’s proposal is a response to the struggles seen in the current democratic crisis. Approaching Mansbridge’s idea through practical applications, it’s clear that this recursive interactive structure is, generally speaking, only possible with twenty-first-century technology. For example, Mansbridge suggests that “a more formal supplement to the electoral representative relationship could both promote representative-constituent communication and save the representative time by creating discussion groups with randomly-selected constituents who could deliberate recursively on an issue through the internet with their representative” (2017, p. 13). The example Mansbridge references in the paper is an online/telephone town hall for Congress (Neblo et al., 2018). Without these digital systems, these kinds of interactive experiences between representatives and constituencies could not exist. Technologies offer the tools to find and engage with constituents consistently when representatives are far away from their geographic districts or unable to meet in-person at large scales. Thus, how scholars think about new kinds of representation are a direct result in shifting representational opportunities that technology provides.

The same discussion is also taking place inside public and government spheres. In Congress, Members and staff promote tools like social media as positive forces for engaging with the public. In a survey by the Congressional Management Foundation, the majority of congressional staff identified social media as enabling more meaningful interactions with constituents, making their offices more accountable (Bradford Fitch & Goldschmidt, 2015). In my field research on Congress, I found that representatives promoted digital media to publicly advertise their efforts to

make citizen voices present in their decision-making practices (whether it makes a difference or not) (McDonald et al., 2019). They understood that the expectations for citizen engagement are increasing and that technology could be utilized to increase the communication pathways available. Technology sets the tone for more engagement and representatives are more inclined to test new digital methods that show they are increasing citizen engagement.

### **3.1.3. Less Representation?**

Although a citizen-centric rhetoric inspires efforts to bring citizens closer to representatives, this doesn't mean it isn't inherently beneficial to the outcomes of representation. The rhetorical shift can lead to a shift in norms for more citizen-centric forms of governance, which then push the expectations away from representatives as more direct-democracy forms of governance emerge. For example, in his influential book *Strong Democracy*, Barber argues that news media technologies can revitalize citizen engagement to combat the weak representative democracy and liberalism. Barber sees representation as a flawed and "thin" system of democracy. Citizens should be able to govern themselves at the greatest extent possible (Barber, 1984).

While I disagree with Barber's claim, it exemplifies a narrative seen in popular discourse and some spaces of academic democratic theory for a new kind of governance where ongoing civic engagement and direct democracy are the norms. A push for more citizen-engagement could make representative systems less publicly favorable.

A balance must be met between creating more spaces for citizen engagement and supporting representative systems already in place. Technology should strengthen citizen engagement in representative democracy, thus making the legitimacy of those representative institutions stronger.

### **3.2. Building Technology for Representation and Deliberation**

So far, there isn't much research into how to design platforms for citizen participation for formal procedures of representative government. As I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, representative institutions should use communication methods for deliberation to become better interpreters and engagers of constituent opinion. The growth of digital methods for civic engagement offers new opportunities to introduce deliberation into representative government online.

The internet is perceived as the quintessential platform to further the ideals of deliberation (Fishkin, 2009; Friess & Eilders, 2015; Price, 2009; Strandberg & Grönlund, 2018). From a conversation quality standpoint, virtual deliberations reduce geographic barriers to participation which can broaden the diversity of people and perspectives. Online platforms can also be designed to eliminate visual social cues which cause bias in face-to-face communication. In addition, the internet allows for increased knowledge sharing by quickly obtaining online information as well and long-term community building through digital communication networks. Thus, there are many in which online deliberations can enhance the quality of the overall deliberation.

Digital platforms can also relieve some of the practical issues with face-face deliberation. Deliberation in the physical world can run into practical organizational issues and physical barriers for participation, especially for deliberations of a large scale (Strandberg & Grönlund, 2018). Deliberations can also be costly and take tremendous manpower to set up, organize, and moderate. These in-person sessions can take substantial time away from participants' everyday lives, reducing the likelihood of their attendance. Online deliberations alleviate some of these issues, making it an attractive space for future deliberative democracy developments.

Internet technologies also offer additional benefits to deliberation that cannot be done in the physical world. For example, online platforms can change the pace of participation where

participants can spend more time developing responses on their own will (Dahlberg, 2004). Online platforms also allow more reflexivity and argumentation by creating more moments of individual thought-time and discussion pause discussions (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011).

Empirically, there is evidence that online deliberations increase knowledge exchange which has been shown to lead to a significant increase in the quality of opinions on issues (Grönlund et al., 2009). Online deliberation has also been found to increase participant's sense of political efficacy and willingness to participate in politics (Min, 2007). There is evidence that online deliberations can reduce opinion polarization and build consensus (Strandberg et al., 2019). Deliberative democracy researchers are still unclear which exact features of online deliberation led to this change, but the overall effects of online deliberation appear to be positive.

There are some cautions to online deliberation. Online deliberation may cause incivility, as seen on many unmoderated platforms across the internet. Platforms could also de-individualize interactions and lose community relationships and feelings of group identity (Kiesler et al., 1984). In addition, there are larger issues around the digital divide and the equity of access to political platforms. The way in which online deliberations should be accessed and formatted vary tremendously by the diversity of the communities (Delborne et al., 2011). Thus, the way in which online deliberations are developed and designed shape the outcomes of the deliberation.

There is evidence from controlled experiments of formalized student deliberations that both face-face and online deliberations offer comparable positive impacts on democratic values, feelings of efficacy, and overall quality of deliberative engagement (Min, 2007). As Min suggested, "Online verbal communication may even be superior to face-to-face communication in terms of rationality, because online deliberation, which is solely dependent on text exchanges, is emotionally more detached and perhaps more cognitively-oriented" (2007, p. 1373). Thus, online deliberation can improve rational thinking. In my case, online deliberations could help participating constituents

and Members clarify their thinking and logic as they present their beliefs to others, in comparison to in-person settings where social and emotionally charged feelings may take a higher precedent.

If computer-mediated communication can reduce the problems already facing deliberation such as social inequalities, deliberative theorist John Gastil believes online deliberation could have a powerful advantage over face-to-face deliberation (Gastil, 2000). Digital platforms are an attractive testing ground to test new communication methods with more deliberative qualities. This will be the basis for my experimental forum between constituent and their Member of Congress discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

As research on online deliberation grows, so does the evidence on how to develop online deliberations practically. For example, researchers in political science and human-computer interaction are developing design principles that can help encourage discussion and make platforms navigable and user-friendly for deliberation (Davies & Gangadharan, 2009; Semaan et al., 2015; Towne & Herbsleb, 2012). Towne & Herbsleb provide a list of over 30 design considerations for online deliberation such as maintaining a low barrier to entry for contributing content and organizing discussions topically rather than temporally (2012). Others such as Raymond Pingree developed theoretical models to design asynchronous online forums for problem organization, ranking, and self-labeled topics (2009).

There is also work on the use of moderation and facilitation (Epstein & Leshed, 2016; Janssen & Kies, 2005; Wright, 2009). Grönlund et al. find that facilitation (i.e., external actors who help participants and guide the deliberative discussion) can alleviate polarization (Grönlund et al., 2015). Moderation (i.e., the monitoring and regulating of user-generated content based on platform-specific rules and guidelines) is not always useful for formal deliberations. There is evidence higher levels of moderation can negatively impact the deliberative experience by lowering perceived levels of policy legitimacy (Perrault & Zhang, 2019).



Lastly, there is research into temporal differences in deliberation. There is some evidence that indicates asynchronous discussion can have a higher discussion quality than synchronous deliberations (Strandberg & Berg, 2013). Some of the lessons learned from these studies helped inform my online forum design and implementation discussed in Chapter 5. For now, I emphasize the rise in this experimentation of different online deliberations that hope to advance the quality of online deliberations.

### **3.2.1. Understanding Digital Forms of Deliberation for Representative Institutions**

Examples and studies of online deliberation provide a breadth of information about how deliberation can and should take place in online environments. However, most of these online deliberation studies take place outside the purview of representatives or any sort of governing institution (Coleman, 2017; P. M. Shane, 2012). They are focused on non-institutional online arenas of dialogue such as online newspaper and newsgroups comments (J. W. Kelly et al., 2006; Strandberg & Berg, 2013), student deliberations of on-campus issues (Min, 2007), and randomly select citizens in academic experiments. Rarely any attention is given to how to introduce these systems of online deliberation to representative actors, or any formal institutions in general.

As discussed in the last chapter, the lack of attention to representative deliberation is expected given that there are clear theoretical tensions between representation and deliberation. There is also less research in general towards understanding when and how policymakers use public input (Lees-Marshment, 2015). This is probably because it's tough to bring deliberation into real sites of policy-making (Hartz-Karp & Sullivan, 2014). Nonetheless, if the ultimate goal of deliberation is to increase the function and legitimacy of deliberative systems (Fishkin, 2009), this work is surely needed.

I believe online deliberations could be beneficial to the goals of representation. They could improve the quality of discussions—something that is desperately needed in Congress as I will discuss more in the next chapter—and introduce diverse, informed, and deliberative dialogue to improve the representative’s interpretation of the constituency. This discussion can mediate the skewed bias already demonstrated from pre-existing forms of communication—which is, as I argued in Chapter 2, the central goal of constituent communication for representation. Formal deliberations could also make citizens feel more informed and attuned to the logic and actions of their representative; they can understand what’s currently happening in the policy realm and what their representative and their staff is currently working on. By conducting the deliberations online, the representative and their staff also increases the possibility of such deliberations succeeding and sustaining long-term interactions. Thus, by looking at theories of representation, deliberation, and technology, the design of constituent communication processes in Congress can be improved.

Thus far, only one study has engaged with this kind of digital representative-deliberative engagement. In 2006, Neblo et al., in collaboration with the Congressional Management Foundation, conducted twelve telephone town halls with Members of Congress to explore citizen knowledge, deliberation, and democratic representation. They argue that deliberation can promote a more “directly representative democracy” where constituents can have more interactions with their Members of Congress. Their results show increased satisfaction of engagement from citizens and Members alike. Satisfaction was especially high for populations of people that are turned off by typical politics (Neblo et al., 2018). Their findings also show that these telephone town hall sessions can reach a diverse set of constituents and increase their policy knowledge and support for the Member (Lazer et al., 2012). These experiments demonstrate the viability of deliberation as a tool for representatives—one that can improve meaningful interactions with constituents and the overall legitimacy of the representative body.

### **3.2.2. A New Kind of Deliberation?**

If representative's constituent communication process were to include deliberative systems, there would be important differences in how the deliberation is designed and how it should take place compared to citizen-to-citizen-focused deliberation. A deliberation between a Member of Congress and their constituency will automatically involve differing power dynamics, as the representative is the final decision-maker in all deliberations. Deliberations will also have unequal information dynamics, as the Member and staff have access to substantially more expertise and time to understand complex issues compared to most everyday citizens.

Differences in power and information-access do not mean deliberation is impossible. These are real challenges already seen in citizen-to-citizen deliberative environments (see Section 2.4.3). Political theorists emphasize that deliberative democracy is an ideal that can never be fully achieved in practice. Rather, the qualities in which the deliberation is evaluated will differ depending on context and goals of the deliberation.

I also want to highlight that when I refer to Members of Congress throughout this dissertation, I often include their staff. As I describe in the next chapter, the staff of Members of Congress are just as much a part of the concept of a "representative" as individual Members of Congress. They may not be elected to represent, but they play a role in how information is disseminated to the Member, how the Member behaves, and how the office communicates with constituents. Their role in this context should not be downplayed while evaluating the power structures inside an online deliberation.

## **3.3. Recognizing Technology's Limits**

Although online platforms could offer new forms of deliberative citizen engagement in representation, I do not want to give the impression that technology is a panacea. Technology is

not positive, negative, or even neutral (Kranzberg, 1986) and there are abundant cases where technology has damaged the democratic practice of representation (Hindman, 2009), reduced the inclusiveness of citizen voice (Bianco, 1994; Sunstein, 2007), and strengthened the status quo (Chadwick, 2011; Schacter, 2019). I highlight a few concerns below to demonstrate technology's complex relationship to ideas of democratic engagement, and to put a spotlight on important barriers that exist when designing technology for representation. These barriers will come up again as I discuss the practical realities of Congress in the next chapter and the results of the deliberative form in Chapters 6 and 7.

### **3.3.1. Legitimizing Business as Usual**

Although platforms for communication may be introduced to alter current representative practices, they may push governing forces to maintain the status quo. For example, the introduction of Civic Town Hall on Facebook could have been used to help representatives engage more constituents in dialogue, but these social media platforms continue to be used primarily for self-promotional content (M. E. Glassman et al., 2013; Mergel, 2012). Government bodies, like any other institution, have long-standing norms, traditions, and expectations. Their ability to engage with citizens depends on their intent and motivations to engage, as well as their institutional leverage to change practice (Peixoto & Fox, 2016). Even when technology is implemented to improve democratic governance, the systems are transformed in the process of design and use, as institutions mediate their enactment (Fountain, 2004). As a result, platforms that are chosen to improve constituent engagement may amplify existing power structures and representational expectations. Even deliberations or any introduction of novel communication methods could potentially strengthen the institutional structures of Congress. I will demonstrate this much more in my overview of Congress in the next chapter.

### 3.3.2. Shifts to Transparency

Although technology can increase transparency and accountability through more open information and discussion, there are cases where increased transparency leads to further opacity and control from external groups. For example, the introduction of CSPAN and the recording of representative behavior on the Congress floor is believed to have pushed policymaker debates further into the shadows, with the public platform better used for self-promotion (Frantzich & Sullivan, 1996). In 2019, political scientist Francis Lee testified before Congress, urging the branch to reconsider the role of transparency, stating that “Sunshine reforms have been more useful to lobbyists than to average Americans” (*Congressional Transparency: A Word of Caution*, 2019). She notes that opening up information on decision-making processes of Congress before decisions are made, empower organized groups to impress their demands on the legislative process. There are moment where democracy benefits from private discussions, and anything which prevents Members of Congress from talking frankly with one another reduces the likelihood of finding common ground (Lessig, 2011). What is supposed to provide more transparency could lead to less.

The rhetoric of more citizen-centric governance can also set a dangerous precedent for the expectations of government representation. Social media has created more spaces for citizens to demand explanations for government decisions. Full transparency, however, may not be good for democracy. Increased transparency can contribute to information overload and “wasted transparency” where reasonably accessible information remains untapped by most citizens (Schacter, 2019). As highlighted by Bannister and Connolly, “in a world of instant, real-time information, citizens come to expect a type of e-transparency from their government and their public servants that is not in the interests of best government. For governments, a real risk is that transparency will not only hamper their operations, it may possibly damage their reputation” (Bannister & Connolly, 2011, p. 24).

If technology increases public demands for more information transparency, then representatives may be expected to spend more time explaining their actions to the constituency. However, representative democracy scholars such as Bianco and Fenno note that representatives do not think of explanations as a form of persuasion and trust. Any attempt to explain themselves could open up the floodgates to anger (Bianco, 1994; Fenno, 1977). These changes to expectations conflict with traditional expectations of representation. Gavin Newsom, the current governor of California, discussed this transparency problem in his book about technology and governance called *Citizenville*. Newsom writes “In asking public figures to release more information, we’re asking them to risk scorn and public ridicule. This is the number one challenge of the open-data movement, in my opinion—the reason why it hasn’t taken off as it should...We’re asking them to do the one things that historically has come at a huge cost...but we must” (2014, p. 52). The push for transparency is colliding with the norms of very old and powerful institutions. Information is power and giving that information away to the public means stripping away forms of protection that representatives take for granted.

A fine line between technology innovation and institutional integrity needs to be played to ensure that the introduction of deliberative systems transforms the context of the current capacities, norms, and expectations of the institution. Such information will be provided in the next chapter, as I dig deeper into the context of Congress. For now, there is promise for technology to improve the deliberative aspects of representative-constituent engagement, and the current rise of civic technology and increased citizen engagement provides a perfect motivation to test these systems into current representative practices.

## **Chapter 4.**

### **The U.S. Congress - A Continuing Tension Between Ideal and Achievement**

So far, this dissertation has broadly discussed theoretical and empirical implications of representation, deliberation, and technology in government. Now I begin to narrow the scope and focus on the United States Congress.

There are multiple reasons I spend this chapter detailing the field site of this dissertation. First, Congress is a unique institution with its own culture, norms, and resources. Any real-life implementation of technology for constituent engagement, where Members and their staff take the time to listen to constituent input and requests, must be done with an understanding of how the institution works. Second, this chapter offers a space to describe findings from my pre-dissertation ethnographic fieldwork on Congress. Those findings outline the primary deficiencies of the current communications systems—and why a system with more deliberative engagement could be a solution. Lastly, the early 21st is, in my opinion, one of the pinnacle points for technology discussion in Congress. I began writing this chapter during the precipice of a global pandemic that forced Congress to rely on technology to work remotely. At the same time, Congress Members are having serious discussions around technology’s power over the institution, the country, and democracy as a whole. Members present feelings towards technology adoption and regulation will affect any efforts to change constituent communication practices.

#### **4.1. What is the U.S. Congress?**

The United States Congress, sometimes known colloquially as “the first branch”, is the legislative arm of the federal government. Congress is responsible for creating laws, overseeing and allocating the federal budget, and providing a representational voice of the people in

government. It has the power to declare war, develop rules for the military, ratify treaties, manage property, approve presidential appointments, and remove presidents. Congress is solely responsible for financial actions of the federal government, giving this branch the ‘power of the purse’.

Congress is the people’s branch; it’s made up of 535 elected representatives (also called *Members of Congress* or just *Members*). 435 Members are in the House.<sup>5,6</sup> 100 are in the Senate. Members are elected by outcomes of majority in a direct vote in the district/state. They must be at least 25 (House) or 30 (Senate) years old and a U.S. citizen for at least seven (House) or nine (Senate) years. Each representative in the House is elected to a two-year term serving the people of a specific congressional district. Those districts are based on population proportions. The Senate is voted to 6 years terms representing each state.

#### **4.1.1. What do Members of Congress Do?**

The practice of representing in Congress is incredibly difficult. Members are legislators, networkers, campaigners, negotiators, listeners, administrators, defenders, leaders, speakers, and deliberators. While they are in D.C., they vote, attend committee hearings, attend conference meetings, campaign, meet with staff, meet with constituents and lobbyists, meet with the press, publish on social media, and review communication from constituents. In their home jurisdictions,

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<sup>5</sup> This does not include five non-voting delegates representing the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. A resident commissioner represents Puerto Rico. The Cherokee Nation has proposed a delegate in Congress, but at the time of writing this, they have not been seated. These delegates do not have voting power.

<sup>6</sup> 435 is not a constitutionally mandated number. The U.S. Constitution calls for at least one Representative per state and that no more than one for every 30,000 persons. Congress would reapportion after each census. But in 1929, the Permanent Apportionment Act of 1929 froze the number at 435 to prevent large cities from gaining representatives. This is arguably a major issue that would completely change the realities of proportional representation. (*The Permanent Apportionment Act of 1929*, n.d.)



they visit local businesses and organizations, they host town hall meetings, attend field hearings and constituent meetings, press events, and have family time.

Representing requires extensive time and stress management. Self-report surveys from Members of the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress describe 60-70 hour work weeks and less than half the Members surveyed were satisfied with managing work-related stress (*Life in Congress: The Member Perspective*, 2013). This is no surprise given that life as a legislator is often hectic, unpredictable, and temporary. Committee hearings and other meetings occur concurrently throughout the day (U.S. House. The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, 2020). There are often late-night or weekend votes with thousands of bills introduced every year (*Vital Statistics on Congress: Date on the U.S. Congress, Updated November 2020*, 2020). Members travel extensively between D.C. and their district, typically spending four days a week in D.C. and then flying home (*Why We Left Congress: How the Legislative Branch Is Broken and What We Can Do About It*, 2018). In 2016, one representative from NC noted they fly an average of 40 weeks a year (Plott, 2016). As Kevin Kosar commented during a panel on congressional capacity, the idiom of *drinking from a firehose* probably best describes the life of a Member (K. Kosar et al., personal communication, December 1, 2020).

A large portion of the Member's time is also given to campaigns for themselves and other candidates. Although incumbents have a substantially higher chance of being re-elected,<sup>7</sup> self-reports from Members say they spend an average of 20% of their work time campaigning (*Life in Congress: The Member Perspective*, 2013). Some Members report spending up to 30 hours a week just campaigning for their party (O'Donnell, 2016). Campaign efforts are so frequent, that political scientist Tim LaPira half-jokingly noted in a talk that the primary job of Congress no longer seems

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<sup>7</sup> Since World War II, 94% of incumbents in the House win, 82% of incumbents in the Senate win (of those who ran)(Center for Responsive Politics, n.d.).

to be legislating but campaigning and raising money (K. Kosar et al., personal communication, December 1, 2020).

Given the expansive workload of Members of Congress, constituent engagement is only a small aspect of the everyday expectations of working as a Member of Congress. Once elected, these representatives have general independence from their constituencies; their focus is on federal-level issues and dealing with party-level pressures that can be tangential to concerns of their state or district. Listening to constituents is only one piece of the puzzle.

Although most Members of Congress are voting on a wide array of issues, Members of Congress come in with particular expertise or a policy topic focus that can strengthen their legislative effectiveness (Volden & Wiseman, 2020). That means some Members are specialized in topics that may not be a concern for many individuals in their district. It also means that constituents in one district that want to be vocal about a particular issue will have a hard time engaging their representative if it's not relevant to their current agenda or their sitting committees (i.e., the congressional committees they are assigned to). Unless non-constituent citizens work through collective organizations and lobbying groups, it's very difficult for individuals to have a representative listen. The reality is that communication with Members of Congress is very difficult.

#### **4.1.2. Who do Members of Congress Represent?**

Members of Congress represent very large constituencies, with the average Member of Congress representing 700,000 constituents.<sup>8</sup> Congress represents more than those that are legally able to vote (i.e., U.S. Citizens that are 18 and over). Members represent residents, green-card

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<sup>8</sup> The range is quite large, going from the smallest district of Rhode Island (~526,000) and the entire state of Montana (~990,000) which only has one House representative for the entire state. These numbers are from the 2010 census and are larger today.

holders, those currently undergoing immigration process, temporary workers, children, etc. Anyone living within the geographic boundary of their district or state is effectively represented by the Member of Congress.

The representation-constituent ratio of the House is one of the largest compared to the largest 35 OECD nations (Desilver, 2018). Although Congress has a constitutional obligation to reapportion the House after each ten-year census, Congress stopped following those obligations after the 1910 census due to fear of power shifts once people began moving from farmlands to cities (Huckabee, 1995). For the United States to be representationally proportional to the population, as the constitution emphasizes, the number of representatives should be tripled in the House, as the population has tripled since 1910. What has instead developed is a system of unproportional representation that oversees very large constituencies.

As a result of these large constituencies, there are more and more people being represented by fewer bodies in government. It is becoming increasingly difficult for citizens to both interact with their Members and for Members to interact with their constituents and comprehend the collective needs and voices of the people. Although many scholars have argued that a large increase of representatives would resolve many of the issues currently facing representation and constituent engagement, changes to the numbers of representatives does not appear to be on the table anytime soon.

#### **4.1.3. Congressional Staff**

Members of Congress need to be superhuman to carry out the daily task of legislating, negotiating, meeting, campaigning, managing, scheduling, and networking on their own. A crucial, but often ignored, component to the study of Congress is the staff. Staff of Members are essential to the legislative process (Fenno, 1977; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019; Miler, 2010; Montgomery

& Nyhan, 2017). Congressional offices are “small personal empires” (Mayhew, 1974) or “legislative enterprises” (Salisbury & Shepsle, 1981) of the Member<sup>9</sup>. Professional staff carry out much of the everyday work of representation—communicating with constituents, assisting in casework, becoming policy experts, scheduling meetings, and organizing campaigns and outreach. Staff do so much work that some scholars worry that staffers hold too much power, becoming invisible influencers and “unelected representatives” (Malbin, 1980). These staff are very much a large component of representation, so much so, that it’s difficult to refer to Members without acknowledging the entire enterprise that works on their behalf.

In practice, the Member teams have a maximum of 22 staffers (18 full-time, and 4 part-time) in each office. Members are free to choose how their office functions; they have considerable flexibility in how they organize their staff. Generally speaking, six types of staffers work on constituent communication: Interns, Legislative Assistants, Staff Assistants, Legislative Correspondents, Legislative Directors, and the Chief of Staff. There are some discrepancies in how each office divides and labels the role of each staffer, but this is the general organization of staff.

Interns, an almost constant presence in each office, are typically the front-line of constituent communication. Congressional offices depend on intern labor using an average of nine interns every year which aren’t included in staff limits (Davidson et al., 2014). Interns are charged with answering phones, opening mail, reading faxes, and logging constituent contact into databases.

Interns work closely with Staff Assistants and Legislative Correspondents who are in charge of answering phones, reading mail, and logging constituent input, among other tasks. Other staffers such as Legislative Directors focus on policy research and production. Occasionally they help the Legislative Correspondents and Staff assistants obtain information for communicating

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<sup>9</sup> This does not include the numbers of committee staff, leadership staff, institutional staff, and support agency staff also involved.

policy to constituents, but the jobs of research policy and communicating with constituents is mostly kept separate. The Chief of Staff, like the head manager of a business, often oversees this entire process.

Staff retention is a serious problem in Congress. Across parties, there is a consistent 19% turnover rate per year. A survey of 400 staff in 2017 showed that 40% of staffers plan to leave by the end of the term (LaPira et al., 2020). No staff position in the House has an average tenure rate in their current position over 3 years, with the primary staffers that work on constituent communication only working on those jobs for a year or less (Burgat & Dukeman, 2019). In one of my interviews, a staffer told me "*The job of the LC [Legislative Correspondent] is a stepping stone; this job is boring. No one wants this job*" (McDonald & Mazmanian, 2019) Staff see the role of constituent communication as a secondary job. The highly coveted roles in the offices are related to policy production. These roles can be hard to obtain without first doing the less desirable work of constituent communication.

Like the rest of Congress, staffers are woefully underpaid. A median staffer makes less than \$30,000 a year, well under the D.C. minimum wage of \$13.25/hr (LaPira & Furnas, 2018). It wasn't until 2019 that Congress set aside money to pay their interns, leaving most of them to fend for themselves when paying for the high cost of living in D.C.<sup>10</sup> Considering that the majority of staff get their positions after unpaid internships (Furnas et al., 2020), the financial capacity of the individual affects the chances of obtaining a staff position. Essentially, the only way to become a

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<sup>10</sup> I should also note that overall funding for personal offices in Congress is down 15% in the last decade and spending on the legislative branch as a whole grew at half the rate of all other discretionary spending in the federal government. Most of this decline is due to former Speaker Newt Gingrich who reduced all spending on Congress, reducing legislative staff by 20% in the early 1990s, defunding congressional agencies like the OTA, and centralizing power to the Speaker office (Article One, Rebuilding Our Congress, Feb. 2021). Overall, Congress as an entire branch of government is extremely underpaid and understaffed.

staffer in Congress is to spend multiple years underpaid and overworked, which means only those with pre-existing financial support remain.

Given these financial effects, it is unsurprising that Congress is not very representative in diversity. Staffers are mostly millennials with 60% staff under the age of 35 and 70% under 40 (Furnas et al., 2020). There is a significant gender gap where women have lower rates of advancement into powerful staff positions compared to their male colleagues. Despite making up the majority of staff in the House, women staff tend to be concentrated in the lower ranking clerical positions such as Legislative and Staff Assistants (Ritchie & You, 2019). Congress is also disproportionately white compared with the overall U.S. population. About three-quarters of all House offices have no staff of color (Scott et al., 2018). This lack of diversity is a result of both economic disadvantages and elite exclusions that favor in-group actors.

Staff play a vital role in the practices of representation and governing. They are the backbone of the institution and the invisible actors of representation. The impact that staffers have on the policymaking and constituent engagement processes cannot be downplayed. Because the staffers that focus on constituent communication are the lowest level of staff with the highest turnover, there is a lack of long-term expertise and commitment to the job. This leaves the practice of engaging with constituents often neglected.

## **4.2. Communicating with Congress**

This dissertation has outlined the ideals of representative-constituent engagement, but how does it work in real-life? Generally speaking, Members provide several communication channels for those living in their electoral districts to contact their offices. These channels include in-person meetings, town halls, letters, phone calls, email, fax, and social media. In turn, citizens reach out to their Members in an attempt to influence their policy decisions, seek assistance with government

issues, and express their personal opinions. Below I highlight the growth of constituent communications technology in Congress and how it has affected the current practices of constituent communication.

#### **4.2.1. Rise of Email**

Pre-internet constituents contacted their Members through in-person meetings, postal mail, and telephone (Owen et al., 1999). But in 1993, Congress began to experiment with email, and in 1995, provided publicly available emails (Owen et al., 1999). The first paper to investigate the congressional use of email technology was published in 1999 by Owen, Davis, & Strickler (Owen et al., 1999). This paper highlights preliminary problems that arose from both email and Member websites in their first two years of use. By surveying 82 congressional offices, the authors found that e-mail from constituents was steadily increasing and contained quick reactions to messages from the news and advocacy campaigns. Members were placing barriers between them and email from constituents by using their staff. And most Members prioritized summaries of the volume, position, and tone of email on particular issues.

There are similar reactions to communications technology today. Replicating Owen et al.'s findings, in 2005 the Congressional Management Foundation found, to no surprise, that the scale of email increased and the problems surrounding email worsened (Hysom, 2008). As citizens began to take part in large-scale coordinated advocacy campaigns, the volume of email increased beyond the capacities of Member offices to manage. Realizing that electronic mail was becoming mainstream, in 2000, Members began developing techniques to reduce spam such as zip code matching software on congressional websites that attempt to block and filter any incoming non-constituent mail.

According to Owen et al., half of all incoming mail in the beginning years of email was from non-constituents (Owen et al., 1999), so the process of filtering should have significantly cut the influx. However, this is not the case. In the mid- 2000s, a new industry of technology vendors emerged to help coordinate digital advocacy campaigns. These campaigns automatically populate email forms on representative websites. The result of easier communication was a four-fold increase in all contact from citizens from 1995 to 2004 (Brad Fitch et al., 2005). Congress responded with more aggressive email filters, email management systems, and new organizational tactics to manage incoming mail. Some offices also began to use CAPTCHAs and IP blocking. The result was a “technological arms race” between citizens, advocacy campaigns, and Congress (Hysom, 2008).

The arms race continues to this day. Anecdotal evidence from offices shows that Member offices have been battling contact directed from newly developed advocacy systems. Two examples of popular systems are Countable, which allows citizens to contact their representative about policy preferences with a simple ‘Yea’ or ‘Nay’ button, and Resistbot (resist.bot) which claims to allow citizens to “contact their congressmen in under two minutes” using a text message. These kinds of digital messages have flattened the cost for constituents to communicate to representatives near zero (McDonald et al., 2017), making the introduction of cheap low-effort communication more prevalent.

Scholars and congressional staff alike argue that the flattened cost of emails has negatively affected citizen communication. When the cost of communication flattens, talk is often cheaper and legislators gain less information from the messages they receive or what the salient issues of the district might be (Cluverius, 2015). In my interviews, staffers note that most incoming contact includes redundant advocacy campaigns, quick emotional responses to media events, or a small number of frequent constituents who write about a variety of issues. Even when Members of



Congress respond to these emails, there is evidence that only half of that mail is even opened by constituents (Goldschmidt & Sinkaus, 2020).<sup>11</sup> As a result, staff are not optimistic that constituent contact through these channels has enough value to affect policy decisions (Goldschmidt & Sinkaus, 2020).

A large portion of the issues of communication in Congress come from advocacy campaigns. Although this communication doesn't appear valuable for Congress, they are for advocacy groups. Karpf (2010) finds that these groups continue to advocate for these quick campaign messages as a way of campaign recruitment. It is a social movement tactic used to collect data about individuals and mobilize them to participate in other higher stakes actions for their cause later on. The methods for communicating with Congress are often hijacked as a form of organizational motivations and recruitment.

The proliferation of constituent and campaign contact continues. Contacting Members is one of the most common acts of political participation after voting, and it is performed by one-quarter to one-third of adults in the United States each year (Bimber, 2003). From 1995 to 2004, Members experienced a fourfold increase in all contact from citizens (Brad Fitch et al., 2005), and congressional offices received between 200 to 1,000 percent more constituent communication in emails over the past decade (Goldschmidt, 2011). Anne Washington, a professor of data policy and previous employee of the Library of Congress, noted that the Senate has 1.5 million phone calls a day during confirmation hearings of 2017. Congress is dealing with communication that's no longer feasible on a human scale (Washington, 2019). Congress Members must rely on technology to manage all their communication.

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<sup>11</sup> Although the Congressional Management Foundation says this evidence is only anecdotal, I have seen the open-rate numbers from one Member of Congress' office which confirms this is true, at least for one office.

Whether the communication is coming from advocacy campaigns or individuals, both sources are not providing useful communication for Members. What is supposed to be an easier way to engage constituents has resulted in a cacophony of low-value contacts overshadowed by well-resourced interest groups and low-value individual responses to issues that flood congressional offices with constituent contact.<sup>12</sup>

#### **4.2.2. Constituent Communication Software**

Once constituent communication passes through the congressional filters and enters the office, it needs to be organized in some fashion. The primary technical system that does that is the constituent database software, also called CRMs (constituent relationship management software). The concept of CRM originated in the 1970s as a way to prioritize customer relationships within businesses—turning into a software product used to capture and understand customer service data in the 1990s (“Customer Relationship Management,” 2021). Between 2017 and 2019, I interviewed staffers and CRM contractors to understand how these systems work and how they are used in congressional offices. Below I provide findings from those interviews to lay the groundwork for how Congress currently manages communication.

CRMs function as both a channel for communicating with citizens through email, and a database to log, track, and categorize incoming contact including snail mail and phone calls. CRMs are provided by external vendors approved separately by the House and Senate Chambers of Congress. In 2018, two vendors in the House controlled the majority of all CRM contracts—Intranet Quorum (known as IQ) and Fireside21. There are only a handful of other vendors approved

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<sup>12</sup> This does not include the more recent increase in hostile communication that reached a new high after the Capitol Riot of January 2021. The incoming negative content has become so bad, the Congressional Management Foundation is asking all offices to change their phone policies to prevent staff harm and avoid long-term trauma exposure from answering threatening phone calls. Although it’s unclear if this extreme case of harmful communication will continue, it will most certainly play a long-term role in the perception of incoming communication through these mediums (Brad Fitch & McGuire, 2021).

(currently there are 5), making CRM selection limited. Members choose their vendor at vendor fairs after being sworn-in while rushing to set up their office. This leaves little time to research each system.

The use of CRMs is almost exclusively left to communications staff. The staffers are expected to answer, listen to, respond to, and organize all incoming citizen contact. They use CRMs to collect, store, analyze, and share citizen information with the rest of their staff. Staff can also use CRMs to send reply letters to constituents, develop communications reports, deploy surveys to gain feedback from citizens, and maintain a record of citizen information.

The CRMs have a large impact on the practices of constituent engagement. During my interviews with congressional staff, I found that the design and representational properties of CRMs shape not only what information is captured during communication, but also how the information is categorized, understood, and put into practice by Members and their staff (McDonald & Mazmanian, 2019). For example, the ways CRMs log and manage information about citizen communication creates discursive expectations that prioritize two main tasks: data-collection and customer satisfaction, which I explain below.

#### **4.2.3. Data Collection**

When constituents contact their Member of Congress, their contact is placed into aggregate buckets, also called “batches”, that categorize and label contact into broad topics of interest. For example, staffers may use batches such as “health care” or “impeachment” to categorize each contact. The majority of these batches are passed up the chain of the office command by mail reports that circulate the office to inform staffers of constituent opinion. In her dissertation, Abernathy (2015) asked staffers through an open-ended survey question to detail the content of mail reports. She found that only half of the 84 offices surveyed indicated that the mail report

included ‘top’ incoming issues (i.e., the topic that constituents mostly contacted the office about that week). Only nine offices indicated they also reported a pro/con status for each issue. The result of these aggregate data collections is a reduction of value to dialogue and reason-giving by constituents to near zero.

#### **4.2.4. Customer Satisfaction**

In addition to aggregation, CRMs reinforce the goal of satisfying constituents like satisfying customers. Staffers share the widely held opinion to keep citizens happy, they must provide formal responses to citizens in a timely manner (McDonald & Mazmanian, 2019). This has resulted in a focus on turn-around times to respond to each form of incoming contact. The goal of constituent communication is responsiveness rather than substantive input for policy decision-making.

The importance of the turn-around time is reflected in the CRM’s tracking tools where dashboard displays let other staff know who is keeping up with the mail and what mail is backlogged in the office. The dashboards operationalize the efficiency and effectiveness of the correspondence staff, creating a tool to consistently track performance through response rates. If correspondence staff are behind in responding to letters, other staff can see their progress in the CRM.

The influx of communication is so large, and the staff capacity so small, that automation towards constituent contact is almost essential if offices want to keep up. Even with current technology, it takes congressional staff an average of 21 days to send back a generic form email to a constituent (Goldschmidt, 2011). Staffers understand that this is not ideal. Constituents are either angry because of the delay or angry because constituents forgot the email was sent in the first place, claiming that the response from their Member was unsolicited. It’s a losing situation.

To increase efficiency, staff keep a repository of sometimes over a hundred template letters in the CRM to use reply to constituents. The CRMs give staffers the ability to create these stock responses for mass-messaging which act more like thank-you notes than evidence of engaged communication.<sup>13</sup> Often the letters will provide updates on the state of bills or general information about what the Member is already doing to address the issue the constituent discussed. Responses are phrased as the final reply from the Member to the citizen and do not invite further exchange. It's a superficial level of engagement to make citizens feel like they are listened to without creating the kind of communication exchange that might inform the Member of constituent opinion.

### **4.3. Why Are Members of Congress Adopting These Tools?**

If these technologies are not providing meaningful methods of constituent engagement, why does Congress implement them? As Fenno identified during his political ethnography of Congress, Members believe that constituents want access to them. They want to feel like the Member is accountable and engaging in two-way conversations. To satisfy this belief, Members must make themselves accessible—or at least convey the possibility of access (Fenno, 1978). In turn, these actions help Members with their re-election campaigns by providing evidence of engagement with their constituency. Thus, it is in the Members interest to provide abundant opportunities for engagement.

There are institutional pressures that also affect the adoption of these communication technologies. By efficiently answering phone calls, maintaining a presence on social media, responding to letters and emails, and tracking constituent opinions, Members of Congress can assert that they are taking constituent voices into account. The act of responding to constituents and tracking their contact creates a form of symbolic responsiveness (Eulau & Karps, 1977), where

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<sup>13</sup> See the Staff Assistant/Legislative Correspondent Best Practices Guide which offers a great example of the recommended style of these form letters (Modernization Staff Association, 2021).

these actions create a sense of trust and confidence in the Member and help them feel legitimated by their colleagues and the public. Members may also feel obligated to integrate technology like the CRMs due to pressures for institutional homogeneity across congressional office. Because these technologies are adopted across the institution and parties, it's hard for Members and their teams to opt-out of many of these communication methods (McDonald et al., 2019). Most staff that I talk to recognize the issues with these methods. But institutional regulations over tool procurement and a lack of time or encouragement to change communication practices make it difficult to venture outside the norms set by the institution.

There are also regulations by the Communications Standards Commission (previously named the Franking Commission), the body that sets the rules of Member's communication practices, that make it hard for Members of Congress to engage. For example, Members need to get approval from the Commission for every unsolicited mass communication with constituents. If Members just want to provide an update on a piece of legislation that was previously communicated by a group of individuals, they need approval by the Commission for every response, which can take multiple weeks (U.S. House. The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, 2020).

Congress is also, quite frankly, under-resourced and over-capacity (LaPira et al., 2020). These low-cost digital communication tools supplement alternative high-cost means of engagement that Members cannot afford to undertake. They are scaffolds to manage a crumbling system.

Lastly, these communications technology like social media and CRMs replace more traditional forms of communication such as in-person town halls. Town halls have dwindled over the past few decades—some this due to Member avoidance of confrontation (Peters, 2013; Amber Phillips, 2017). Health care reform during the Obama administration led to waves of town hall chaos in which protestors disrupted Member remarks through persistent questioning and verbal attacks (Herbst, 2010). In 2017, another wave of angry town halls erupted across the country as

Members were attacked on the potential removal of the ACA (Fortin & Victor, 2017). It's becoming less attractive to hold town halls during times of policy contention.

At the same time, Members are holding fewer and fewer in-person events and moving towards more informal, less public, and less interactive modes of communication like online Q&As, recorded videos, and social media posts. Political scientists Carr and Evans (2018) believe this is intentional to avoid in-person engagement. Members no longer perceive these town halls as public meetings open to all, but platforms for protestors. Because these town halls no longer support their agenda for personal promotion, Carr & Evans predict they are moving to more controlled digital forms of communication. Together, all these reasons attest to the tremendous issues of constituent communication in Congress.

#### **4.3.1. A Failing System**

Given the changes to communication methods, there is a shift from the *public sphere* of constituent engagement to a *public screen* (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002). According to Carr & Evans, the public screen of Congress creates both a symbolic screen-like barrier or filter to constituent engagement and a technological screen on a computer compared to face-face interaction (2018). Members use internet communication to maintain the essence of accountability while avoiding kinds of in-person communication that are no longer useful for their personal presentation.

Despite the substantial amount of effort that goes into these digital forms of communication, the logging, tracking, batching, and responding to constituent contact pushes citizens further away from actually engaging with their representative. In Abernathy's exploration of mail reports, she found no indication that citizen voices were being used systematically to influence policymaking (2015). The Open Foundation, who also ran a large study to understand the constituent communication process, found no clear indication that citizen input is mediated through

digital platforms. Despite calling their report “From Voicemail to Votes”, they found that “Constituent input is used most universally to back up existing policy agendas.” (Open Gov Foundation, 2017, p. 10)

Although phone, email, social media, and other digital pathways give off the idea that Members are listening and interpreting the views of the constituency, internal evidence suggests they are not. Current communication practices of Congress have resulted in a flood of low-value communication, a firewall of filtering, institutional expectations of aggregating and responding to contact, and low staff capacity and resources to fix their problems. The practices of engaging with constituents have become a formality rather than a utility to improve the representativeness of Members of Congress. Even worse, the systems reinforce poor practices which limit any appeals or bandwidth to introduce more meaningful forms of constituent engagement.

#### **4.3.2. Effects of the Congressional Communication Practice**

It’s important to note that these communication practices are not entirely new. They represent incremental changes to form letters, post-cards, and petitions that have been used for decades. Nonetheless, the volume is not the same and the resources of the institution have dwindled. What is left is an institution in dire need to support.

The practice of constituent communication also highlights a very crucial point: the act of constituent communication does not really involve the representative at all—nor has it ever over the past few decades. Rather, it is the representative’s staff that collectively offer a voice of the representative to the public. Due to the shift in communication, offices have reallocated staff resources away from other tasks of legislation and casework (Hysom, 2008). In 2005, some Congressional offices reported allocating up to 50% of their staff to constituent correspondence (Brad Fitch et al., 2005). However, the number of staff in each office has only increased 4% since



1982 (Straus & Glassman, 2016); there are just too little staff to manage the communication without a reliance on technology.

If we compare the practices of Members of Congress to the theories of representation discussed in the first chapter, theory and reality don't match. This kind of communication, through emails, CRMs, and mail reports, does not provide a legitimate guide to help Members interpret constituent views. As Glassman testified before the Select Committee of Modernization in 2019 "if constituents cannot easily communicate preferences to Members, congressional action is less likely to reflect public opinion." (*"Congress and the Frank: Bringing Congressional Mailing Standards into the 21st Century,"* 2019), and indeed this seems to be the case. This poor system of representative-constituent engagement has long-lasting effects on the perceived value of constituent input to the practice of representation. For constituent engagement to help Members fulfill their duties and interpret the voice of the constituency, things need to change.

## **4.4. Improving Congress**

What should be done? The problem of constituent engagement in Congress is clearly a complex and fraught situation. But any improvements, even minor, could help this faltering system. That is why many advocates on and surrounding Capitol Hill continue to work to improve it. Most of these improvement proposals fall into two approaches—improving the current communications methods within Congress or proposing novel forms of interaction. I discuss both of those approaches below.

### **4.4.1. Changing the Inbox**

The first approach is to create micro-improvements to the current methods in order to address the immediate problems of staff capacity. For example, there are offices interested in changing the methods in which they respond to constituent contact. I have anecdotal evidence from

some staffers proposing experiments to automate responses to advocacy campaign mail in order to focus more time on responding to individual contact. Some congressional offices are experimenting with alternative forms of constituent correspondence. For example, Congressman Rick Crawford (AR-1) gave up social media platforms for alternative methods such as texting (Ng, 2018). The hope is that texting will provide a direct platform for constituents to contact the office compared to social media. This switch was motivated by concerns that media companies are monetizing constituent communication by charging for constituent time on their platforms. That being said, the information collected through text messages ends up in the same CRM processes as other communication, so it's unclear if such changes impact the way the Member's office collects and interprets constituent input.

Many of these smaller improvement solutions also come from the technology vendors who optimize for efficiency and reduced staff effort. For example, Fireside21 has been experimenting with machine learning algorithms to make it easier to batch and organize constituent mail and match it to a pre-written response (Nelson et al., 2019). The company Indigov has created a custom segmentation process to send customized automated message responses to constituents, claiming to reduce responses to constituents from 32–64 days to 8 hours.<sup>14</sup> The goal is to make communication as automated and fast as possible.

Although these tools reduce the labor spent on constituent communication, these approaches do not tackle the harder problem of re-engaging constituents in more meaningful forms of communication. They clean the inbox without improving the relationship between Members and their constituents.

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<sup>14</sup> According to the front page of their website on Indigov.us. Date Accessed: 1/19/2021

#### 4.4.2. Changing Engagement

Taking a second approach, congressional advocates and internal committees are trying alternative proposals for engagement. These methods shift engagement by moving away from the current practices and taking a more—unsurprisingly—deliberative approach to engagement.

In 2006, Neblo et al. and the Congressional Management Foundation hosted 19 telephone town halls with 12 Members of Congress and a broad representative sample of constituents (Neblo et al., 2018). They found promising results from these remote town halls; a more representative sample of eligible voters than actual voters showed up to the events, constituents became more informed about the issues discussed, and the Member provided direct engagement and justification for their policy decision rationale. This led to overall high persuasion rates from constituents on the Member's rationale for decision-making, high approval rates for each Member of Congress, and a positive evaluation of the overall town hall experience.

Voice of the People and the University of Maryland's Program for Public Consultation is improving citizen polling through the use of policy simulations. In these polling scenarios, constituents are placed into the shoes of policymakers to see arguments for and against policies and topics before they are polled. After seeing both sides, they are asked to decide like a policymaker would. In some cases, there are district-based interactions where constituents who participate in the policy polling scenarios meet in-person with their representative as the representative receives the results of the polling (Stettler, 2019). According to Steven Kull, the CEO of Voice of the people, having the representative present appears to be key to citizen satisfaction (Kull, 2019).

In the Beck Center's *Congress Modernization Report*, Lorelei Kelly outlines the steps that must be taken to include citizen voices in the policymaking process through district-level intermediaries. In essence, she suggests using the power of local staff and district offices, land-grant and public universities, and civic tech hubs to uplift citizen voices. Because these more local

bodies can meet constituents where they are at home they offer more on-the-ground perspectives and expertise to the Member (L. Kelly, 2020).

Recently, the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic brought new opportunities to experiment with other forms of engagement. Although not directly related to constituent communication, congressional advocates and former Members of Congress have developed a format for online-based congressional hearings and markups to ensure they run as effectively online as they do in-person. More than a dozen former Members of Congress tested a mock committee hearing (Harris, 2020). These mock hearings jump-started additional experimentations on multiple committees to set up remote hearings. There is hope here that Members and advocates can use these new remote methods when things return to normal. Remote or semi-remote hearings create opportunities to bring in more citizen expertise into committees without having to fly to D.C. It also allows Members to spend more time at home or away if needed, such as in cases of maternity leave. These remote opportunities already exist in places like Spain (Alsina & Gambrell, 2020) and could be integrated into place like Capitol Hill.

Each of these efforts offers new opportunities to utilize technology for deliberative experiences. They recognize the need for communication practices to move towards engaged and discursive constituent experiences, with promising results. Thus, there seems to be a general move by congressional office and its non-profit and academic advocates to provide more deliberative engagement between Members and constituents.

#### **4.4.3. Congress Is Seeing the Problem**

The examples listed below were run by congressional non-profits and academics outside Congress. But Congress is also recognizing the need to change the rulebook for constituent communication. For example, the Select Committee on Modernization had a two-year mandate to

explore methods to modernize the institution. In their main findings and recommendations, the committee created a section called “Increase the Quality of Constituent Communication” (U.S. House. The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, 2020, p. 175). The committee offered seven recommendations to current practices.

One of those recommendations was to “Increase opportunities for constituents to communicate with their Representative” (pg. 185) which included two primary requests. The first request was to allow Members to reach out to constituents about a topic they have already reached out about. The second is to increase the modes by which Congress can reach out to constituents using more opt-in methods of communication by phone calls and text messages. Essentially, they want to increase the technology mediums for constituents to opt-in to representative contact.

Such forms of proactive contact could be very beneficial to Congress. The new opt-in systems can help Members invited selected groups of constituents to discuss issues when they know the topic concerns them. This could open up larger avenues for engagement with sub-constituencies interest in specific topics or issues.

There is still much work to be done to improve the communications process. None of the recommendations from the Select Committee can turn into new rules without a formal bill and vote from Congress. But the committee shows that at least part of Congress is listening to new ideas and well-designed deliberative methods make the forum intervention in this dissertation timely and appropriate. This is exactly what I attempted to do in my deliberative forum discussed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5.**

### **Study Design and Methodology**

Representation is a critical structure to democracy and ideally, representatives should be good interpreters of constituent views and needs (Chapter 2). When designed thoughtfully, communications technology could encourage quality deliberation between representative and constituents that could make representatives better interpreters (Chapter 3). However, Members of Congress are failing to find appropriate methods to do so. The communications technology that Congress currently uses to engage with constituents is not providing quality communication (Chapter 4). Now that the scene is set, it's time to discuss the deliberative forum intervention.

This experiment tests whether an asynchronous online forum can promote deliberation between constituents and Member of Congress. As a result of this deliberation, I hypothesize that the forum can improve citizens' approval towards the Member, improve their feelings of political efficacy, and empower citizens to take part in their Member's decision-making process. In addition, such deliberative online forums can improve the ways that Members and their staff interact with constituents and interpret their voice and opinions. As a result, the forums can remedy issues seen within current congressional engagement practices and improve the legitimacy of representation in Congress.

#### **5.1. Study Design**

The forum was designed as an online, week-long, single-topic forum between one Members of Congress and their constituents. To explain the importance of each of those qualities, I break down the details underlying each of those design decisions below.

### **5.1.1. Online**

This forum took place online in a text-based format. Text-based and asynchronous platforms have been found to support reflexive and rational conversations (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011), where people can compose messages at their own pace for debate (Coleman & Gøtze, 2002; Dahlberg, 2001; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Thus, I felt that this mode of discussion would be likely to promote in-depth debate.

This text-based virtual design allowed for larger participant numbers, far more than an average town hall. By combining online engagement with a week-long session, the number of citizens that could participate increased substantially, allowing for a flexible schedule of engagement across time. These platforms offer convenience for both the Member and constituents.

### **5.1.2. Week-Long**

I chose the forum to last one-week long for multiple reasons—the first being convenience. Other forms of discussion such as in-person town halls only last 1–2 hours. In that time, Members can only answer a dozen or so questions that can be hand-picked by the Members and their staff. Short-term discussions also do not provide opportunities for rumination, fact-checking, and informed questioning which are essential for good deliberation. There is also evidence from online communication studies that shows synchronized online communication can lower the quality of interactions due to a lack of coherence (i.e. a feeling of disconnectedness or disjuncture in a piece of discourse) but this outcome can depend on the topic of discussion (Stromer-Galley & Martinson, 2009). By facilitating slower-moving dialogue, this forum will potentially provide more deliberative discussion in comparison to synchronous online events.

### **5.1.3. Single-Topic**

Single-topic forums also have numerous benefits. Focusing on a single topic creates the possibility for depth and details and provides a common basis of understanding. Single-topic town halls also provide opportunities for policymakers to offer information on the topic before-hand, allowing more time for citizens to become informed before entering the forum space. This narrowed and informed focus can compensate for situations where citizens don't feel competent enough to participate (C. Abernathy et al., 2019). With a potential for a more constructive conversation around a singular topic, constituents may view both the Member and the platform more positively.

I allowed the Member and their staff to choose the topic of forum. By choosing the topic, the Member signals to constituents that this topic is prioritized by the office and they are open to input from the constituency. There are down-sides to this option. Member of Congress and their staff may select uncontroversial or sensitive topics to avoid points of contention. That being said, in this case the Member did choose a topic of contention to the community.

### **5.1.4. Collaborating with POPVOX**

This forum was run in collaboration with a small civic engagement company called POPVOX. POPVOX was created by former congressional staffers and advocates to improve communication between citizens and their government. As a website, POPVOX is already used by over 1 million people. Over the past nine years, the website has provided a space for citizens to read bills, leave comments, state positions on bills, and contact Members of Congress. Because POPVOX was created and run by prior Hill staffers, the platform has established trust within Congress. The employees are attuned to the problems currently facing Congress and what can be done to improve current processes.



Unlike other social media platforms, POPVOX was grant-funded with a business plan for becoming self-sustaining. They do not sell or exchange information about users to any outside organization except Congress. This is important to maintain the integrity of the site as a civic-focused platform. It carries a strong message to Congress that the platform was built for the institution and not for the benefit of outside vendors.

POPVOX can support ongoing maintenance and upgrades. This is critical to the long-term success of any system hoping to have an effect in real policy-making environments. It is well known in software design and development that 50–80% of the cost of any software system is in the maintenance of the software (Dehaghani & Hajrahimi, 2013). As Cavalier, Kim, and Zaiss caution in their development of PICOLA, an online deliberative discussion system, “While customized software based on open source and commercial tools is an enticing concept, the truth is that such programs often require a \$60,000/year programmer to maintain them. And it is all too common to find such environments orphaned once the programmer moves on” (2009, p. 73). The group was unable to maintain the software after a 5-year NSF grant cycle. By working with an established company, I tried to ensure the opportunity for long-term use and maintenance. If Members find the tool useful, they can continue using the product on their own.

There was no conflict of financial interest for this study; POPVOX provided the platform for free while I obtained no monetary benefit. Before the forum took place, I was classified as an unpaid intern for POPVOX in order to gain access to the platform and help moderate the conversations.

## **5.2. The Platform**

POPVOX developed a platform called LegiDash prior to this study. LegiDash is a platform for legislative staffers in Congress. It is a free communications platform designed to help

congressional offices communicate with constituents. LegiDash also provides a calendar and legislative updates, a member and staff directory, and the ability to 'follow' Members of Congress and their legislative activity. The feature that I used for the deliberation is called a 'Member Post'. Here, a Member of Congress can create a forum post, like posting something on a social media site such as Facebook, and both the Member and constituents are able to comment on that post.

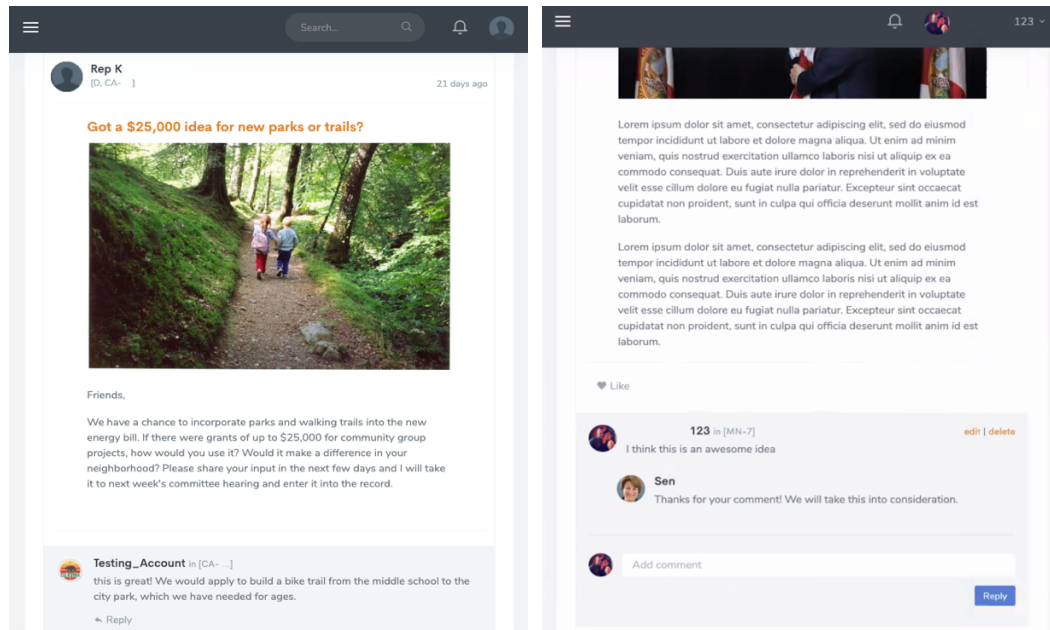


Figure 5-1. Screenshot Example of POPVOX Member-Post Interface. Shows an initial Member Post (left) and proceeding comments (left and right).

*Quasi-Anonymity:* The virtual platform also provided opportunities to experiment with anonymity. Anonymity has the benefit of helping filter cues about race, age, gender—which can broaden participation. Constituents can also freely speak out without judgment and identification by neighbors within the constituency, which may prevent speech in more public conversations (Leshed, 2009). There are, however, controversies about too much anonymity. De-individualization theory, which includes studies that look at people from positions of anonymity, suggests personal behaviors in social settings can become deregulated without identifiability (Spears et al., 2002). In many online cases, anonymity can produce negative effects such as limited

social cues, trolling, and vulgar language (Cheng et al., 2017; Kilner & Hoadley, 2005). Conversely, identification can foster civility, rationality, and sincerity (Coleman & Moss, 2012). A healthy balance between the advantages and disadvantages of anonymity should be met.

Thus, capitalizing on the best of both worlds, this platform offered semi-anonymity where citizens are anonymous to each other but not the Members of Congress. When citizens sign-up for POPVOX, they are required to provide their real name and address, however only their username of choice is presented publicly on the site. This is to ensure that all citizens have the ability to remain anonymous to other citizens. However, the real name of the constituent will be identifiable to the Member of Congress. The citizen is informed of this quasi-anonymity. POPVOX hopes this design choice will offer opportunities for open and productive communication where people can speak without fear or judgment by community members while maintaining accountability for their actions and transparency to the platform and the Member. This feature was useful for the deliberative forum.

*Communication Restrictions:* Only a confirmed constituent is allowed to comment on posts made by their Member of Congress. Unlike other social media platforms like Facebook where anyone can comment on pages of different Members of Congress, only citizens of the district are allowed to comment. Constituency is confirmed by address, and constituents can only change their address once every month in order to prevent deception.<sup>15</sup>

Constituents can only comment on posts made by the Member; they are not allowed to comment on post made by other constituents. The reason why POPVOX made this decision was to

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<sup>15</sup> Although constituents cannot change their address more than once a month, there are no restrictions on what address they use nor are there features on the platform to verify the legitimacy of the address.

avoid public debate and minimize opportunities for unproductive interactions that have manifested on other platforms (like flame wars, personal attacks, or loudest voices crowding out others).

The lack of constituent-constituent interaction makes for an interesting study. Initially, I felt that it was inappropriate to limit avenues of interaction because the point of this study was to increase deliberative aspects of engagement in Congress. However, the most important channel of engagement in this forum is between the representative and constituent, not between constituents. POPVOX felt it was unwise to open up avenues that take away focus from Member interactions, and thus the limit of interactions was maintained.

### **5.3. Study Outline**

I recruited a self-selected sample of constituents to participate in the forum. Two sub-samples were randomly chosen to be representative of the district by demographics. One sub-sample was asked to attend the online forum (i.e., treatment/forum group). The other sub-sample was asked to only partake in the pre/post surveys (i.e., control group). The forum group was invited to attend the forum with their Member of Congress from February 24<sup>th</sup>-March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020. Both groups took a pre- and post-survey to answer questions related to the forum research. Although this study took place during the beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, there was no influence on the timeline of events. The final timeline is detailed in Figure 5–2. Blue squares indicate participant groups, tan circles indicate participant activity, and the text above the dotted lines indicate research team actions.

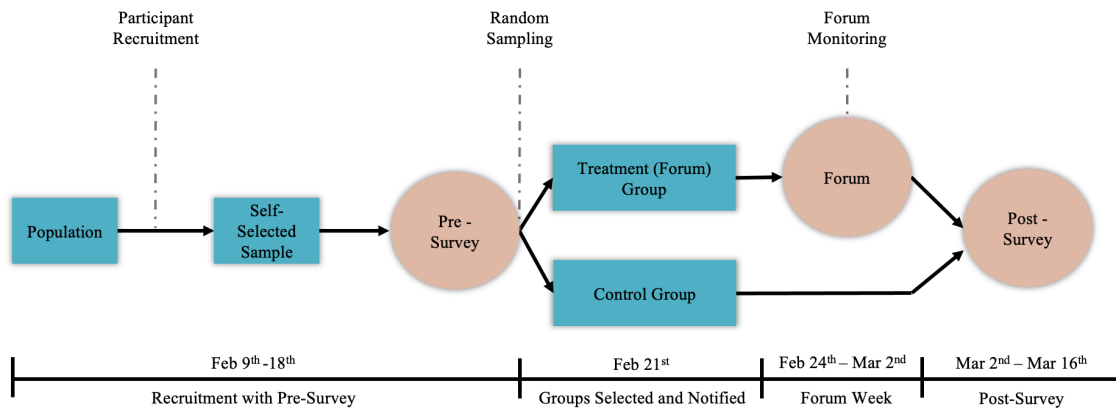


Figure 5-2 Study Timeline of Events..

## 5.4. Research Questions

The primary research questions (RQ) can be divided into two sections—the citizen’s experience and the Member’s experience. As seen in previous research, citizens often have little direct communication with policymakers, making it very difficult to inform their policy-decision making in a meaningful way. This platform is designed to promote direct engagement and, as a result, help Members become better interpreters of constituency opinion. The research questions were the following:

### 5.4.1. Deliberation:

**D-RQ-1:** Did the forum provide a space for deliberative engagement between the Member of Congress and their constituents?

### 5.4.2. Citizens:

**C-RQ-1:** Does the forum appeal to a diverse sample of constituents that reflects the constituency population?

**C-RQ-2:** Do citizens feel an increased sense of political efficacy as a result of the online forum?

**C-RQ-3:** Does an online forum with their Member change how citizens view their Member?

**C-RQ-3.1:** Does the online forum increase citizens' feeling that the Member is being receptive to the collective voices of the constituency?

**C-RQ-3.2:** Does the online forum increase citizens' approval of the Member?

**C-RQ-4:** Do citizens find value in the experience of participating in the forum?

**C-RQ-4.1:** Does the experience mitigate issues seen in other forms of discussion such as access to the member, freedom of expression, and impact on policy decision making?

**C-RQ-4.2:** Does the forum format provide citizens a viable space to engage their representatives?

**C-RQ-4.3:** Is the POPVOX platform user-friendly for participating citizens?

### **5.4.3. Members**

On the Member side, the goal of this study was to provide a quality platform where the Member trusts citizens' opinions as valid and well-informed and would consider the outputs of the forum in their policy decision-making process. Just like citizens, it is important that the Member and their office find the platform user-friendly and easy to integrate into their work practices. This makes it more likely they will use it in the future.

**M-RQ-1:** Does the online forum offer Members and staff something of value to their decision-making?

**M-RQ-2:** Do Members and staff believe the online forum offers a quality space for citizen-engagement?

**M-RQ-3:** Does the online forum offer Members and staff a user-friendly space?

**M-RQ-4:** Does the Member and their staff believe the continued use of these platforms could be attractive?

## **5.5. Methods of Analysis**

### **5.5.1. Deliberation Analysis**

**D-RQ-1:** Did the forum provide a space for deliberative engagement between the Member of Congress and their constituents?

How did the forum fair as a quality deliberation? This information helps inform the outcomes of the survey and each of my research questions. There were multiple methods consulted to analyze the forum content. Previous studies of online communication offer a variety of methods for qualitative analysis of the deliberation (Black et al., 2011; Freelon, 2010; T. Graham, 2012; Jensen, 2003; Steenbergen et al., 2003). Some of these methods require rigorous human coding, such as Steenbergen et al.'s Discourse Quality Index (2003), or rigorous computation such as Gold et al.'s measures of four core aspects of deliberative discourse (2015). Given the small size of this forum and my labor capacity, I decided to use qualitative coding. I used Saldaña's manual for qualitative coding (Saldaña, 2015) to conduct a multi-stage coding. I captured salient themes/concepts engendered by the forum, which help indicate the deliberativeness of the forum in comparison to Steenbergen et al.'s description of elements for the deliberation.

### **5.5.2. Measures of Civic Empowerment and Approval**

To answer the research questions, I use three sources of data: pre/post surveys, interviews, and data collected from the forum.

**C-RQ-1:** Does the forum appeal to a diverse sample of constituents that reflects the constituency population?

I answered this question using demographic information collected in the pre-survey and attendance information for the recruitment and forum participation. This information was compared to the demographics of the district.

**C-RQ-2:** Do citizens feel an increased sense of political efficacy as a result of the online forum?

As discussed in Chapter 2, participation has the ability to increase further civic participation, but those motivations may only occur if constituents have a substantial feeling of efficacy. Understanding efficacy also helps determine the propensity of the constituency to continue engagement in these types of deliberative venues.

*Political efficacy* is regarded as one of the primary antecedents to political participation. The concept was originally defined as "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, i.e., that it is worthwhile to perform one's civic duties. It is the feeling that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change" (Campbell et al., 1954, p. 18). The more a person is informed and understands politics, and feels like their voice can be heard, the more likely they are to participate.

The primary and most tested measures being that of *internal* and *external* political efficacy. Internal efficacy (IE) refers to citizens' feelings of personal competence "to understand and to participate effectively in politics" (Craig et al., 1990; Niemi et al., 1991). External efficacy (EE) refers to citizens' perceptions of the responsiveness of government to citizens' demands (Balch, 1974; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

To develop my questions for political efficacy, I adapted the work of Erhardt Graeff and his measures of civic empowerment (2018). Graeff developed these measures to evaluate the empowerment of individuals before and after engaging with technology designed for civic engagement. Such measures are well-suited for this study. Using Graeff's methodology, I compared multiple papers with validated measures on efficacy to develop a measure of internal and external efficacy specific to this study. I used pre- and post-surveys to measure short term and long-term



effects of the forum on citizen's belief that they are capable of participating in the political system (internal efficacy), that the system is responsive to their input (external efficacy).

*Table 5-1 Question Comparison for Measures of Internal and External Efficacy*

<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Efficacy Questions Within the Literature</b>	<b>My Question (7-point Likert)</b>
<i>Internal Political Efficacy</i> (IE-1)	<p>(Qualified)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I considered myself well-qualified to participate in the group decision making process (Morrell, 2003).</li> <li>• I consider myself to be well qualified -to participate in politics (Niemi et al., 1991).</li> <li>• I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics (PRE) (Morrell, 2005).</li> <li>• I considered myself well-qualified to participate in the group decision making process (POST).</li> <li>• I consider myself well-qualified to participate in local affairs (Graeff, 2018).</li> <li>• I am perfectly able to understand and assess important political questions (Reichert, 2016).</li> <li>• I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics (Tine Nabatchi, 2007).</li> </ul>	I consider myself well-qualified to participate in general political discussions.
<i>Internal Political Efficacy</i> (IE-2)	<p>(Understanding)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I felt that I had a pretty good understanding of the important issues discussed by my group (Morrell, 2003).</li> <li>• I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country (Niemi et al., 1991).</li> <li>• I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country (PRE) (Morrell, 2005).</li> <li>• I felt that I had a pretty good understanding of the important issues discussed by my group' (POST) (Morrell, 2005).</li> <li>• I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important issues facing my local area (Graeff, 2018).</li> </ul>	I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.

<i>Internal Political Efficacy</i> <i>(IE-3)</i>	(Informed) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I think that I was well-informed about the issues discussed by my group (Morrell, 2003).</li> <li>• I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people (Niemi et al., 1991).</li> <li>• I think that I am as well-informed about politics and government as most people (PRE) (Morrell, 2005).</li> <li>• I think that I was well-informed about the issues discussed by my group (POST) (Morrell, 2005).</li> <li>• I think that I am better informed about local issues and local government than most people (Graeff, 2018).</li> </ul>	I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people.
<i>External Political Efficacy</i> <i>(EE-1)</i>	(No Care) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elected officials don't care what people like me think (Nabatchi, 2007).</li> <li>• I don't think public officials care much for people like me think (Craig &amp; Maggiotto, 1982).</li> <li>• My local government DOESN'T care much what people like me think (Graeff, 2018).</li> <li>• I don't think other members of the group cared much what people like me thought (Morrell, 2003).</li> </ul>	Most federally elected officials DON'T care what people like me think
<i>External Political Efficacy</i> <i>(EE-2)</i>	(No Say) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People like me had no say about what the group did when deciding the issues discussed (Morrell, 2003).</li> <li>• People like me DON'T have any say about what my local government does (Graeff, 2018).</li> <li>• No matter whom I vote, it won't make a difference (recoded) (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).</li> </ul>	People like me DON'T have any say about what my federal government does.

**C-RQ-3:** Does an online forum with their Member change how citizens view their Member?

**C-RQ-3.1:** Does the online forum increase citizens' feeling that the Member is being receptive to the collective voices of the constituency?

Direct engagement with the Member could change how constituents view their Member. In particular, do citizens feel that their Member is being receptive to the collective voices of the constituency? I explored this question through adapted measures of *government efficacy* that is re-framed toward representatives (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Again, the method of comparing and selecting these questions was adapted from Graeff’s civic empowerment metrics (2018). The concept of government efficacy comes from Gil de Zúñiga et al. who believed measures of internal and external political efficacy were not enough to measure a separate concept—the belief that the government system is responsive to all citizens, and not just the person answering the survey. It is a way to measure not only if the citizen is being heard, but if the citizen believes their government is listening and considering the views of the collective. This concept, which they coined ‘government efficacy’ focuses broadly on the government’s response to all people.

I adapted the measure of government efficacy to determine if citizens feel a similar sense of collective efficacy towards Congress and their individual Member of Congress. In the pre-survey, constituents were asked to answer this question based on Congress, which I call *Congressional Efficacy*. The question of Member Efficacy was retrospectively asked in the post-survey for the forum group, as I did not want to assume that each person knew the identity of their Member of Congress before the forum.

*Table 5-2 Questions of Government Efficacy converted to questions related to the Member of Congress*

Measurement	Original Question (s) (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017)	My Questions (7-point Likert)
<i>Congressional Efficacy</i>  (CE-1)	My government works on everyone’s behalf.	Congress works on everyone’s behalf.
<i>Member Efficacy</i>		I feel that congressperson ( <i>Member name</i> ) works on the district’s behalf.

(ME-1)		
<i>Congressional Efficacy</i> (CE-2)	My government makes decisions based on what citizens want.	Congress makes decisions based on what citizens want.
<i>Member Efficacy</i> (ME-2)		I feel that congressperson ( <i>Member name</i> ) makes decisions based on what citizens of the district wants.
<i>Congressional Efficacy</i> (CE-3)	Our political institutions (e.g., Congress, political parties, etc.) represent all citizens.	Congress represents all citizens.
<i>Member Efficacy</i> (ME-3)		I feel that congressperson ( <i>Member name</i> ) represents all citizens of the district.
<i>Congressional Efficacy</i> (CE-4)	My government's decisions are transparent.	Congress's decisions are transparent.
<i>Member Efficacy</i> (ME-4)		I feel that the decisions of Congressperson ( <i>Member name</i> ) are transparent.
<i>Congressional Efficacy</i> (CE-5)	Today's American democracy works well.	Today's American democracy works well.

**C-RQ-3.2:** Does the online forum increase citizens' approval of the Member?

In order to understand if the deliberation enhanced constituent trust in the Member, I asked constituents to state their overall approval of the Member of Congress. I used the exact phrasing from Neblo et al.'s deliberative town hall surveys.

Table 5-3 Question of Approval

Approval (A-1)	I approve of the way ( <i>Member name</i> ) is handling (his/her) job as a Congress person (Minozzi et al., 2015).	I approve of the way Congressperson ( <i>Member name</i> ) is handling their job (Minozzi et al., 2015)
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### 5.5.3. Measures of Forum Experience:

**C-RQ-4:** Do citizens find value in the experience of participating in the forum?

What makes the experience worth the time and effort for engagement of participants? I developed my questions for this analysis. These questions do not measure the experience of deliberation as done in other studies (Nabatchi, 2007), but the experience of engaging with the representative in an online setting.

**C-RQ-4.1:** Does the experience mitigate issues seen in other forms of discussion such as access to the member, freedom of expression, and impact on policy decision making?

To develop these questions, I considered the failures of current communication practices highlighted in my previous studies, and the benefits of POPVOX as an alternative form of online engagement. I focus on three themes: access, expression, and impact. I believe these themes offered important questions for understanding the outcomes of the deliberation in comparison to how constituent communication is perceived in other methods.

- i. *Access* – In my ethnographic fieldwork, I highlighted significant roadblocks for citizens to access Members attention on digital platforms (Mcdonald et al., 2019; McDonald & Mazmanian, 2019). Current online media sites like Facebook cannot confirm constituency, and staff spend little time responding on those platforms or relaying messages to Members. This often signals to citizens that their Member isn't listening. However, POPVOX attempts to resolve this issue through confirmation of constituency and direct outreach. As a result, do citizens feel like the platform offers direct access to the Member? This will

- require citizens to feel like they are being heard, thus feeling like they had access to the Member's attention.
- ii. *Expression* – There is a tension between anonymity and disclosure for public forums on digital platforms. Anonymity allows citizens to speak freely, but it can also cause uncivil discussion. Public identification can resolve issues of civility through accountability; however, minority voices tend to speak less out of fear of retaliation. Anonymity also helps people speak out openly about stigmatized issues (Rho et al., 2017). POPVOX is a hybrid combining the benefits of anonymity and accountability. Given this design choice, do citizens feel like they could express their opinions freely as an anonymous participant while remaining identifiable to the Member?
  - iii. *Impact* – Do citizens feel like the outcomes of the forum discussion would be used by their Member in their policy decision-making? This question relates to access and related questions that measure government/representative efficacy. However, access denotes the ability to speak directly to Members, while this question revolves around the ability to affect the Members actions. This question is likely related to a constituent's satisfaction with the Member's response to constituents in the forum, and whether the Member provided evidence that participant opinions were considered.

All three questions were asked using a seven-point Likert scale. They were only asked to constituents in the pre-survey if they had engaged with the Member in some capacity before the online forum. Their responses to questions of access, expression, and impact in the pre-survey were compared to their responses to the same question in the post-survey, but in reference to the online forum.

Table 5-4 Questions related to Access, Expression, and Impact

Access	During this online discussion, I feel that Congressperson ( <i>Member name</i> ) was listening to what I had to say.
Expression	During this online discussion, I feel that I could express my opinions openly.
Impact	I feel that Congressperson ( <i>Member name</i> ) will use the input from citizens in this online discussion in their policy decision-making.

**C-RQ-4.2:** Does the forum format provide citizens a viable space to engage their representatives?

Do citizens find this style of the discussion (week-long online forum) viable for engagement with their Member of Congress? These questions were not geared around whether these online discussions will replace other forms of engagement such as face-to-face town halls, but to enhance current opportunities. I was particularly interested if (1) the constituent believes the online forums should continue in the future and (2) if the temporal length of the forum was appropriate.

Table 5-5 Questions related to platform attractiveness and long-term use

Discussions Like These	In addition to other forms of citizen engagement (for example letters, town halls, social media), I think Members of Congress should have online discussions like these.  (Scale: 7-point Likert)
Discussion Time	The researchers chose to have this discussion last one week. If this project happens again, would you prefer that the discussion last...  (Scale: Less than A Week–The Same–More than A Week)

**C-RQ-4.3:** Is the POPVOX platform user-friendly for participating citizens?

I also requested user experience feedback on POPVOX as a platform. In business, the standard measure of user experiences is the Net Promoter Score (NPS), which measures the overall satisfaction with a product or service through one question: “How likely is it that you would recommend company X to a friend or colleague?”. Although easy to integrate, the NPS has been

empirically questioned by scholars (Keiningham et al., 2008). This question is supposed to measure not only satisfaction but also customer loyalty (Reichheld, 2003). Loyalty to the platform is not the aim of this project, because the use of the platform selection is dependent on the choices of the Member and not constituents. Instead of NPS, I used measure is the System Usability Scale (SUS), which measures attitudes towards system usability (Brooke, 1996; Sauro & Lewis, 2011). This is a validated measure using 10 questions:

1. I think that I would like to use the website frequently.
2. I found the website to be simple.
3. I thought the website was easy to use.
4. I think that I could use the website without the support of a technical person.
5. I found the various functions in the website were well integrated.
6. I thought there was a lot of consistency in the website.
7. I would imagine that most people would learn to use the website very quickly.
8. I found the website very intuitive.
9. I felt very confident using the website.
10. I could use the website without having to learn anything new.

There is some evidence that the questions can be separated into constructs of usability (8 items) and learnability (2 items, 4 and 10) (Sauro & Lewis, 2009). These measures are specific to the usability of the platform. However, these measures center around the entire platform. Questions like “I found the various functions in the website were well integrated” and “I think that I would like to use the website frequently” are not useful when participants are only asked to engage with one feature of the POPVOX platform at one time. In addition, I cut two questions, 5 and 8, after cognitive interviewing (see Section 5.5.4). The final questions were the following:



*Table 5-6 Questions from System Usability Scale*

SUS-1	I found the POPVOX website to be simple.
SUS-2	I thought the POPVOX website was easy to use.
SUS-3	I think that I could use POPVOX without the support of a technical person.
SUS-4	I would imagine that most people would learn to use POPVOX very quickly.
SUS-5	I felt very confident using POPVOX.
SUS-6	I could use POPVOX without having to learn anything new.

#### **5.5.4. Cognitive Interviews:**

To ensure that the questions are comprehensible and appropriate measurements, I conducted cognitive interviews (Willis, 2005) with everyday constituents. This included 13 cognitive interviews with constituents within the district recruited from the local university as undergraduate or graduate students, and members of a local community meet-up group that comes together to discuss philosophical questions. This meet-up group offered a diverse group of constituents from the community—with an especially older generation. Because the district was higher educated and wealthier than most—it was reasonable to conduct interviews on constituents that are more educated and able to attend meet-up groups.

Most interviewees were interpreting questions of efficacy the same. For example, the first question “I consider myself well-qualified to participate in general political discussions”, I found was related to one’s educational record and their attentiveness to information within the media. Responses to “I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country” were also associated with a general understanding of the issues. The question “In addition to other forms of citizen engagement (for example: letters, town halls, social media), I

think Members of Congress should have online discussions like these” was incorporated in the study after a suggestion from an interviewee to talk broadly about platforms.

Some interviewees were confused when questions referred to populations as a general indicator. For example, using the phrase “most people” left some interviewees concerned about interpreting the described populations of “most people” differently than others, with some people feeling it was too difficult to compare themselves against everyone else. However, when asking for a description of “most people” the interviewees had a shared assumption that the question was asking them to compare against an “average person” within their frame of reference.

Nabatchi phrased the question, “Elected officials don't care what people like me think” (2007), but in order to gain a general understanding of how the constituent felt about the majority of Congress, the word “most” was added to create the question “Most federally elected officials DON'T care what people like me think.” Interviewees had no issues interpreting “most” within this context. Overall, the cognitive interviews made me feel confident that the questions of efficacy made sense.

In addition to questions of efficacy, I also asked participants questions from the Systems Usability Scale. The questions were tested by asking participants to choose one website they use frequently and answer the questions based off of that website. Two questions, “I found the various functions in the website were well integrated” and “I found the website very intuitive” caused confusion. Some participants believed the first question was too vague to answer. The second question seemed redundant to the question of whether the website was easy to use. Those two questions were cut. All final survey questions are located in Appendix D as they were displayed to constituents.

### **5.5.5. Member-Staff Interview**

On the Member side of this study, the goal was to provide a platform where the Member could trust constituent opinions as valid and well-informed and would consider the outputs of the forum in their policy decision-making process. Just like citizens, it was important that the Member and their office find the platform user-friendly and easy to integrate into their work practices. This would make it more likely to use the forum in the future. These research questions below were asked directly to staff in a post-forum interview.

**M-RQ-1:** Does the online forum offer Members and staff something of value to their decision-making?

**M-RQ-2:** Do Members and staff believe the online forum offers a quality space for citizen-engagement?

**M-RQ-3:** Does the online forum offer Members and staff a user-friendly space?

**M-RQ-4:** Does the Member and their staff believe the continued use of these platforms could be attractive?

### **5.5.6. Testing the Platform**

Before the forum began, I tested the Member post function of the online platform with a group of 40 students at the university. I received permission from the instructor to test the platform as part of their class on programming software and Python. I had the students discuss a question related to class content on the platform and then provide feedback through an online survey. This survey included open-ended questions on platform feedback as well as the SUS questions to test the questions' comprehension. The students provided substantial feedback to POPVOX for future design components and helped us identify software glitches that needed to be fixed before the official forum began.

## **Chapter 6.**

### **Results**

#### **6.1. Forum Preparation**

##### **6.1.1. Ethics**

To ensure I was abiding by the ethics rules and regulations of Congress, I obtained approval from the Congressional House Ethics Committee to conduct this study. The Congressional House Ethics Committee has very strict policies on gifting and the use of congressional resources for external activities. These rules prevent undue influence from lobbyists and other political interest groups and are aimed at preventing the Member of Congress from overlapping campaign resources with official house resources. As a public university employee, I am funded by the federal government and thus have a right to collaborate and provide resources to the Member of Congress in their official duties. However, because I collaborated with a social media platform (i.e., POPVOX) and used a raffle as a paid form of recruitment—the ethical boundaries were less clear and needed review. In addition to obtaining informal approval from an Ethics Committee member, I informally consulted an ethics law professor with previous federal ethics experience. This was done to discuss any legal or political risk to the university or me as a result of engaging in a research experience with a Member of Congress. Although useful, these processes demonstrate the immense intuitional barriers that can disincentivize researchers from engaging with Members of Congress.

##### **6.1.2. Member Recruitment:**

I recruited one Member of Congress for the study. There were two Member offices that were interested in this study but given time and capacity constraints, I was only able to work with one. This Member is junior ranking. They represent a constituency that is politically diverse and

purple leaning (i.e., a mix of democratic, republican, and other affiliations) with a slightly above average population size for a typical congressional district<sup>16</sup>. The district represents a constituency that is generally well-educated with a median household income that is larger than the U.S. average.

As part of the forum agreement, the Member and their staff were asked to participate in the full week-long forum, choose the date of the forum, and choose the topic of forum. This topic was chosen a month in advance of the forum. This gave me time to develop a balanced information sheet about the topic, notify the constituents of the topic, and spread the information sheet to all participants before the forum began. I also asked the Member and their communications staff to take part in an exit interview to answer the primary research questions about the forum experience.

The Member of Congress and their staff chose homelessness as the forum topic. The staff chose and Monday, February 24<sup>th</sup> of 2020 as the beginning date of the week-long forum. It should be noted that this week was during the primary election season, just a few weeks after the House of Representatives voted to impeach the sitting President. It was an especially lively and contentious time to be politically engaged. This week was also a few weeks before concerns around the COVID-19 pandemic were raised in the U.S. There were no regulations or precautions related to COVID-19 at that time.

The Member of Congress and their staff were not given any guidance by me or POPVOX on how to engage in the forum. They were encouraged to actively log-on and engage in the forum as they saw fit.

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<sup>16</sup> Given the anonymity of this project, I chose not to provide extensive detail about the Member and their constituency to avoid accidental disclosure.

### **6.1.3. Topic Sheet**

To help participants in the forum group understand the topic before the deliberation, I developed a factsheet about homelessness. Research has shown that people's policy preferences can shift substantially when presented with accurate and reasonably balanced information (Barabas, 2004; Luskin et al., 2002). In addition, factsheets have been shown to have a positive impact on participants' perceptions of deliberations and their outcomes (Fishkin, 2009).

The information in the sheet only came from verified academic and government sources. Multiple academics and congressional experts reviewed the factsheet before its distribution, including academics within the Member's community that worked on related issues around homelessness. I attempted to increase the accessibility of the information by using simple language, but this turned out to be very difficult. Working with a colleague at a congressional non-profit, we got the fact sheet down to a Flesch–Kincaid readability level of grade 13.9. Given the higher education level of the district, this didn't seem to be a problem. In the future, there should be more effort to make fact sheets friendly to lower reading levels.

I distributed the fact sheet to participants in the forum group before the forum began. A copy of the factsheet is in Appendix C. This control group did not receive the fact sheet.

### **6.1.4. Moderation**

Moderation is an important component of deliberations (Minozzi et al., 2015; Perrault & Zhang, 2019; Towne & Herbsleb, 2012). Good moderation from an outside entity can improve political dialogue (Edwards, 2002), but too much moderation can lower perceived levels of policy legitimacy (Perrault & Zhang, 2019). Consulting with POPVOX, we decided to have minimal moderation for the forum. From POPVOX's experience, constituents tend to be respectful and engaged—it is people who contact the Member from outside the district that are often the most

problematic for congressional offices. I also saw that trend during my interviews with staff. We also assumed that participants would be disincentivized to troll or disrupt the deliberation because each participant's real identity was available to POPVOX. Thus, we used little moderation and we did not attempt to guide the discourse.

To avoid the potential for destructive behavior from constituents, I developed a one-page code of conduct for constituents which included tips on how to constructively engage with a Member of Congress. This code was based on moderation rules from political subreddits,<sup>17</sup> as suggested by a colleague and expert in the online moderation space, Kat Lo. The code of conduct was reviewed by POPVOX and academic experts. A copy of the document is in Appendix B. In addition, POPVOX and I actively monitored the forum for inappropriate content. POPVOX and I decided to only take a participant out of the forum if they violated the code of conduct. By the end of the forum, no persons violated the code of conduct. We only removed one comment due to a usability issue, as they were having trouble writing their comments in the provided text box. We notified the constituent of this removal and addressed their usability in the middle of the deliberation by making the text box wider.

Although it was an online study, I remained in Washington D.C. during the forum to help the Member and their staff with any technical issues. I visited the Member's office multiple times to ensure the platform was working as planned.

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<sup>17</sup> Subreddits, are a design feature of the website Reddit, in which communities categorize themselves by specific interests and develop their own rules of moderation and community engagement.

## 6.2. Citizen Recruitment

To recruit the representative sample, I obtained the voter files from the Member's local county. These files contained a list of all constituents in the electoral district that voted in the 2014 and 2016 elections. I used the emails provided in this list to recruit potential participants.

Using voter file registration skews the representativeness of the population, as it focuses only on registered voters and those of voting age. However, obtaining a sample through alternative methods would be costly (access to this list only cost \$81), and this population is of particular interest to the Member as voting constituents have a direct impact on their re-election rates.

Potential participants were told in the recruitment email that a doctoral student was conducting a study to test new technology for constituent communication in government and that their Member of Congress agreed to participate in this project (see Appendix A). I told participants that if they wished to participate, they would need to take two online surveys—one they could take right away (the pre-survey), and one distributed a few weeks later (post-survey). They were told only some participants would be randomly selected to attend an online forum with their Member of Congress. The forum would last one week on a website called [popvox.com](http://popvox.com). They could participate as little or as much as they liked.

I began recruiting in mid-February for a forum start date of February 24th, 2020. Email recruitment started in small, randomized email batches of 200 that grew to larger batches of 1,000 over the span of two weeks. I sent the emails in batches to reduce the likelihood of any technical errors in the recruitment process. By spreading out recruitment, I had time to fix any potential issues before the next batch was distributed. The gap also helped identify initial recruitment rates just in case I decided to stop the recruitment early.



In total, I sent emails to 156,643 email addresses. About 6.3% of those email invitations lead to duplicates or bounced emails. Removing those issues, 146,713 total email invitations were successfully sent. While roughly 2.3% of people began the pre-survey, only 1.3% finished, leaving us with about 1,927 potential participants and full pre-forum survey responses. After cleaning up the response data for errors and blanks, I identified a total of 1,182 potential participants.

### **6.2.1. Representative Sampling**

Once the number of potential participants was identified; it was time to select the sub-samples for the control and forum (i.e., treatment) groups. It was difficult to predict the number of citizens who would participate in the forum. In Neblo et al.'s (2018) experiments, 34% of the citizens invited to their town hall attended. However, this event only lasted a few hours for one day and it was unclear if turnout could be compared to this forum. Once I saw the high number of people interested in the study, I decided to recruit 300 participants in total, with 150 in the control and 150 in the forum group.

I worked with two statisticians to develop a randomized representative sampling technique to invite the 300 constituents to forum and control groups. Defining what is 'representative' of a district is somewhat subjective; taking cues from age, race, gender, wealth, party affiliation, political engagement, and educational status, we tried to ensure a demographically diverse set of participants was chosen.

Representativeness and randomization are two difficult qualities to match under a constrained sample size. It is also difficult to obtain a stratified sample of constituents through five strata. To overcome these challenges, the statisticians and I created a rulebook. If a particular demographic is significantly unrepresentative, which we defined as a 15% difference from the census demographics, then the demographic would be resampled in another stage of sampling. We

chose this percentage given our previous recruitment experience, and the statistician's general perception of what would be over-representative. No more than five stages would be done to resample demographics. This limit was set in advance to avoid biases of continued re-selection until a particular match is obtained.

Re-sampling order was pre-determined by ranking demographics. To create this ranking, I determined which variables had the largest number of effects on these other variables. For example, age has an effect on party, education, and income (3 variables), but it does not have an effect on gender or ethnicity. Party doesn't affect any other variables (0 variables), but it is very much affected by all the others. I started with the demographics that had the largest impact to rank the order of re-sampling demographics; this ranking was age, gender, ethnicity, education, and income. Thus, if I had to resample, I would first re-sample by age, then gender, and so on.

If, after the first sample, there was more than a 15% difference in one demographic, we determined that we could re-sample based on demographic data no more than five times. This sampling method was pre-written in R and uploaded to an open-science framework before sampling began.

The randomized representative sampling method developed was not needed. To our pleasant surprise, the first sub-sample for the forum was near representative of the district. There was no more than a 9% difference between the district demographics and the participants collected, except for education as graduate and professional degrees were over-represented by 15%. Recruitment attracted a large age group between 18 and 85<sup>+18</sup>. The digital recruitment did not seem

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<sup>18</sup> I specifically paid for voter files from 2014 and 2016 elections, so it is unclear why our recruitment was able to reach people as young as 18. My suspicion is that the file provided by the county included registrations past 2016.

to affect the ability of older participants to engage. We had 47 self-selected participants between 75–84 years old and 7 people 85+ years old.

Party affiliation was not used as a selection criterion. This is because party is a dependent variable that is affected by all other demographic variables collected. We assumed that with appropriate representative sampling, party affiliation would skew more representative. However, the original sample of constituents was heavily skewed Democrat and Independent, with 51% Democrat, 16.1% Republican, 26% Independent, and 7% “Something Else”. The selected Member was a registered Democrat, which could have affected the skew. In the end, our final sample was 47% Democrats, 30% Independent, 16% Republican, and 7% "Something Else". According to the state's secretary of state, at this time the district was registered ~35% Democrat, ~35% Republican, ~3% Independent, <1% Green Party, and 26% unaffiliated. Thus, party affiliation heavily favored those who supported the same party as the representative, as well as Independents. I suggest including party affiliation as part of the sampling method for future recruitment situations.

Out of those 1,182 individuals that fully completed the pre-survey, 48% had never contacted their Member of Congress before, and only 31% of those that have contacted a Member of Congress said their most recent contact was with the current Member. Thus, only 16% of people who agreed to participate in this study had potentially ever interacted with the current Member, signifying a substantially new group of people engaging with their current representative.

Comparing the demographics of those within the forum and control group, there was no more than an 9% difference in each of the demographic categories; most demographics comparisons between the forum and control group had under a 5% difference. The largest differences were within income and gender. The forum group had an 8% higher number of individuals who made between \$100,000-\$199,999 a year and 9% less individuals who made more than \$200,000 a year. The forum group also had 7% less females than the control group.

### 6.3. Forum Constituent Attendance

**C-RQ-1:** Does the forum appeal to a diverse sample of constituents that reflects the constituency population?

**C-RQ-2:** Does a representative sample of the constituency engage in the forum?

Out of the 150 people that were invited to attend, 51 people (34%) indicated they attended the forum in some capacity, whether that meant watching the forum take place (i.e., lurking/watching) or engaging in the forum (i.e., posting). I include participants who did not engage in the forum because lurking is an important form of engagement that can still substantively affect the experience (Farina, 2012). 34 people (66%) indicated posting a comment and 17 people (33%) only engaged by reading other's posts. Looking at the actual number of comments, there were 38 participants who posted, meaning at least four additional participants did not complete the post-survey.

There were some differences in demographics between the original recruited population for the forum and those that attended and participated in the event. Given the low sample size, I keep to non-statistical comparisons across percent distribution, looking at differences that are greater than 10%.

For those who engaged, either by watching the forum or leaving a comment on the forum, there was less engagement from participants who make more than 200k a year (-15% compared to the invited forum group) and more males (+12%). This representation appears to correlate with the comparative differences between the forum and control group. Age, Race, Education, and Party did not have 10% or more differences compared to the original group of participants invited to attend—making those categories fairly representative of the district.

For those who engaged by leaving a comment, there are additional differences. More participants who chose to comment identified themselves in the 'Other' category of Race (+12%),

as well as more educated with grad or professional degrees (+22%). More people also labeled themselves in the 'Something Else' (+13%) category of party affiliation. These selected categories of 'Other' and 'Something Else' leave us with vague understandings of participants' parties. I postulate that these selected categories could indicate a group of participants that were privacy-sensitive and wanted to opt-out of providing personal information. Overall, the party affiliation for those who posted was 44% Democrat, 24% Independent, 12% Republican, and 21% 'Something Else'.

Although smaller than our overall sample, there was engagement from a novel group of participants. 37% of those who engaged in some capacity had never contacted a Member of Congress before, with 35% of those who specifically left a comment new to engaging with their Member.

## **6.4. Deliberative Engagement**

**D-RQ-1:** Did the forum provide a space for deliberative engagement between the Member of Congress and their constituents?

There were 38 persons who engaged in the online forum with 61 comments summing to 11,800 words. The average length of each constituent comment was 1,159 characters, with every comment being minimum one paragraph (i.e., at least three sentences) in length.

Using Saldaña's manual for qualitative coding (Saldaña, 2015), I conducted multi-stage coding to capture salient themes that emerged from the deliberation. I first used *holistic coding* in the first cycle to grasp preliminary themes that tie to the survey questions and theories of deliberation. For example, a healthy deliberation according to Steenbergen et al. requires respectful dialogue, justification of reasons, and a sense of common good (2003), so I looked out for comments that either reflected or negated such qualities. I also paid careful attention to how to

Member interacted with each participant's comments and how that may relate to constituent's feelings of Member efficacy presented later in the surveys.

After identifying ~150 preliminary codes, it became clear that the actions of constituents and the Member, also known as *process codes*, were prevalent and important to explaining forum engagement. For example, constituents were *suggesting* their own solutions, *asking* questions to the Member, *providing* evidence, and *agreeing* with other participants. Identifying the most prevalent processes opened a window into patterns of interactions between constituents and the Member. The codes helped determine the deliberativeness of the forum by connecting the ideals of deliberation to the processes identified in the forum. Thus, process coding became an essential component to coding .

After identifying the process codes from constituents, the Member of Congress's comments were separately coded for unique features relating to the role of representation and deliberation. For example, were there aspects of the Members comments that were align with theories of representation? Were there comments that presented novel Member behavior compared to typical behavior? These codes included process-based codes, but they also included other codes based on theories of representation. Once these codes were established for both the Member and the constituents, I combined the codes into salient themes that captured the overall essence of the forum and the presence of deliberative and representational features.

#### **6.4.1. Starting the Forum**

The deliberative forum started with a post from the Member and their team. I asked them to write this introductory post, but I also provided an example template. I made it clear to staff that the Member did not have to use the template, but they used most of it. The final post from the Member and their team stated:

Let's talk about homelessness.

Hello, everyone. Thank you for joining me in this experiment to test new technology for constituent engagement. This group reflects the diversity of voices in our district, and I look forward to hearing from all of you.

This week, we are having a single-topic online discussion about **homelessness**.

**What do you see as potential short-term and long-term solutions to homelessness? What can I do to be an effective partner at the federal level?**

We know homelessness affects people from many walks of life, including veterans, students, and survivors of domestic violence. That's why this issue has been a priority for the [redacted] Committee, on which I serve. [One of my] Committee hearing was on the topic of homelessness, during which I highlighted the research that calls for a permanent supportive housing approach. I've advocated for additional support for the Foster Youth to Independence Initiative within the Department of Housing and Urban Development and toured the [local city] Temporary Emergency Shelter in our community.

**Nothing is more important to me than listening to members of our [local county] community.** In today's digital age, it's important to make our legislative body more accessible. When a graduate student from [university] asked me to help test new technology to facilitate better communication between Congressmembers and our districts, I knew I could not pass up the opportunity.

If your question remains unanswered during this time, please know that our team goes through all of them, and we take your comments seriously.

If you have any questions or feedback about the experiment, you can email [the] research team at [digitaldemocracy@uci.edu](mailto:digitaldemocracy@uci.edu).

-Congress[person] [X]

As shown in the Member's initiating post, the forum begins with a recognition of the diverse group of individuals recruited. The Member asked forum participants to think about the single topic of the forum and offer proposals for potential solutions to the issues, as well as actions the Member can take at a federal level. This was the basis for the deliberation.

## 6.4.2. Qualitative Evidence from Constituent Engagement

### *Suggesting Solutions*

Constituents spent most of their time responding directly to the post's request for solutions. They offered their own ideas for how to resolve the issue of homelessness. Many constituents recognized that homelessness is a complex subject with the highest concerns around housing. There was a diversity of suggestions for how this could be addressed. The fact sheet that was given to constituents before the forum stated that the number one cause of homeless in America is housing, so it was not surprising that most solutions proposed by constituents were related to affordable and accessible housing.

“Addressing rising rents is one vital part of the solution, since many homeless people have jobs but cannot afford housing. We should impose steep vacancy taxes to reduce the number of luxury homes sitting empty...” –P34

“I think we need to focus on mental health before we look any further. The lack of access to health care in regard to mental health is a key factor when addressing homelessness...” –P39

It's unclear if constituents knew housing was the main cause prior to this forum. Some constituents referred directly to the fact sheet in their comments, indicating that the fact sheet was a valuable source of preliminary information. Constituents also pointed to the need for increased access to mental health, education, and labor opportunities for the homeless.

Many constituents also answered the Member's request for both short-term and long-term solutions by separating their responses into these two categories of suggestions.

“Mental health is the one long- and short-term priority to end homelessness. Mentally ill often self-medicate with drugs to be normal so addressing that with long term care - i.e., mandatory treatment will reduce the homeless. Drug addiction goes hand in hand with mental illness. Address both seriously as top priorities.” – P7



“As far as long-term solutions go, I think we need to get serious about education investment at the federal level. [State] schools are falling apart. We need more than the false hope of passing a parcel tax.”–P17

### ***Offering Evidence***

14 constituents offered evidence to support their claims. Some of this evidence was statistical (n = 5) such as pointing to numeric factors about homelessness and housing prices:

“The [local newspaper] conducted a questionnaire back in October 2019 and found their numbers to suggest, about [#] % had either a mental illness or a substance abuse disorder. Individually, substance abuse affects 46% of those living on the streets ....” –P31

Eight constituents offered their personal experience as a way to offer evidence to re-affirm problems or solutions:

“The biggest issue is the lack of affordable housing in [this] county. I am a single teacher and make a good income. However, I pay \$[#]/month for a one-bedroom apartment. This is half of my monthly take home salary. After my rent, car payment, Student loan payment, utility bills, insurance, and food, there isn’t much left every month. I imagine that it is extremely difficult for families and individuals with lower paying jobs to afford housing...” –P15

“Thank you for recommending the [local] study. I volunteered as a [homelessness advocacy organization] volunteer but wasn’t aware of the study. The numbers are astonishing. It was eye opening and I think may play a role in a key short-term solution--arming people with facts...” –P17

“...My spouse is [from another Country], we have family in [that country] and we lived [there] for a year. Talked to people who had major medical illnesses, like cancer. They never had to worry about a bill due to [federal health insurance] covering everything. They just concentrated on getting well, not losing their homes. Even mental health is covered under the [federal health insurance] ...” –P28

### ***Acknowledging Others***

Although the platform did not allow participating constituents to comment on each other’s posts, they still found ways to acknowledged others. Some constituents referenced other participants’ comments in their statements. They used their post as a way to acknowledge others when they couldn’t do so directly:

“Everyone has raised good points. Homelessness seems to have an aggregate of causes and potential solutions...” –P28

“Wow, there are a lot of opinions here! [Constituent Username] brought up an interesting point about how there is a lot of [state] real estate that is vacant and is just being used as an investment. I do think that some sort of local county and state laws need to be put in place in order to incentivize home use...” –P9

### ***Community Tensions***

Constituents were aware of the underlying tensions around homelessness in the local area, recognizing a collective need to address these issues together on a community level. Six constituents brought up concerns over community tensions around “NIMBYism” which is an acronym for *Not in My Backyard*. NIMBYism, in this context, describes people who are generally against the development of homelessness shelters in their own communities. In this congressional district, there are tensions around homeless shelter development. There have been protests due to concerns around personal safety.

Recognizing the local tensions of homelessness, three additional constituents noted that it was important to “*humanize*,” “*change the narrative*,” and “*change perceptions*” around homelessness. They recognized that solutions would be difficult to undertake unless these tensions were addressed. As one constituent commented:

“All of us must not be NIMBY's but rather cooperator's in implementing the solutions.” –P13

### ***Alternative Views***

Not all participants agreed with the general flow of recommendations within the forum. For example, one constituent pointed out that the high cost of living is a reality for the area. Instead of helping the homeless, the homeless should move away from the area. Another constituent challenged the legitimacy of information within the fact sheet, offering a ‘tough love’ solution to homelessness.

“It seems that many believe one of the main reasons for homelessness is lack of affordable housing. What does one do when they can't afford housing in a certain area? You move to an area of the country where housing is more affordable. Look I know that seems harsh but there are many areas where housing is unaffordable for me. So, I don't try to. I live where I can afford to live. Sorry for stating the truth.” –P11

“The Fact Sheet is incorrect in at least one aspect: affordable housing is not the cause of homelessness. While many of the comments identify the MULTIPLE causes of homelessness, no data is provided to indicate magnitude...Some tough love is required here. We should demand that law-abiding citizens NOT live on public property or congregate on our streets, etc. The best solution is to house those without a place to live in barracks-like settings according to the nature of their problem... each resident gets 18 months to get his life in order find a job, or move out of the state. Those who go back to the street must be prosecuted and incarcerated. Being homeless should not be accepted by society. If it is we'll only get more of it.” –P33

Although these counterarguments and suggestions were not prevalent, it appears the forum provided an open atmosphere for these counterarguments to arise. Because constituents could not comment on other constituents' comments, there was no direct discourse in response to these claims. However, one person used a comment to refer to one of these constituents, offering a reason why their suggestion should not be taken:

“...On a different note, I saw a fellow constituent above state that we should relocate homeless people to cheaper land. Please don't do that. I fear that will lead to the demonization of homeless people...” –P21

### ***What Should the Federal Government Do?***

Although this was a forum with a federal representative, there was a clear recognition from constituents that this issue would require more than federal-level help with local, state, and federal level collaborations. Although the initial post asked for suggestions on what they could do at the federal level, very few constituents explicitly mentioned things that the federal government could do. The three people that did offer suggestions detailed reforms to protect people from falling into homelessness, collaborations across government, and federal spending.

“As far as what you, [Member name], our Congress[person] can do, I think continuing to fight for the reforms that help protect middle-and working-class families is the best way to prevent homelessness.” –P30

“If we are to believe that the majority of homelessness is due to unaffordable housing then it only makes sense that if Federal money is spent to solve the issue that the recipient of the aid must work to earn some portion of the aid. No one benefits from being given something with no responsibility.” –P11

There are a few reasons why I believe federal-related discourse did not occur. First, the issue of homelessness hits very close to home as people experience it on a local level. This could make it easier for people to focus on more local solutions. Second, it is well-known that most Americans have very little understanding of how government works (*Americans Are Poorly Informed About Basic Constitutional Provisions*, 2017) and likely even less understanding of Congress’s jurisdiction over large issues like homelessness. This concern was mildly addressed in the pre-forum fact sheet, where federal-level initiatives were explicitly mentioned. However, very few constituents offered federal-level proposals.

### ***Asking Questions to the Member***

Only three constituents directly asked a question to the Member and their staff. None of these questions were directly answered by the Member’s team:

“So my question to you is, [Member’s Name], how will you define the scope of this situation, with the scope being defined by the specific interests involved? Will it be defined solely by ameliorating the homeless, or is it going to be defined by the interest for affordable housing with the expansive and still ambiguous corollary economic and political factors involved?” –P37

“It is the obligation of every decent society to provide its constituents with basic housing -- shelter. Given that much of the problem securing sites for new low-cost housing is impeded by NIMBY attitudes, what do you intend to do to convince [the] County residents and homeowners that they must approve and help to fund projects that will provide all homeless people with permanent and safe shelter?” – P32

“A vacancy tax and foreign-buyer tax won't solve all issues but it dis-incentivizes wealthy foreigners from parking their money in homes that don't get lived in puts less upward pressure on rent/home prices AND can bring in significant revenue for homelessness programs. My question is this: what are your thoughts on

implementing a foreign-buyers tax and vacancy tax in places such as [our city]?”  
–P1

There are a few possible reasons why there were so few questions. First, the prompt in the Member’s initial post specifically asked for suggestions for solutions, offering a sense that this forum was about sharing ideas more than asking questions. Second, as I will talk about a little farther down in the findings, the Member’s team did not engage with the content of the comments as much as I would have expected. They took considerable time (typically 24 hours) replying to constituents throughout the week and did not directly respond to any of these three questions. This may have led other constituents to feel like there’s would not be answered as well.

### ***Forum Tone***

Overall, the tone from constituents was respectful and insightful. There was little conversation around doubts or problems with the issue of homelessness, nor were there any concerns about cordialness and respect of others in the forum. Some constituents expressed surprise at the quality of the forum:

“The civility of this conversation is encouraging. The multi-faceted, holistic approach described by most is indeed what is needed.” –P13

“Hello Congress[person] and fellow constituents, fantastic space to freely discuss this topic affecting [the state] at the moment and to suggest ideas to address it” – P19

Only one constituent directly complained about politicians saying “...I am really sick of politicians not addressing mental health and blaming it all on the Opioid crisis.”–P8, but none directly complained about the Member or their actions. Looking at the entire forum, the constituents offered an engaging and respectful forum. There was a diversity of views, personal experiences, and comments, which left the forum on a positive note.

### **6.4.3. Qualitative Evidence from Member Engagement**

How did the Member of Congress and their staff interact? After the forum ended, we learned from staff that the Member did not engage in the forum at all. Rather it was the staff that engaged on the Member's behalf. This finding will be discussed more in Section 6.6.1. The Member's team only responded to eleven constituent comments, responding to no more than three comments a day. They did not answer any of the direct questions by constituents. That being said, what comments were left engendered interesting qualitative themes that closely matched historical trends in Member-constituent engagement.

The style of communication in the staff-written comments closely followed some of Richard Fenno's theory of "Home Style" (Fenno, 1978). Home Style was based on Fenno's ethnographic fieldwork where he followed Members around their home districts in the 1970s. During this fieldwork, Fenno attempted to answer the question, how does a representatives' view of their constituency affect their political behavior? During this fieldwork, Fenno found a series of behaviors which he called "home style" which help Members garner this support and secure re-election.

The comments left by staff were so well correlated to some of Fenno's Home style description, it felt textbook for the kinds of interactions with constituents. Although I did not initially intend to compare the forum comments to Fenno's theories, it became evident during the middle and end of the coding process that the themes emerging from those comments were mimicking his theories. Although it was staff—and not the Member—engaging in the online forum, the ways in which staff learn to engage with constituents is nearly identical to that of the Member. Thus, Fenno's homestyle components can explain themes emerging from the staff comments.

## *Presentation of Self*

One of Fenno's Home Style components is *presentation of self*, which he described as the way politicians present themselves to garner political support and evoke a sense of trust. This idea comes from sociologist Erving Goffman that was then translated into the political arena. The way that Fenno believes Members present themselves is through a rhetoric of *qualification*, *identification*, and *empathy* (1978, p.57). Members should show that they are qualified for the job they seek they must, convey a sense that "I am one of you", and empathize with constituent concerns.

In the case of the forum, the staff attempted to convey a sense of *qualification* for the job by offering their resume of past actions to qualify their capacity to do their job. This was initially coded as "personal experience" but clearly conveyed a sense of qualification.

"I'm completely with you that we need to understand the problem before we can think about solutions. Before I came to Congress, [an expert in a related field and worked for a solution for families hurt by this issue]"

"You're right: medical debt is a real problem. As a longtime [expert in a related domain], I know that the number one cause of [a related issue] in this country is medical debt."

"...When I worked [for a major auditing body in a state government] against the big banks...people would never come to me and say, 'I'm a Democrat; I need help,' or 'I'm a Republican; I need help.' This shouldn't be a partisan issue."

The staff did not offer a sense of *identification*. However, these expressions are probably unnecessary for this kind of forum environment. The forum focused on systemic issues that predominantly affected others. No one in the forum indicated that they were directly affected by homelessness, so it's hard to find instances where the Member would need to feel they identify with the constituents.

Staff spent the most time showing *empathy* by agreeing with participant statements and offering a sense of mutual consensus about an idea or statement. Almost half of the comments left by staff lead with an affirmation which relate to feelings of connectedness.

“I agree that there needs to be collaboration among all levels of government and between private and public actors...”

“Cost of housing is definitely something we should be thinking about...”

“You're right: medical debt is a real problem...”

“I'm completely with you that we need to understand the problem before we can think about solutions...”

“I agree: the homelessness crisis was not created overnight, and it will not be fixed by minor tweaks to the status quo...”

### ***Explain Washington Activities***

Staff also spent time detailing events and actions in Congress. One of Fenno's Homestyle components is the *Explanation of Washington Activities*, which is when Members of Congress explain to their constituency what they have done in Congress, often describing the working system of federal government and their place within it (1978, p.138). The comments offered clear examples of explaining Washington Activity.

“Congress passed the Substance Use-Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment (SUPPORT) for Patients and Communities Act of 2018 to begin to tackle the problems you mention. It's a good first start and includes the requirement that the Department of Health and Human Services to issue best practices for recovery housing...I would like to build on this 2018 effort and do more to crack down on waste, fraud, and abuse.”

“... I'm concerned that, at the federal level, the President's proposed budget for 2021 cuts funding for the Department of Housing and Urban Development by 15 percent. That money is coming out of essential housing assistance programs that lift up our communities.”

“I've been pushing hard on legislation that will improve mental health coverage. My bipartisan [X] Act would ramp up enforcement of existing federal law .... I'm going to keep pushing to get this bill across the finish line and working to break down the stigma surrounding mental health.”



### ***Dispelling Myths***

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I emphasized that one of the roles of the Member is to educate the constituency. Representatives should play a large role in informally educating citizens just as much as listening to their views. There is one example of this role in the forum. The Member's staff dispelled a myth about homelessness. In multiple constituent comments, there was an assumption that the homeless problem was due to outsiders coming into the state, not locals who become homeless. Factually, this is not the case and the staff took to the time to explain. They provided an authoritative voice over the information, dispelling the myths propagated by some constituents about the cause of homelessness in the state:

“Two things: first, it's a widely held misconception that homeless individuals living in [our] County are not long-term residents. In fact, according to a study published by the [local homelessness non-profit], based on research conducted by [local university research], [#] % of homeless individuals are long-term [district] residents. Second, I agree that a supportive housing approach needs to be part of any plan to tackle homelessness in our communities.”

### ***Overall Member Engagement***

Although the staff did not spend a substantial amount of time engaging in the forum, they did provide valuable patterns of Member engagement. Every comment provided in the forum is offered in the quoted examples above.

The Member's team did not deviate from the typical norms of engagement, closely following the norms seen by many Members of Congress who wish to present themselves as competent, trust-worthy, and capable individuals to take on the role representative. The comments left no indication as to whether information from constituents could be of some value to the Member and their team.

#### **6.4.4. Incident of Non-Disclosure**

For transparency, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the online forum, there was a mistake on my behalf which led to a privacy concern. Constituents were meant to be anonymous for the entirety of the online forum. However, an email mistake led to an information compromise. In effect, all participants of the online forum could see the emails of the other 149 participants invited to the forum. No other information was disclosed, and the constituents and the Member were notified within 24 hours of the mistake. Constituents were given the ability to opt-out of the study at that time if they chose to do so. Only one constituent decided to opt-out of the study. The Member did not respond with any concerns.

Given that only a fraction of those that were invited to the forum participated, and that constituents used anonymous usernames for the forum, it would have been difficult for any fellow participants to identify the forum comments of another. I did not see any change in the conversation due to this mistake and the conversation carried on for the last few days of the forum. Nonetheless, this information is disclosed to help readers understand the full experience and outcome of the forum.

#### **6.4.5. Was the Forum Deliberative?**

Taking in all the qualitative information above, did the forum promote qualities of deliberation? According to Habermas, there are a few main requirements for an ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1973). This ideal can never be obtained in practice, but it is the basis for many measurements of deliberative discourse, including Steenbergen et al.'s Discourse Quality Index (2003). I used Steenbergen et al.'s summaries of these requirements from Habermas here as a way to qualitatively investigate the deliberativeness of the forum.

First, a deliberation must be *open to participation*, meaning every individual should be able to partake in the discourse. There must also be opportunities for *justification* of reasons, as assertions from individuals are individually assessed. Third, there must be some sense of a *common good*, in which empathy and solidarity around the importance of the forum are understood. Fourth and fifth, there should be an essence of *respect* and *authenticity*. Both are imperative for serious listening, especially with respect to counterarguments. There must be little doubt around the authenticity of the speakers and their likelihood of deceiving individuals. Lastly, the deliberation must include *constructive politics* that end with a rational consensus. Steengern et al. note that constructive politics is an aim more than a necessity; in the real-world consensus is not always possible. Together, these qualities make up an ideal normative conception of deliberation.

Looking to the qualitative comments left in the forum, many of these requirements have been met. The forum was relatively open to participation (although only for those randomly invited for diverse and representative views). The constituents and Member's staff demonstrated some justification of reasons and beliefs by offering evidence of Washington activity and personal experience (although the staff's justification was more about their job in Congress rather than solutions to homelessness). There was a sense of common good and collective action seen throughout the dialogue as participants discussed the community and nation-wide aspects of homelessness. There was also no evidence of disrespect, even in light of a few counterarguments and the current external political climate.

There were some qualities that could have been better for a deliberation. Authenticity is a complex question. The Member did not participate in the forum at all. Rather, staff contributed to the forum. This information was unknown to constituents or the research team until after the forum was complete. If the constituents knew about this before or during the forum, there could be feelings of insincerity, or at the very least confusion as to why staff were speaking on the Member's behalf.

As I will talk about in the final chapter, this may have more to do with the public's general misunderstanding of the role of staff than actual concerns of inauthenticity. Nevertheless, I told constituents that the Member would engage, I asked the Member to engage, and comments posted but staff in view of constituents appeared under the Member's name.

Constructive politics was also not achieved in this deliberation. There was no process to come to a mutual consensus or decision. As Steenbergen stated, constructive politics is not always feasible or desired for deliberations. In the instances of deliberation with representatives, the final outcomes should not be a consensus but rather a mutual understanding of differing opinions and reasons and a valuable reflection of opinions for the Member to interpret. The Member and their team are the only people responsible for the final outcomes of policy.

Taking this together, could the forum be considered deliberative? I would argue a tentative yes. Although there is room for improvement, the forum demonstrated that there was a group of constituents eager to offer input, they were respectful of their fellow constituents, and fully engaged in the experience. The constituents offered a variety of solutions while the Member offered important information, personal experience, and feelings of affirmation.

## **6.5. Survey Response Findings**

Did the forum change constituent measurements of efficacy, approval, impact, access, and expression? Those measures were taken in the pre-and post- surveys, in addition to measures of usability and platform viability.

### **6.5.1. Constituent Feelings of Personal Empowerment**

**C-RQ-2:** Do citizens feel an increased sense of political efficacy as a result the online forum?

Before and after the online forum, I asked participants in both the forum and control group to answer questions in the survey related to their internal and external political efficacy. These constructs measure people's belief that they are capable of participating in the political system (internal efficacy), and that the system is responsive to the people's input (external efficacy). Internal political efficacy involved three questions on a 7-point Likert scale, while external political efficacy involved two questions on a 7-point Likert scale. To create the scores, I summed the Likert scale responses from 1–7 for each construct. The largest possible score was 21 (3 constructs) for internal political efficacy and 14 (2 constructs) for external political efficacy. To detect differences before and after the forum, I compared simple difference among the pre- and post- scores and used non-parametric to assess its significance.

The pre-forum survey mean response score for internal political efficacy in the control and forum<sup>19</sup> groups were 17.65 and 18.29 respectively out of a possible 21. The control group's post-forum internal efficacy slightly moved up to 17.59 while the forum groups slightly lowered to 18, demonstrating relatively small shifts. The pre-forum survey external political efficacy for the control and forum groups were 9.14 and 8.27 respectively out of a possible 14. After the forum, the control group's internal efficacy was 9.60 while the forum group was 8.45. All groups were compared within subjects.

Despite small shifts in both internal and external efficacy scores based on simple difference, I decided to check for significance. I performed a Shapiro test for normality and found both efficacy questions results were significantly different from normal distribution, thus I am unable to assume a gaussian distribution. The non-normal distribution continued for further

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<sup>19</sup> When I reference the forum group for statistical comparisons, I am only looking at the survey responses of participants who indicated in the post-survey that they attended the forum in some capacity (i.e., commenting or watching the forum). Some participants in the forum group took both surveys but indicated that they did not attend. They were excluded from analysis.

statistical comparisons. Instead of comparing t-test and assuming normality, I used a Wilcoxon/Mann-Whitney non-parametric test to compare differences for each efficacy question. Because the data is ordinal and skewed, the interpretations of significance in a non-parametric test remain the same. The Wilcoxon/Mann-Whitney test, like most non-parametric tests, has a conservative output which makes it less likely to interpret false significance (i.e., type I errors).

*Table 6-1 Comparing changes between forum and control's feelings of internal and external political efficacy before and after the online forum.*

Internal Political Efficacy	N	P-Val
Control	85	0.4224
Forum	51	0.4933
External Political Efficacy	N	P-Val
Control	85	0.0423*
Forum	49	0.5249

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ , \*\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.0001$

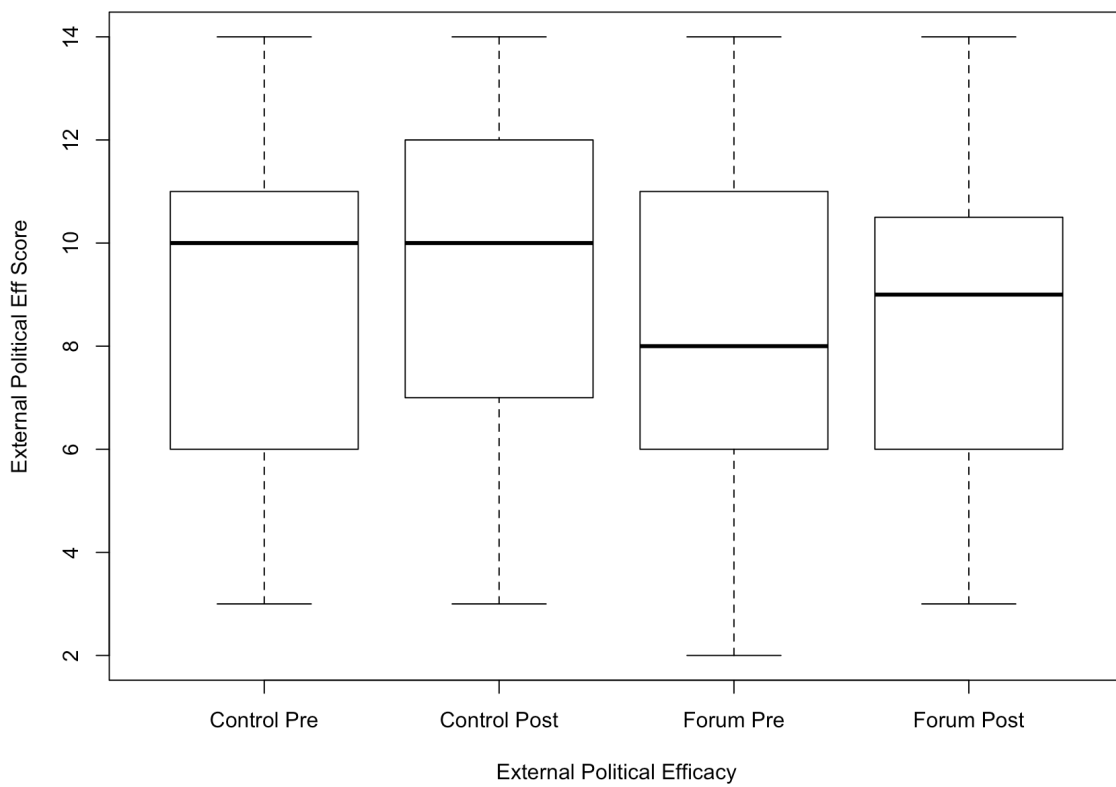
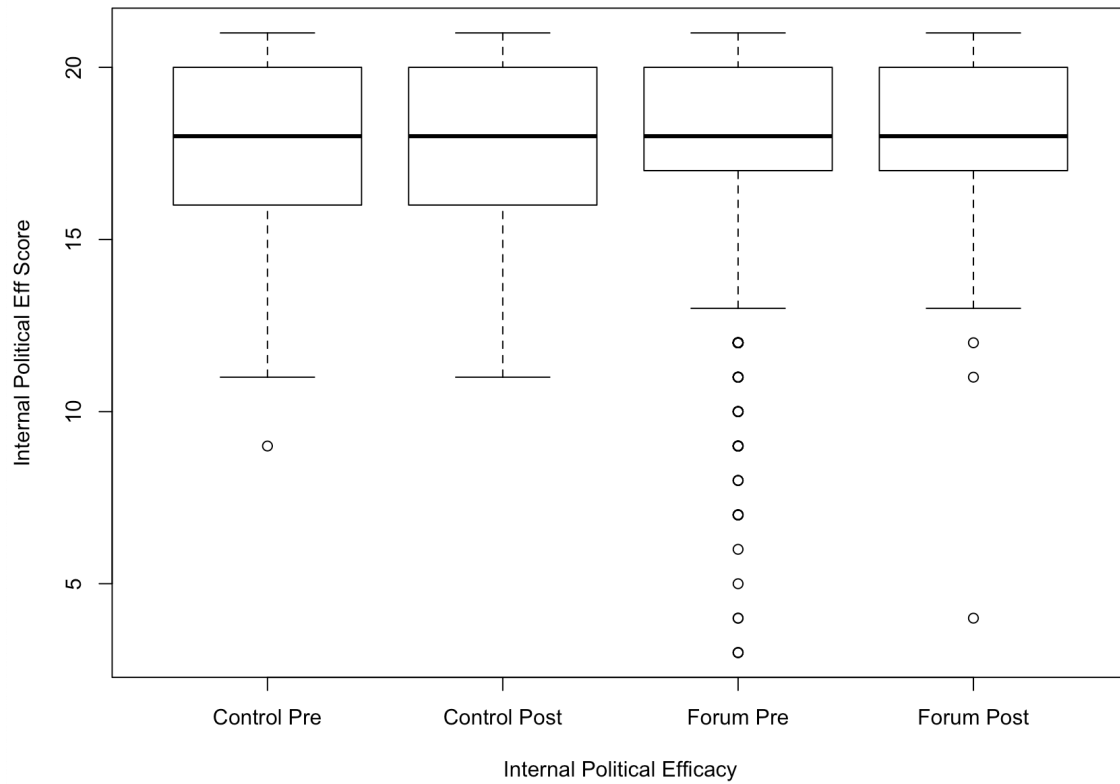
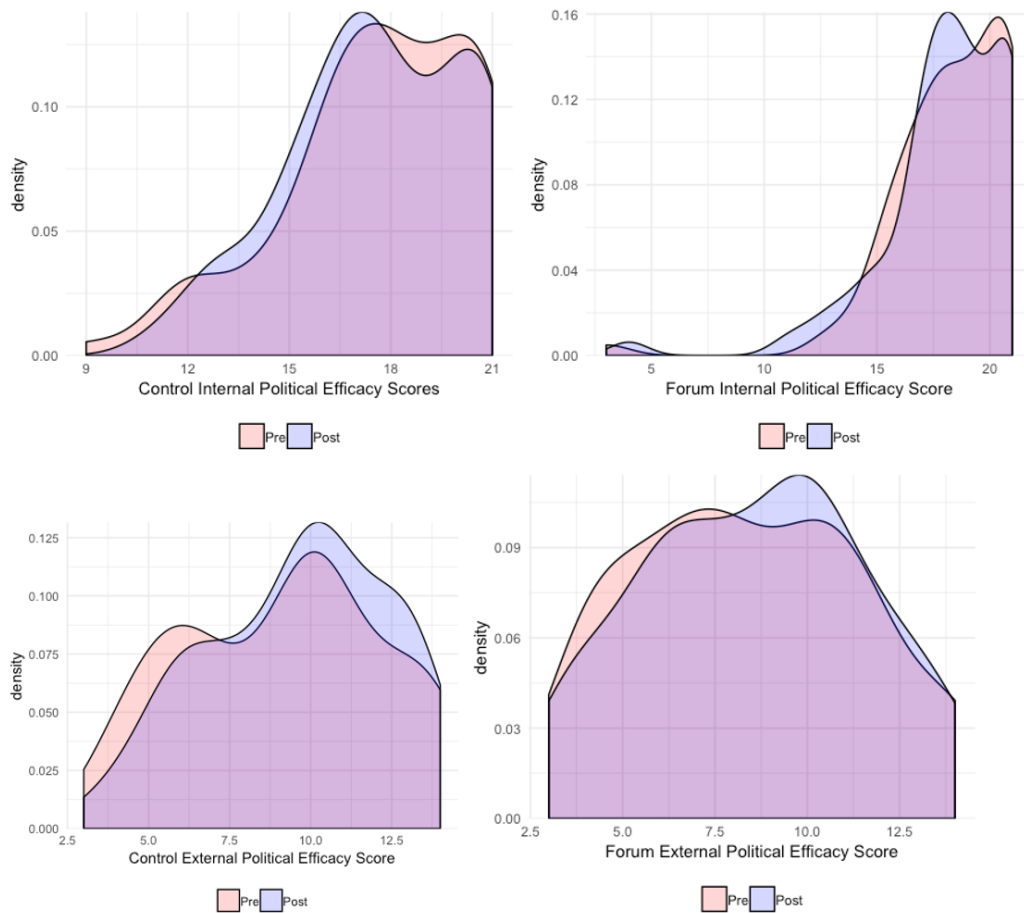


Figure 6-1. Box & Whisker Plots For Internal and External Political Efficacy



*Figure 6-2 Density Plot For Internal and External Political Efficacy*

The Wilcoxon test (Table 6-1 Comparing changes between forum and control's feelings of internal and external political efficacy before and after the online forum. indicates that there was not a significant shift in scores for both the control and forum groups' feelings of internal political efficacy. There was a small but significant shift in the control group's feeling of external political efficacy, but this was not true for the forum group. I cannot conclude that the online forum had a significant effect on the participant's sense of efficacy, internally or externally. The shift in external political efficacy from the control may be due to the fact that this forum took place during an election cycle or due to the control participants awareness of this study. Either way, it is unclear why the control group's feelings of efficacy increased.



To check whether the non-significant results from the forum were due to a lack of statistical power, I conducted a post-hoc power analysis for t-tests with  $\alpha = .05$  and paired. The sample size was well within means to detect an effect, requiring at these 15 paired instances to detect large effects ( $d = .8$ ) and 34 to detect medium, or more granular, effects ( $d = .5$ ).

Looking at the density plots in Figure 6-2, the forum group's feelings of internal political efficacy before and after the forum is left-skewed compared to the control group. The forum group contains only those that were both invited and attended the forum. Thus, the plot demonstrates that people with higher feelings of internal political efficacy attended the forum. People who feel more politically empowered are more likely to engage in political discussions, so this result is unsurprising. However, if one of the goals of these deliberative forums is to boost people's confidence in their ability to participate in politics, this may not happen under people's own self-selected engagement.

### **6.5.2. Member Perceptions from Constituents**

**C-RQ-3:** Does an online forum with their Member on POPVOX change how citizens view their Member?

**C-RQ-3.1:** Does the online forum increase citizens' feeling that the Member is being receptive to the collective voices of the constituency?

In the pre-forum survey, I asked participants questions of government efficacy adapted to reflect Congress (i.e., Congressional Efficacy). In the post-survey, I asked participants the same questions about Congress and then questions of government efficacy adapted to reflect only the Members of Congress (i.e., Member Efficacy).

#### ***Congressional Efficacy***

There was no statistical effect for Congressional Efficacy. The pre- and post-survey mean response scores for the control group were 16.75 and 16.10 out of a possible 35 (there were 5, 7-

point Likert constructs). The forum group was 17.68 and 17.29. Although both groups had lower feelings of congressional efficacy, the difference in means shows that those who attended the forum had higher levels of congressional efficacy to begin with compared to those in the control group.

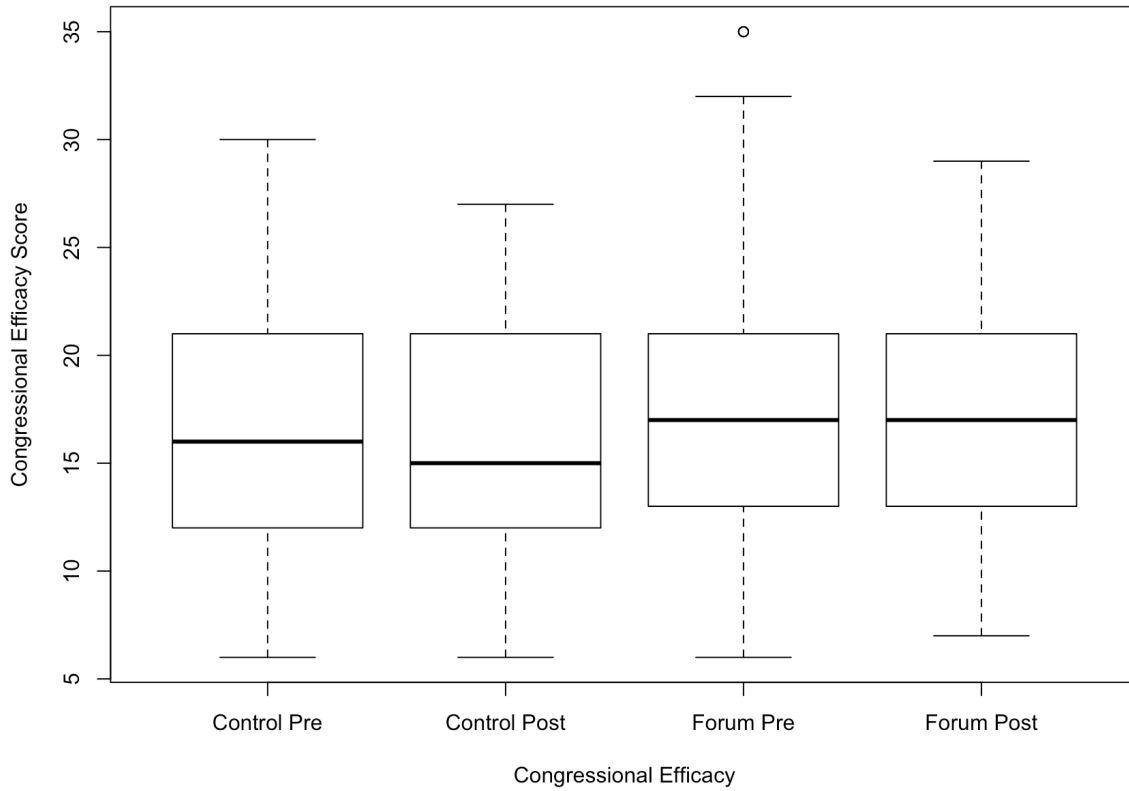
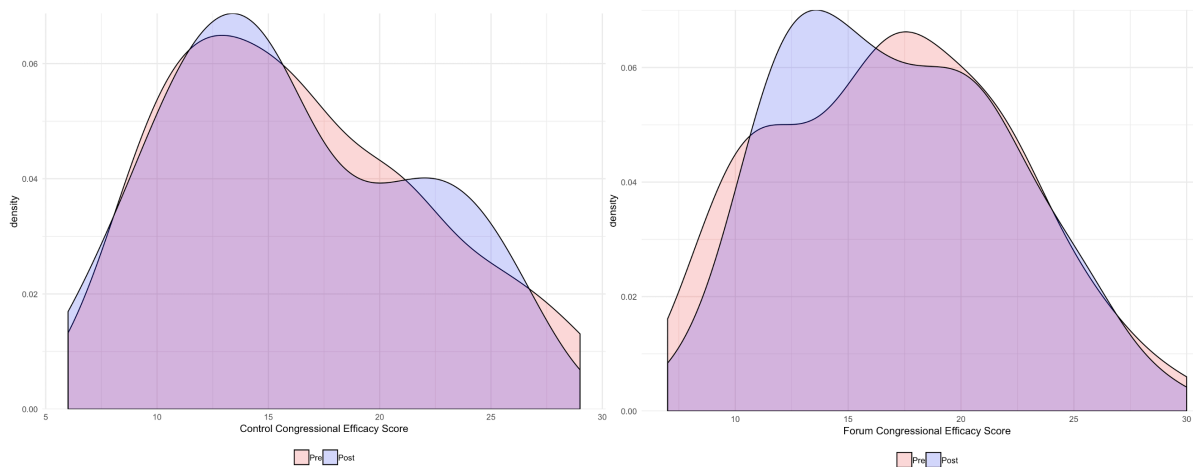


Figure 6-3 Box & Whisker Plots For Congressional Efficacy

Table 6-2 Feelings of Congressional Efficacy.

	N	P-Val
Control	68	0.1146
Forum	57	0.4387

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ , \*\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.0001$

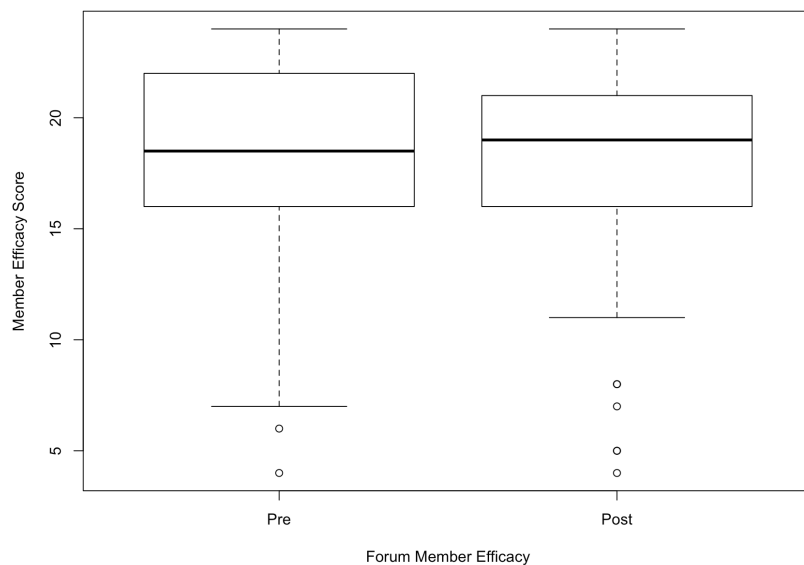


*Figure 6-4 Density Plots For Congressional Efficacy*

The density plot (Figure 6-4) demonstrates a shift in feelings of congressional efficacy for the forum group. Although the shift is non-significant, there appears to be some consolidation as a few participants feelings of congressional efficacy went up and a few went down. This begs discussion around the complexities of deliberations as a tool to influence participant behavior. Some people may feel improved feelings towards Congress's efficacy as a result of these deliberative forums while others may not.

### ***Member Efficacy***

In the post-survey, I asked participants in the forum group to answer retrospectively to gain some indication of potential differences. This question was asked retrospectively because it was unclear how many people would know who their Member of Congress was before the forum. The Members' name was not mentioned in the invitation email. The control group was not asked retrospectively.



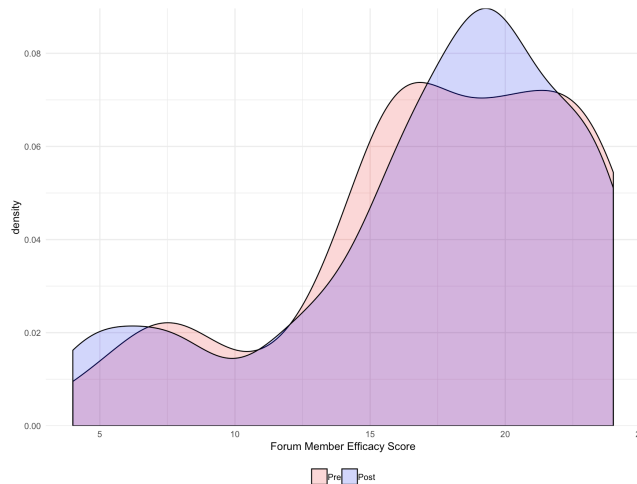
*Figure 6-5 Box & Whisker Plot For Member Efficacy*

The mean pre/post scores for member efficacy in the forum group were 17.45 and 17.26 respectively out of a possible 28. Although the mean score decrease, the median score increased from 18.5 to 19, as indicated on the box and whisker plot. There was no significant difference between retrospective pre- and post-for the forum group, thus no significant change to the forum group's feeling of member efficacy.

*Table 6-3 Feelings of Member Efficacy.*

	N	P-Val
Forum (Retrospective)	51	0.7214

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ , \*\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.0001$



*Figure 6-6 Density Plot For Member Efficacy.*

## ***Approval***

### **C-RQ-3.2:** Does the online forum increase citizens' approval of the Member?

Looking at the pre-and post- survey questions of approval, there were some shifts in both the forum and control groups. The overall approval ratings (i.e., those who wrote “strongly approve”, “approve”, or “somewhat approve”) from the control group increased 9% (n = 79), with all of that increase coming from participants who switched from selecting “neither agree nor disagree” in the pre-survey to some kind of approval in the post-survey. Overall disapproval increased by one person, or 1%.

Evaluating the 7-point Likert scale, the majority of the increase in approval for the control group went from “neither approve nor disapprove” to “somewhat approve”, demonstrating a minor increase in feelings of approval. Because the control group knew about the forum, but did not participate, their approval increase may have been affected by the notion that a forum existed. The forum also took place during an election cycle which could have influenced this number.

Looking at changes in the forum group ratings of overall approval in the pre- and post-surveys, there is a 4% increase in approval, an 8% increase in disapproval, and 13% decrease in “neither approve nor disapprove” (n = 48). Half of the participants who originally said “neither

approve nor disapprove” moved to overall approval while half moved to overall disapproval. Thus, there was a split between participants in the forum who increased their approval and those that decreased their approval. Overall, the approval ratings were still high at 71%.

*Table 6-4 Member approval ratings from control and forum groups.*

	Pre	Retrospective Pre	Post	% Change (Pre-Post)	% Change (Retro-Post)
<b>Control (n = 80)</b>					
Overall Approve	51%	-	60%	+9%	-
Neither Approve nor Disapprove	28%	-	18%	-10%	-
Overall Disapprove	22%	-	23%	+1%	-
<b>Forum (n = 48)</b>					
Overall Approve	67%	67%	71%	+4%	+4%
Neither Approve nor Disapprove	23%	13%	10%	-13%	-3%
Overall Disapprove	10%	21%	19%	+9%	-2%

It’s important to note that the Likert scale breakdowns represent relatively small-n shifts in approval. Nonetheless, the approvals offer some indication that those who already favor the Member increase their approval, those that already disapprove of their member increase their disapproval, and those in the middle a mix shifts to each side of the spectrum. It seems that participants approval was reaffirmed and strengthened by pre-existing feelings for the Member.

How do these numbers compare to the retrospective approval numbers? I asked participants in the forum group to provide their feelings of Member approval retrospectively in the post-survey; meaning that, in addition to asking them about their current feelings of Member approval, I also asked participants in the post-survey what their approval of their Member was before the forum began.

The retrospective was important to include because I assumed many participants would not know who their Member of Congress was before the online forum took place and they would

potentially rate their pre-approval differently if asked again after the forum took place<sup>20</sup>. In this case, 88% of constituents who participated in the pre-survey (n = 1182) were able to correctly guess who their Member of Congress was<sup>21</sup>.

If you compare constituents' feelings about their Member before and after the forum using the retrospective-pre- and post- answers, changes in feelings of disapproval were not as large and moved the opposite direction. There was still a 4% increase in approval, but a 2% decrease in overall disapproval, and 3% decrease in "neither approve nor disapprove". Thus, feelings of disapproval slightly decreased with the retrospective, but feelings of approval stayed the same. Constituents thought their feelings of disapproval were stronger before the forum than they what was indicated in the pre-survey.

### **6.5.3. Feelings of Impact, Access, and Expression**

**C-RQ-4:** Do citizens find value in the experience of participating in the forum?

**C-RQ-4.1:** Does the experience mitigate issues seen in other forms of discussion such as Access to the Member, Freedom of Expression, and Impact to policy decision making?

Participants who engaged in the online forum were asked to answer the questions related to Access (i.e., the feeling that the Member and staff were listening to what the participant had to say), Expression (i.e., the feeling that the participant could openly express themselves), and Impact (i.e., the feelings that the participant has an impact on the Member's policy decision-making). In the pre-survey, participants were asked to answer the question in relation to their most previous

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<sup>20</sup> That being said, just because a citizen does not know who their official representative is, does not mean they lack an opinion about the representative's performance. This is why I included both a pre- and retrospective pre- approval question.

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix D for details. Constituents were asked this questing using a multiple-choice list that included the Member and other Members in the state. Constituents had the option to select "I don't know."

interaction with a Member of Congress (if they had one). In the post-survey, participants were asked to answer these questions as they pertain to the online forum experience.

*Table 6-5 In response to pre- and post-survey questions of Impact, Access, and Expression*

Forum Responses	N	Overall Agree	Overall Neither	Overall Disagree
Impact (Pre)	29	17%	34%	48%
Impact (Post)		59%	14%	28%
Access (Pre)	29	52%	14%	35%
Access (Post)		62%	17%	21%
Expression (Pre)	29	90%	3%	7%
Expression (Post)		83%	14%	3%

*Table 6-6 Changes to forum selected participant's feelings of Access, Expression, and Impact.*

Forum	N	P-Val
Impact	29	0.008545**
Access	29	0.1133
Expression	29	0.4382

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ , \*\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.0001$

There are various levels of agreement with each of the variable (see Table 6-5). Looking at the aggregates, there was a 42% increase in participants feelings of impact on the Member's decision-making as a result of the online forum compared to their previous interactions with that same Member of Congress. The Wilcox/Mann-Whitney non-parametric test indicates that this was a significant difference in constituent's feeling of impact (see Table 6.6).

Given the post-hoc power analysis described in Section 6.5.1, the number of paired instances for these questions is less than what we would want to look for a medium effect ( $n = 34$  for a .5 effect). That being said, the power analysis investigates the likelihood of false negatives (i.e., type II errors), meaning that the smaller number of constituent responses in this analysis did not impact the Wilcox/Mann-Whitney test's ability to find a moderate effect. Thus, we can assume the change in constituent's feelings of impact is significant.



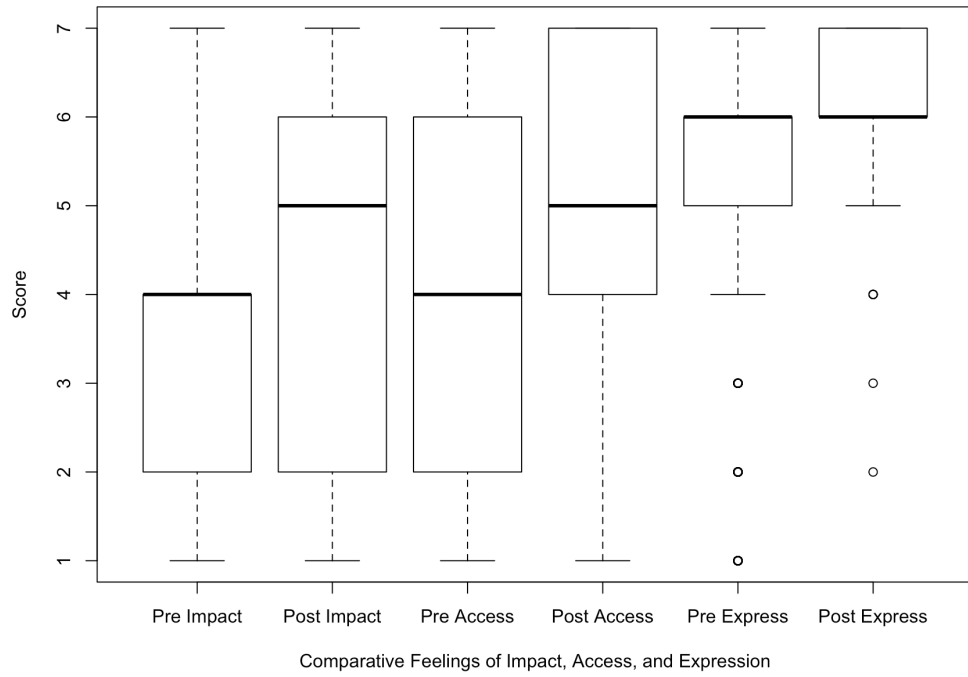


Figure 6-7 Box & Whisker Plot for Feelings of Impact, Access, and Expression in the Forum Group

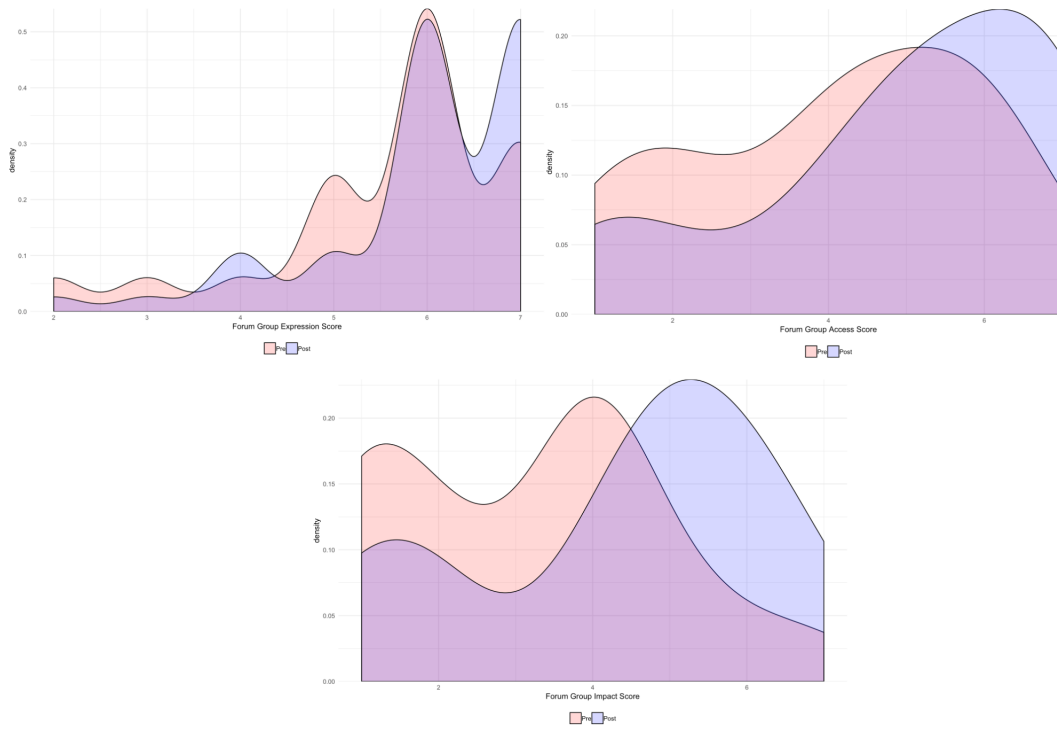


Figure 6-8 Density Plots For Feelings of Impact, Access, and Expression

There was no statistically significant change in feelings of access or expression. Looking at the density plots, there was an increase in people's feelings of access that reflected a similar shift in feelings of impact—but it was not enough to reach significance. Feelings of Expression were high to begin with at 90% and decreased by 7% in the post-survey results.

It's important to note that these questions were only asked to those who have engaged with the Member of Congress previously and attended the forum; this group already had a high sense of internal political efficacy. Thus, this forum appeared to give people who already feel politically motivated a higher sense of impact. If the goal is to improve the ways in which people already interact with the Member of Congress, this is a promising finding.

#### **6.5.4. Feelings of Worthwhile Engagement**

**C-RQ-4.2:** Does the forum format provide citizens a viable space to engage their representatives?

I asked participants in the forum group to answer three post-survey questions about the viability of the forum in long-term use. The majority of participants (88%) believed that online forums should continue to be used by Members, confirming that the current platform is a viable space for the discussions (see Table 6-7). The majority of constituents believe that online discussions like these are a good way for Members to hear the view of constituents, communicate their policy positions, and explain their actions in Washington D.C. (see Table 6-8, Table 6-9, Table 6-10) Most promising, participants prefer to have the forum take place over the course of the week, with almost a quarter of participants wishing they would last longer (see Table 6-12). As a result, there appears to be substantial interest in extended online forums.

Table 6-7 In response to: “I think my Members of Congress should continue to have online discussions like these.”

	N = 51
Strongly Agree	41%
Agree	41%
Somewhat Agree	6%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	10%
Somewhat Disagree	0%
Strongly Disagree	2%

Table 6-8 In response to: “Online discussions like these are a good way for Members of Congress to hear the views of their constituents.”

	N = 51
Strongly Agree	31%
Agree	31%
Somewhat Agree	24%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	2%
Somewhat Disagree	2%
Disagree	6%
Strongly Disagree	4%

Table 6-9 In response to: “Online discussions like these are a good way for Members of Congress to communicate their policy positions to constituents.”

	N = 51
Strongly Agree	29%
Agree	43%
Somewhat Agree	16%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	4%
Somewhat Disagree	4%
Disagree	2%
Strongly Disagree	2%

Table 6-10 In response to: “Online discussions like these are a good way for Members of Congress to explain their actions in Washington D.C.”

	N = 51
Strongly Agree	31%
Agree	37%
Somewhat Agree	20%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	8%
Somewhat Disagree	0%
Disagree	4%
Strongly Disagree	0%

Table 6-11 In response to: “I feel the POPVOX platform is a viable space to have online discussions with elected officials.”

	N = 51
Strongly Agree	39%
Agree	29%
Somewhat Agree	18%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	8%
Somewhat Disagree	6%
Strongly Disagree	0%

Table 6-12 In response to: “The researchers chose to have this discussion last one week. If this project happens again, would you prefer that the discussion last...”

	N = 51
Less than a week	8%
The same (i.e., one week)	69%
More than a week	24%

### 6.5.5. Usability

**C-RQ-4.3:** Is the POPVOX platform user-friendly for participating citizens?

Participants in the online forum were also asked to rate the usability of the POPVOX platform and its use for the online forum. Typical analysis of the SUS requires a scoring method based on the 10 original questions. Because I retracted four questions based on feedback from cognitive interviews, I calculated the SUS score for each question using the sum of scores from the Likert scale (1–7) divided by the maximum score possible for each individual question (see Table 6-13). The overall usability rating of the platform was 86%, indicating that the overall usability of POPVOX was high. Thus, the design of the forum platform did not interfere with participants’ ability to participate in the forum.

Table 6-13 System Usability Score of POPVOX, out of 100.

	N = 50
SUS-1 I think the POPVOX website was easy to use.	79%
SUS-2 I found the POPVOX website to be simple.	82%
SUS-3 I could use POPVOX without the support of a technical person.	90%
SUS-4 I would imagine that most people would learn to use POPVOX very quickly.	83%
SUS-5 I feel very confident in my ability to use POPVOX.	90%
SUS-6 I could use POPVOX without having to learn anything new.	90%
Overall SUS	86%

I also received qualitative feedback from constituent to improve usability. In the post-survey, I asked constituents to leave qualitative feedback for POPVOX. One participant said that the UI needed to be improved for seniors. Four constituents said they had problems with the text-box interface, saying that it was too small, would not allow paragraphs, and didn't allow you to see the entire response when you were drafting. When a sentence was longer than the text box—the rest of the sentence would be cut off. This issue was identified mid-forum, and a POPVOX software engineer upgraded the interface and expanded the text box where constituents to accommodate the issue.

#### 6.5.6. Reasons for Insignificant Effects—Feelings of Non-Engagement

I found no clear effect of the forum on measurements of efficacy. Why could the measure changes be so little? Externally, this forum took place during a primary election season and just a few weeks after the House of Representatives had voted to impeach the sitting President; it was a peculiar time to be engaged with a political forum. However, the forum engagement from participants was robust with no mention of these external events. Potentially more impactful, my qualitative evidence points to a potentially bigger but much simpler reason: The Member did not participate enough.

At the end of the post-survey, I offered constituents a space to leave qualitative comments, questions, or feedback about the entire forum experience. Nine constituents left additional

comments. Four of those comments were about the Member's overall engagement in the project, with one constituent writing directly to the Member:

“Dear Rep. {X}, if you were to have used this more diligently it would have had more success, your constituents showed up but you were lacking in dedication to the researchers. I am sure you are 'busy', I get it, everyone is busy, but I would encourage you next time to take the project more seriously.”

“Felt the member didn't directly engage with anything that was said, but more just provided lines from her resume. Played it very safe.”

“Seeing what other members of my community had to say was more interesting than what the Member of Congress had to say. Although I think [they were] listening and taking this seriously, the Member of Congress gave very short replies and sometimes seemed off topic, directing users to other generic resources rather than providing a personalized and targeted reply...”

“.... I thought there would be a little more back and forth—if you do this again, perhaps I would suggest a minimum of a comment per day.”

From these qualitative comments, it is clear that some constituents were disappointed with the level of engagement from the Member. This could explain why the forum effects on our measures were majority-low or inexistent. The engagement was just not enough to make significant dents to participants' feelings of efficacy.

## **6.6. Member and Staff Experience**

After the forum was complete, I asked the Member of Congress to participate in an interview to discuss the outcomes of the forum. This interview was supposed to take place following the forum and post-survey responses from constituents. Unfortunately, the forum was completed at the beginnings of a global pandemic that brought the United States into a state of crisis. My home state of California went into lockdown the week after the forum ended, around the same time I was still obtaining responses from constituents in the post-forum survey. Because of this, it became very difficult to reach the Member and their office while the federal government grappled with the situation. I decided to wait until the office had more time and capacity to speak

about the forum event. I was able to schedule a meeting on June 4<sup>th</sup> about three months after the forum took place.

The Member did not attend this meeting, but two staffers did. One staffer was the communications director who had been in frequent communication with me throughout the project and during the forum. The other staffer was new to the office post-study. They were invited by the first staffer to listen-in on the conversation.

### **6.6.1. No Member Attendance**

In this staff interview, I learned that the Member of Congress did not attend the forum in any capacity. Instead, the staffers wrote the initial posts and replied to comments on their behalf. To keep the Member in touch about the event, the staffers kept a shared living document internally where the Member engaged with top-line summaries.

After explaining this to me, the staffers felt my tone of surprise to this information. It was clear in my initial meeting with the Member and throughout my mail exchanges with staff that POPVOX and I assumed the Member would be participating. In defense, the communications director noted that “Many Members of Congress aren’t involved [in this kind of online engagement] to the point where they would.” The other staffer chimed to say that this Member was more engaged than any other Member they had worked with—a remark that was, I’m assuming, meant to justify their absence.

Knowing that the Member did not attend was crucial to our understanding the overall outcomes of the forum, the deliberation, and overall practices of constituent engagement. I will discuss this more in the next chapter. For now, I emphasize that this information highlighted two important points. First, staffers are crucial to the practices of representation. Second, staffers are becoming the primary controls of any digital forms of communication. As reviewed in Chapter 4,

there are trained staffers in charge of Member’s digital communication and social media presence. Because this forum took place within a similar medium as other kinds of digital communication (e.g., social media, emails, etc.) the staffers maintained a similar workflow as they do on other platforms.

Despite the lack of involvement from the Member, the staffers provided important content that helped me answer my research questions. These details are provided below.

### **6.6.2. Value of Citizen Input**

**M-RQ-1:** Does the online forum offer Members and staff a high value of citizen input?

The staffer who primarily engaged with the platform said they found the comments from constituent’s substantive:

“Many of the people who left comments [and] wanted to engage offered what I describe as substantive [compare to] what we see on other social media platforms. I thought that was really positive.”

The design of POPVOX does provide a social media-esque style of engagement—so it would be reasonable for the staffer to think the platform was like any other form of online engagement, despite the more formal tone of the discussion. When discussing the large participation rates, the staffer indicated that they were unsurprised.

“That is probably [due to] the district we represent; we haven’t had a single town hall that was not a packed house.”

When asked whether the forum impacted their office’s policy decision making, the staff did not think the input from citizens would have an impact. The staffer believed part of this was because the topic was broad. If they would have chosen a narrower topic, it may be different. The staff also mentioned that homelessness is a topic the office has already thought a lot about. There wouldn’t be much room for additional insights from constituents. Although I specifically asked the



Member's office to pick a topic that was important to their office and where public input have some impact on their office decision-making, the Member's team chose a topic that appeared to be less useful to their office.

"I would say that in this instance, probably not, but I don't think that's [due to] a function of the design of the project, so much as we didn't pick a topic that was necessarily useful...it would have been different topic, [for example] congress is making a decision about X in three weeks...We could imagine a different scenario if we did a different discussion about testing in coronavirus...[If someone said] I thought testing was supposed to be free, that's something we could then follow up with"

### **6.6.3. Quality Space for Engagement**

**M-RQ-2:** Do Members and staff believe the online forum offers a quality space for citizen-engagement?

The staffer said the platform was good for engagement. They could imagine this platform being useful to their office. In terms of effort, the staffer said they spent a total of 4–5 hours reviewing comments and developing the forum responses that week. Most notably, the staffer said that the temporal length of the online forum allowed them to collaborate with other staffers:

"One thing I thought was helpful [was] the timing. There was a deadline by which this would be over, but within that deadline [you could] respond whenever you wanted [which] opened up opportunities for us as a team. For example, for me to touch base with our policy staff, to talk about homelessness...."

This finding was significant, in that it demonstrates a collaboration across staffers. This is often unseen in Congress. My collaborator POPVOX found this particularly exciting as it is unusual for communications staff to actively collaborate with policy staff on communications like this. Occasionally, policy staff may weigh in on constituent correspondence to provide factual information and expertise on the topic, but they rarely do they touch base in such a way.

The staffer also mentioned how they chose to respond to constituents. They said that that they "picked comments that could advance the conversation." Given that most comments from the

Member were in agreement, it's unclear if this was the case. I was unable to ask why the staff did not respond to direct questions.

#### **6.6.4. User Friendliness**

**M-RQ-3:** Does the online forum offer Members and staff a user-friendly space?

The staffer thought the platform of the forum was easy to use. They had no concerns using the software. Although POPVOX was designed to allow more than one person (e.g., such as the staffer or the Member) to comment under the same name (i.e., the Member's name), but under different accounts, the staffer said they only used one account. The staffer had no trouble creating an account and using it to respond to constituents.

#### **6.6.5. Long-Term Feasibility**

**M-RQ-4:** Is the continued use of these platforms feasible and attractive to the Member and the office?

Despite finding the tool useful, the staffer did not believe the platform would be feasible for long-term use in their office. The primary reason was because POPVOX is not integrated into any pre-existing tool in their office. Adding a platform on top of the other ones they already use for constituent communication was not desirable to the office. This is an important practicality as the number of platforms needed to manage constituent communication has grown. This also reinforces the idea that the staffer assumed this system was akin to other constituent communication practices already used in offices.

### **6.7. Limitations**

There are limitations to the forum results. First, the sample was not entirely random. Our original sample size was a list of email addresses provided by the local official voter registration list, meaning only those who have registered to vote were contacted. Only those who signed up

were randomly chosen to participate. Although email recruitment produced a fairly representative sample, using email addresses skews samples towards digitally literate participants and participants who had access to computers. The study also took place during an election season and just a few weeks after a presidential impeachment, which could affect over participation rates. Feelings of political engagement were most likely higher at this time, which could have impacted turnout and overall engagement from constituents.

The results are also based on one Member of Congress in the House of Representatives, limiting generalizability to the Senate, other levels of the U.S. government, or any other government. The Member also represented a district with higher-than-average education levels, most likely leading to higher participation rates and skew towards people already politically engaged in some capacity.

The limited engagement from this one Member of Congress means it's hard to determine whether such forums would be increasingly successful with more engagement. Given the positive engagement from constituents, I would speculate that this would be the case, but there is no evidence to prove it in this instance.

## **6.8. Summary of Findings**

The online forum provided qualities of a deliberative space for engagement between constituents and the Member of Congress. The constituents offered robust and engaged viewpoints that could help the Member interpret the views of the constituency. However, a lack of engagement from the Member and their team made it hard to determine the ability of these forums to impact constituent feelings of efficacy. The forum made constituents feel like they had an impact on the Member of Congress's decision making, even if the actual impact was little. This suggest that if

Members and their staff put in the work to engage constituents in these kinds of forums, their ability to gain valuable insight from the constituency could increase.

At the same time, the Member's staff found engagement from constituents in the forum substantive. Staff noted that the asynchronicity of the event opened up opportunities for staff to collaborate internally. The staff believed forums like this could impact their decision-making, but in this case, they chose a topic that was too broad for impact. It is also unclear how such systems could be practically viable unless they were integrated into the office's pre-existing communications software.

## Chapter 7.

### Discussion

*“How, instead of regarding representative institutions, such as congresses and parliaments, as remote, unintelligible, self-serving and insensitive to mundane experience, could represented citizens come to feel they are—or at least, could be—an integral part of the democratic process?”*

– Stephen Coleman, *Can the Internet Strengthen Democracy?* 2017

Coleman’s query points to the fundamental question of this dissertation: How can we integrate citizens’ voices into Congress and do so in a way that strengthens representative democracy? As this dissertation has outlined, I believe that representative-constituent forums that provide qualities of deliberation are one way to address these questions. The outcomes of the deliberative forum suggest some potential of online deliberative forums to improve the value of constituent voice in Congress, but more research is needed. For now, I contribute to this conversation by discussing the findings and its implications for future research, implementation, and discussions of Congress moving forward.

### 7.1. Learnings from the Forum Outcomes

#### 7.1.1. Diverse Engagement

Previous work in both online and offline deliberation emphasizes the difficulties of obtaining a representative sample of participants (Perrault & Zhang, 2019). In this case, the efforts taken to obtain a diverse sample demographically paid off and the forum achieved an impressively representative sample of a diverse constituency. This diversity is necessary to capture the range of voices within the constituency.

That being said, the sample population did have an over-represented portion of educated constituents and males. I also did not sample for constituents registered party, leaving the sample

skewed toward the Member's party. Those who attended the forum also had higher feelings of internal efficacy to begin with. Thus, it may not be sufficient to rely on random and representative invitations to deliberative spaces in order to achieve diverse and inclusive engagement. There should be multi-modal recruitment strategies to invite and motivate constituents to engage these deliberative spaces, such as reaching out to local community groups for recruitment and oversampling for groups with lower experiences with political engagement. Such recruitment may be necessary to achieve a more inclusive and, ultimately, more democratic engagement.

I was fortunate because the residing county of the Member allowed academics to purchase voter-file information at a relatively low price. This isn't the case in all representative districts, as some do not allow outsiders to purchase this information. There are instances in other deliberations where finding participants is difficult and expensive—sometimes costing thousands of dollars to purchase voter lists to contact potential participants. Finding and recruiting participants will remain a challenging task for any form of recruitment at this scale.

### **7.1.2. Novel Engagement**

The study had a large volume of novel participation. 37% of participants had never engaged with their Member of Congress before, offering greater exposure to a diversity of voices and views of the constituency. This is similar to findings in Neblo et al.'s telephone town halls in which they found that people who don't usually participate in partisan and interest group politics, such as writing letters to the Member of advocacy campaigns or leaving a phone call, were willing to participate in deliberative events (2010).

During my pre-study fieldwork, congressional staff told me most individual constituent communication comes from a small group of people in their district that frequently contact the office, also known as "frequent flyers." These frequent flyers are one of the primary reasons

incoming constituent engagement is discounted in Member offices. Yet, forums such as this could provide a more diverse and novel range of voices to the Member's office, incentivizing Members and staff to listen to constituent voices with greater attention.

Novel participation is also healthy for civic engagement as a whole. The introduction of one or two small political acts can lead to life-long engagement by other means such as voting and campaign activity (Verba et al., 1995). Thus, recruiting diverse constituents is a very promising tool for improving democratic participation.

Although I cannot say definitively, I believe the high response rate from recruitment may be due to four factors. First, the research project was advertised as a local university experiment. Compared to Congress, Universities are more trusted sources of information and knowledge in local communities and Members of Congress already work with universities to use their auditorium for town halls and other events<sup>22</sup>. Such collaborations should continue to be explored by either the Members or researchers for future deliberative forums.

Second, this study took place a few weeks before the election cycle for Members of Congress. I had no control over the date of the study—which was chosen by the Member's office—but the deliberation took place at a politically vibrant moment.

Third, I provided a raffle gift card that was set to a large sum to encourage diverse engagement. Because participants provided substantial time and effort to the forum, I believe there is value in monetizing participation in this way, and I wish I would have had the funding to pay each participant. Too often, civic engagement projects emit a spirit of civic altruism or civic piety where citizens are expected to do the hard work for their communities and governments for free,

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<sup>22</sup> It's important to note that citizen trust in higher education is low, especially for marginalized communities that may have been exploited by university research. That being said, compared to Congress, higher education does have larger trust rates (Johnson & Peifer, 2017).

consigning civic engagement to the “voluntary sector” of civic life (Boyte, 2013). But the value of citizen’s time and engagement is substantial, and such incentives are important when the returns on investment are hard for them to see. That is why Boyte calls for a greater focus within education on “public work,” to bring back a sense of agency and power to citizen engagement through civic education.

In the same way that academics often compensate participants for their time in academic research, the government should too. It might be practically difficult for Members of Congress to do this on their own given current regulatory concerns, but advocates of these deliberative systems should consider paying people for their time and expertise for the benefit of their representatives. These monetary incentives could influence people’s willingness to participate.

Finally, the forum recruited a diverse and novel engagement because it was intentionally designed to collect diverse engagement. The mass-mailing of invites, the flexible schedule, and minimal technical resources required (i.e., only access to a laptop or phone and the internet) lowered the barrier to entry. The email list I used was a fairly accurate representation of all constituents. In contrast, Members of Congress are expected to collect their own information about constituents, which means they are generally only able to reach out to people who have contacted their office before. Although this country’s digital literacy gap prevents some communities from engaging, especially in minority groups (Mamedova & Pawlowski, 2018), technology can offer a substantial leg-up for Members of Congress to engage with more than just those who have contacted their office. These methods provide more diverse and accessible spaces compared to what Members of Congress currently use.



### **7.1.3. The Attraction of Asynchronicity**

This forum had a longer and more flexible time horizon than typical engagements with constituents (e.g., in-person town hall events). Participants were highly satisfied with the asynchronous week-long style of deliberation; they reported that a week-long format, or longer, was attractive for future constituent engagement. The staff who engaged in the forum said that the asynchronicity allowed for internal staff communication and collaboration—a promising avenue for more constituents to influence staff perceptions of the constituency. Thus, it appears that well-designed asynchronous technology can improve the quality of deliberative exchanges for constituent communication. In this case, asynchronicity could play an important role in the value and attractiveness of deliberative engagements in Congress.

Of course, synchronous engagement has its benefits as well. The real-time presence of the Member and their staff could also increase constituents' feelings of connectedness and investment in the experience. It could also keep Members accountable by encouraging them to show up for at least part of the conversation. Looking forward, I believe a collection of both in-person, real-time, and digital opportunities are key to constituent engagement. I suggest future research explore deliberations with diversified cadences. For example, online deliberations such as this one could be integrated with synchronous events, where people meet in real-time before and after each forum. These different levels of synchronicity can elongate discussions and offer even more flexibility and comfort of engaging, as suggested by Delborne et al. (2011). A mixture of both synchronous and asynchronous interactions should be explored in research.

### **7.1.4. High Feelings of Impact**

Participants of the forum indicated that the forum created significantly higher feelings of impact on the Member's decision-making than their previous forms of engagement with their

Member. It is unclear what those other forms of engagement were, as I did not ask constituents to detail their previous interactions, but overall feelings of impact were substantially less.

Why was this the case? I believe there are a few potential reasons. First, the forum provided a trusted space for intentional and proactive listening. Although I was not engaged in the actual discussion, the mediation of academic actors could have played a role in maintaining trust in the forum process. In addition, constituents were invited to engage and they were told they would have direct discussions with the Member of Congress. This is a far cry from typical communication methods such as writing letters or leaving phone calls that leave little evidence of intentional listening.

Second, the presence of others from the community could have influenced feelings of impact. Participants knew they were part of a select and diversified group of fellow constituents. Being part of a selected group of the community can give people a feeling of political legitimacy even when public officials are unable to demonstrate impact (Tina Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). Because constituents knew there was a diversified number of participants in the forum they could have felt collectively more impactful.

As I mentioned earlier, the group of people who felt higher feelings of impact were already politically motivated (they reached out to the Member before) and experienced higher feelings of political efficacy. Considering that the goal of this project was to improve the ways in which people already engage with their Member, this finding has great promise. Deliberative forms may improve people's feeling of impact compared to what they already experience when engaging with their Member, letting constituents create more valuable forms of impact compared to what they already contribute. However, it's unclear if these feelings of impact would be the same for those who have never engaged with their Member before and do not have an understanding of what those experiences are like in comparison.

### 7.1.5. No Evidence of Actual Impact

Although the forum improved participants' feelings of impact, I have no evidence that it changed policymaker decisions. Referring back to my framework of representation in Chapter 2, the key markers of democratic representation are avenues for Members to accurately interpret the constituent's views. Representatives do not have to demonstrate direct responsiveness to constituency opinion to maintain normative ideas of representative legitimacy.

That being said, people won't engage with their representatives if they feel there is little to no potential for influence. If the Member intentionally reaches out to the constituency for input, constituents would expect that their input will be used in some way, or else such engagement would be pointless. It is unclear from the findings that the study succeeded in helping Members utilize constituent opinion for policy decision-making. The lack of actual impact on the Member and their staff in this forum is one of the ways the forum failed to live up to the expectations.

It is plausible that the Member and their team chose the topic of homelessness as a way to evade more consequential topics of consideration. As many feminist political scholars have pointed out, powerful actors may take advantage of deliberations to maintain power and hierarchy, using deliberations for outward perceptions (See Section 2.4.3). This seemed to match the ways in which the staff used language to maintain a *presentation of self* (Fenno, 1978). These platforms may be used to keep citizens feeling like they have influence rather than having actual influence.

This scenario is a bit like a chicken-and-egg problem. Many Members of Congress may be scared to include citizens in important policy decisions given their current experience dealing with the floods of angry contact from constituents that their office receives. But if Members and their staff slowly open up to new possibilities of deliberation, and those deliberations offer a new vantage on the role of constituent input, their view of the quality and value of deliberative constituent interaction may change overtime. More deliberative engagements with constituents might be

needed for the Member and staff to feel comfortable making deliberative engagements consequential to their decisions. If this becomes the case, then deliberative democracy may become a viable path for addressing substantive issues in representative-constituent communication.

From a participation standpoint, future iterations of forums like these (or for any constituent engagement for that matter) should provide evidence that constituent voices could influence the Member's perspective and decision-making. For example, it would be beneficial for Members to demonstrate what they have learned at the end of forums by summarizing the discussion, highlighting some key points left by constituents, and offering statements about the discussion's impact on their thoughts or future actions. It would also be beneficial for Members to select issue topics that they are actively wrestling with proactively. If decision-making is still in the early stages of development, there are more possibilities for constituent input to shape the foundations of future actions and policies. These steps were not taken in this study, but they could prove useful for the long-term viability of deliberative platforms and deeper engagement with constituent voices.

#### **7.1.6. Lack of Change to Efficacy**

Although constituent efficacy is not the direct goal of constituent communication, personal feelings of efficacy and the efficacy of the representatives and the institution are necessary for long-term civic health. They are important indicators of whether constituents would be willing to engage in further deliberations to provide a positive feedback loop for political discussions.

This forum did not have any effect on participants' feelings of efficacy—internally, externally, or towards the Member. All efficacy measures presented little effect. As discussed in the findings chapter, there are a few potential reasons why efficacy was not achieved, such as the lack of substantive engagement from the Member and the lack of transparent outcomes from the

forum deliberation. It could also be that the intervention was just too small to offer any significant change to a person's political efficacy.

Graeff's efficacy analysis of users on a civic engagement website demonstrated a similar lack of impact on efficacy (2018). In his case, there was a correlation between those who engaged more on the website and a higher sense of internal political efficacy, but an intervention meant to empower individuals to feel meaningful engagement on the platform produced no change to internal or external efficacy. The same lack of effect on internal efficacy was highlighted by Morell, who indicated that global measures of efficacy might not change due to deliberations, but situation-specific measures of efficacy might (2003).

Thus, more research is needed to understand if efficacy measures would change as a result of more engaged participation from the Member in these forums or whether such broad measures are useful compared to situation-specific measures. In future iterations of these forums, I hope to compare the demographic information of participants to their efficacy scores and engagement levels. This additional analysis may shed light on the findings of efficacy.

## **7.2. Understanding the Presence of Staff**

The primary presence of staff in this forum presents some interesting questions around the style of deliberative communication, the role of staff in deliberative engagements, and the labor practices of Member offices. I explore these factors in this section.

### **7.2.1. Staff Engagement**

#### ***Style of Communication***

The Member's staff engaged with constituents on the forum in a manner that reflected standard congressional communication. Staff responses to the dialogue attempted to preserve the

Member's image and generally mimicked the standard playbook of responses typical to other kinds of engagement with constituents.

The standard playbook of responses is not inherently good or bad for the overall quality of deliberation; it depends on its use. For example, in my qualitative findings, I show that the staff comments demonstrated empathy for constituents and presented explanations of Washington activities. Both are considered important components to Fenno's theory of representative's presentation of self, but they are also useful to set the tone of a deliberation. For example, the staff showed empathy to the constituents by offering a sense of agreement and mutual consensus. This kind of engagement is important for good deliberations as participants try to understand the collective views of a topic.

Another typical representative action—explaining activity in Washington D.C.—can provide information and context to individuals. Such information provides anecdotes of human behavior that can reinforce Member arguments or emphasize key actions from the Member and their team. Thus, from a deliberative standpoint, the comments posted by staff followed some of the qualities for healthy deliberations.

That being said, there are downsides to staff simply following the playbook of standard constituent communication. Staff are trained to respond with formal modes of constituent engagement (e.g., letters and emails). They rarely have the authority to speak off-script—especially if they are speaking on behalf of the Member. It would be considered risky and out of turn for a staffer to speak on the Member's behalf in an emotional or opinionated way without the Member's consent.

The ability and willingness to go “off-script” is important to set a tone of authenticity, carefulness, and humanity. While it is standard for staff to speak on behalf of the Member in many

situations, it is key that Members themselves engage to some degree for such deliberative platforms to work. This would allow opportunities for more “off-script” and casual engagement with constituents and an opportunity for Members to have direct exposure to constituent opinions.

### ***Influence of Staff***

Although there are benefits to the Member engaging in the online platform, the lack of Member engagement does not diminish the potential for constituents to influence the Member’s interpretations and decision-making. Many Member decisions are influenced by staff opinions and the degree to which constituent voices are shared among staff is critical in shaping Member decision-making. There was evidence that the asynchronicity and the single-topic component of the forum allowed staff to engage more with each other. In particular, it encouraged communications staff to work more with the legislative staff.

This finding is substantial. The communication team and legislative team generally operate independently within a Member’s office. Considering that legislative staff are the primary persons in charge of policy research and insights that are directly translated to the Member, the closer communications staff can involve themselves with legislative staff, the closer constituents are to influential legislative staff. These findings suggest important gateways to influence can be opened in unexpected ways. If collaborating on asynchronous responses to constituent dialogue kindles relationships among communication and legislative staffers, the more likely incoming constituent opinion from various channels will be integrated into the policy process.

This staff collaboration also demonstrates an instance where a change in communications technology altered the labor practices of the Member offices. In the same way that the presence of social media increased the number of social media experts in Member offices, these platforms may reconfigure the way offices define and develop staff roles. Such shifts could be positive to the office, as deliberations could promote more collaboration across staff.

Lastly, the results from the deliberation strengthen the idea of Members of Congress are not singular entities but collections of “legislative enterprise[s]” (Salisbury & Shepsle, 1981). Members are the “head” of a body of collective persons and knowledge. Too often, staff are left out of the image of Members of Congress, and research on their knowledge and behaviors are rare (Furnas et al., 2020; Miler, 2010). This is true despite the fact that staff are primary influencers of Member actions. It might be time for political scholars in the U.S. to reframe ideas of representation around collective bodies of representative, rather than individually elected Members.

As I highlighted in Chapter 4, the act of constituent communication often does not involve the representative at all. Rather, it is the representative’s staff that collectively offer a voice of the representative to the public. More work needs to be done to engage staff and recognize their impact on the entire representative process.

### ***A Lack of Member Engagement***

Although staff are important, the absence of the Member in the online dialogue is still concerning. The general public is predisposed against the value of congressional staff as they are often ignorant of their purpose (Madonna & Ostrander, 2020). Surveys suggest that the public believes there is an overabundance of congressional staff, even though their numbers have steadily decreased over time (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995; Madonna & Ostrander, 2020).

Constituents already have negative perceptions of staff, so staff’s presence in the forum could be perceived as having no value. If constituents believe they are not directly interacting with the Member, then they will not impact the Member’s decision-making. This could play a substantial role in constituent’s feelings of political efficacy and their likelihood of future engagement.

A lack of engagement from the Member also engenders questions about the integrity of these kinds of online forum engagements. Would constituents find the experience authentic if they



knew that the Member did not show up at all? Probably not. No matter how much staff play a role in the actual decision-making process of Members, keeping staff behind a façade of the Member is a form of deception. And deception does take away a sense of authenticity required for good deliberations (Steenbergen et al., 2003).

As a result of these issues, the Member should either make the role of staff transparent to constituents throughout the deliberative process or guarantee the Member engages directly. As I suggested earlier, a mixture of asynchronous and synchronous events could offer such opportunities, keeping staff and Members engaged in parts of the deliberative process.

### **7.3. Platform Design and Influencing Forum Outcomes**

#### **7.3.1. Text-Based Systems**

How the platform was designed plays a huge role in this how constituents and Member staff participate in the online dialogue. The fact that the deliberation was text-based (and therefore not entirely transient), and I sensed an incentive from staff to stay “on message.” It’s not hard to imagine that because staff recycled language from their treasure trove of form emails. This is a way to avoid unapproved language from the office and to streamline responses to constituents’ comments. Thus, although asynchronicity allowed constituents to fact-check and ruminate decisions for better deliberation, the same feature may lead to lower engagement from the representative’s team, who can utilize redundant and pre-researched messages.

This has important implications for any system designed to mediate engagement between parties where information asymmetries exist—but it is most notable for deliberation between a representative and their constituents. The public needs more time to investigate issues and get up to speed, which slower-moving dialogue affords. At the same time, because representatives and staff have abundant access to prepared statements, reports, and internal expertise, they may be

reluctant to substantially deliberate by text if they are given easy opportunities to use pre-written statements that are already used to engage constituents.

### **7.3.2. Fact Sheet Development and Distribution**

Fact sheets play an important role in both setting the tone for deliberation and empowering constituents with knowledge around the topic of deliberation. Because Members and staff already have expertise and exposure to policy information, it's important to bring constituents up-to-speed so they can make important contributions.

In this case, the fact sheet was written by me with assistance from academic experts on the topic of homelessness and congressional experts. For all deliberative engagements between representatives and constituents in Congress, I believe it's important to recruit outside entities to write, or at least confirm, the information within fact sheets. These outside confirmations help constituents determine the information to be authentic and not skewed by the Member and their staff.

It is also important to ensure that information is non-partisan or, at the very least, provides exposure to the logic and reasoning from all sides of issues—paying careful attention to minority voices. This is something that was not fully achieved by this fact sheet in this study but will prove useful in the long-term equity of information exposure for constituents engaging in these deliberative environments.

### **7.3.3. Representative Role Fluidity**

POPVOX knew there was a high chance of staff taking over conversations on behalf of the Member. That is why POPVOX designed a staff log-in system that allowed high-ranking staff to post on behalf of their Member. The design of POPVOX thus enabled the Member and staff to

fluidly interchange speakership. It followed the norms and practices already in Congress and kept them in perpetuity through the design of the platform.

This design decision conflicts with feelings of authenticity that I discussed earlier. If POPVOX continues to hide staff behind the accounts of the Member, then there are limited opportunities for staff to be transparent about their role in communication.

Again, I had little control of the design of POPVOX before the deliberation took place. For future iterations of forum like these, it would be useful to consider re-designing the ways in which staff can present themselves without having to post only on behalf of the Member.

#### **7.3.4. Post-Comment Format Restrictions**

The POPVOX design did not allow constituents to comment on other constituents' comments; only the Member could comment on constituent comments. This design choice was made to avoid side-conversations and flame wars, but it also limits the ways in which constituents can engage with their community and engage in the deliberations. Thus, the design of comments evoked a feeling to constituents that they were only to engage with the Member of Congress (and staff) and not their community.

Considering the number of flame wars that occur on social media pages of Members of Congress on other platforms, I understand why POPVOX believed this design choice was necessary. However, these comment restrictions limit opportunities to provoke important and sometimes contentious political discussions. It would be in the best interest of anyone developing these online deliberative forums for representatives to reconsider the limitations of constituents commenting and find alternative forms of regulations like good moderation.

## **7.4. Developing Design Principles:**

At this point in the discussion, it is worth taking a broader perspective and outline a set of design principles for future iterations of deliberative forums in representative contexts. This list is non-exhaustive, but it provides some of the key insights gained from this experience:

1. Work to enhance the diversity of constituents engaged and consider if and when certain populations of constituents need to be oversampled compared to demographics of the representative's district.
2. Ensure deliberative topics chosen by the Member and their staff offer clear opportunities for constituents to provide persuasive impact and informative insights.
3. Provide factual information written by those outside the Member's office before and during the deliberative event, ensuring all information covered in fact sheets includes all the important views surrounding the topic.
4. Make expectations of engagement clear to the Member and their staff. It may be helpful to include a minimum threshold for engagement and direct contact.
5. Embrace aspects of asynchronicity and slower-moving dialogue as part of the deliberative engagement.
6. Keep the roles of Members and staff transparent to constituents in the interface design of engagement.
7. Ensure constituents have opportunities to engage with the Member and each other throughout the deliberative sessions.

## 7.5. Congressional Barriers

Even if improvements to the deliberative forum experience are made, there are important practical considerations that need to be addressed. If the goal is for Members to adopt online dialogues independently, then my interviews with staff after the forum exemplified limits to technology change. The staffer believed the forum could not be integrated into their office because the office had too many software tools already. Whether this statement was due to the fear of increasing cost, management, or both is unclear—but it was unattractive to the office to have one more tool in the toolbox.

The overabundance of civic platforms in the office points to an important problem. As Alex Howard, director of the Digital Democracy Project, pointed out during a congressional tech conference, there is a massive civic tech graveyard of Congress, most likely due to the lack of civic participation as a whole (Howard, 2019). Advocates continue to try to find new methods to improve the institution and often fail to persuade long-term bureaucrats to change their methods of public engagement.

While there are many examples of civic tech solutions and platforms that have failed or otherwise proven ephemeral, we should keep these failures in perspective. I do not think the civic graveyard is a barrier to the success of any future platforms. In my opinion, many of these platform failures seem to be due to (1) a lack of understanding about the needs and capacities of Congress and (2) a lack of effort from Congress to select tools that innovate away from current communication practices. If these design and process flaws are addressed, such platforms can succeed.

Breaking barriers to congressional conformity are not easy. Members of Congress and their staff will have to break from norms and practices that they worked so hard to conform towards.

Most Members will only commit to change if there is a guarantee such changes will benefit them, and their perspective of what they believe is ‘beneficial’ could get in the way. Members will continue to find short-term solutions to their communication problems unless given enough institutional backing and incentive to select alternatives. Any platform that intends to make a permanent presence in these offices needs to provide Member’s confidence and proof of long-term effectiveness at either improving the jobs of the staff or improving the outward appearance of the Member.

At the same time, even if Member offices want to adopt these tools, it is clear from congressional capacity research that Members and staff are overwhelmed and overbooked (LaPira et al., 2020). Although I believe companies like Indigov that automate the process of responding to constituent emails put a bandage on a larger problem with constituent communication, those systems reduce the time staff waste developing responses to advocacy campaign mail. In turn, some automation of constituent communication may free up the time of staff to focus on developing more quality communications efforts like this one. The reduction of time spent on email-based communication frees up time for more deliberative forms of communication—but only if Members and staff are given the incentive to do so.

There are also tremendous hurdles to institutional adoptions due to decentralized authority over technology regulation and technology acquisition approval processes. Streamlining a technology like POPVOX for online deliberations will require numerous vendor, legal, and security review processes. Congress has not made it easy for Members to try new platforms or update existing systems. And those bureaucratic barriers will continue to block or scare away anyone who wishes to fix internal issues from the outside.

In the face of institutional barriers, congressional advocates need to keep pushing for change. The current communication status quo does little to strengthen representative’s relationship

with their constituency. These interventions are a learning process towards a complicated vision of better engagement. The more that Members can see the possibility of alternatives, the more receptive the institution may be to shifting the goals of constituent communication.

## **7.6. Looking Back to Look Forward**

Recalling my discussion in Chapter 2, I ask if these kinds of deliberative forums could help representatives become better interpreters of their constituency and include citizens in more meaningful methods of policy decision-making? For me, the answer is, potentially, but it hasn't fully proven its utility yet. Participating constituents provided a diverse and informative view of their opinions to the Member, and the Member's team used the forum to hear from and educate their constituency on the topic and their policy efforts. However, the lack of engagement from the Member does not fare well for long-term engagement from the constituency. Constituents need to feel meaningful connectivity and efficacy for the long-term success of these deliberations. These deliberations need to be based on topics that can create meaningful input from constituents to the Member.

The deliberative study has shown a tremendous need for dialogue and empowerment of citizens that is not being met by the current congressional arrangements. Integrating democratic innovations such as this one into such a heterogeneous, contentious, and partisan environment like Congress seems a bit unachievable in its current state. But what better way to learn how to bring constituents and representatives together in deliberative dialogue than to make those pathways available. This shift will only change with increased experimentation and exposure.

Thinking revolutionarily, the only way that these deliberative methods of engagement—and new ways of representing in general—will flourish is if the institution shifts the power and incentive structures away from leadership positions into the hands of individual Members, their

staff, and constituents. Some scholars have suggested developing a fourth branch of government; a deliberative branch that puts citizens voices right next to the executive, legislative, and judicial branch—allowing the deliberative body of citizens to enact laws that are checked by the other branches (Leib, 2004; Papandreou, 2019). This idea supports a radical new way of involving citizens in the process, restructuring the idea of representation around not just elected bodies but randomly selected bodies of everyday persons.

Although the fourth branch proposal is inspiring, my work focuses on strengthening representatives through the citizens' voices rather than strengthening citizens directly. To strengthen Congress, I suggest creating an internal department that runs deliberative sessions on behalf of individual Members, committees, and other internal collectives. That department can make the enactment of deliberations easier by recruiting experts and stakeholders in the policy topic, working with pre-existing agencies like the Congressional Research Service to develop fact sheets, and developing official and cost-effective recruitment strategies to make it easier for Congress to find the right diversity of participants.

Again, these deliberative sessions will only be legitimate if Congress chooses to seed some power to the people's voice. Right now, it's near impossible for individual Members to take action on bills without instructions for their parties' leaders, let alone their constituents. Party leaders and power interests will do their best to thwart any redistribution of power or any deviation from the norm. But, if the power dynamics of Congress shift towards individual Members, and Members are given the time, incentives, and resources to engage constituents directly in the policy-making process—then the citizen's voice will strengthen.



### **7.6.1. An Important Caveat to Future Work**

As a final point, it is important to emphasize that this study was difficult to execute. Such difficulties speak to the larger reasons why so little academic work is being done in this space. Bureaucratic and ethical considerations abound. Congressional offices often have minimal trust in outsider groups. The study would not have been possible without multiple years of my own networking and engagement with Congress.

Given the bureaucratic barriers and political nature of the institution, developing a rigorous understanding of how Congress's procedures work was also essential. I spent many evenings learning the ethical guidelines, regulations, and current political climate of Congress. I also felt the need to consult a former White House Ethics Lawyer on the political risk involved in this research. Given that this project took place with a Member of Congress during a re-election campaign, there was a political risk for both me and the University that could have arisen. Even with approval, and an eager and tech-savvy Member willing to engage in the forum, it took a year to get the project off the ground and get on the Member's calendar. It is no wonder that less than a handful of academic research projects have been able to conduct citizen-engagement research with Congress.

The difficulty of the project also speaks to how hard it is for Congress to enact these kinds of innovations on their own. Members are heavily restricted by the Communications Standards Commission (previously known as the Franking Commission) and Ethics Rulebook and thus unable to collaborate with outside entities or try different kinds of constituent engagement practices. Most offices do not have the luxury of time, staff, or resources to innovate, nor is there any incentive from the institution to do so. As clearly demonstrated in Chapter 4, constituent communication is not a priority to the offices, and even with the right incentives, it is rare for any changes to occur.

I do not include this information to dissuade other scholars and practitioners from further research in this space. Quite the contrary, I hope these barriers demonstrate a need for more

advocacy to change the governing processes and promote research collaborations in this space. The more that researchers can engage Congress and demonstrate the importance and impact of these collaborations, the more likely the barriers to this work will fade.

### **7.6.2. A Different World Than Before**

The forum took place on the precipice of a global pandemic. In mid-March of 2020, just a few weeks after the end of the forum, Congress—with the rest of the world—went into lockdown. The technological and labor norms of Congress were altered as staff began working remotely. For many offices, all internal communication, town hall events, and other forms of communication have become completely digital. Members are relying on remote communication practices to connect to their constituency (Goldschmidt & Sinkaus, 2020). Even remote and proxy voting is now getting traction. The House authorized remote voting by proxy as well as study to evaluate the feasibility of using technology to conduct remote voting long-term. The Congress we knew before and during the forum is far more technologically exposed than it was prior.

The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) surveyed staff after the onset of the pandemic shut down (Goldschmidt & Sinkaus, 2020). They found that Members and their staff are becoming more comfortable with technology. At the same time, digital contact continues to rise. One Chief of Staff said their contact with constituent went up 700% during the first two months of COVID-19, mostly from those who needed assistance. 82% of staff to indicate that their offices had increased the financial and personnel resources dedicated to constituent engagement. Some staff noted that the pandemic was opening up offices to the ideas of new digital communication that they have not considered previously. And many respondents of the survey said they thought their offices will increase the time and resources devoted to remote engagement in the future. All in all, I believe the past year brought a state of technical necessity that brings further opportunities for dramatic change.

## 7.7. Striving Towards Understanding

What's to be done now? I believe this dissertation has shed light on Congress and its need to test more deliberative methods of constituent communication. It also unveiled the important institutional barriers to implement theoretically promising ideas into reality. Most importantly, this study demonstrated the eagerness of constituents to participate, to have an impact, and to talk with their representatives. Online deliberative platforms could help representatives involve constituents in their decision-making processes. We can help representatives do their job better.

The democracy of the United States continues to face a barrage of threats to institutional legitimacy. These threats come as the nation grapples with the tension between what it strives to be and what it has always been. Congress is bruised and battered but continuously moving towards the reforms it needs. Although constituent communication is only one of many desperately needed reforms, it can impact the relationships between constituent and their representatives—a relationship that needs serious amends.

The representatives of tomorrow need to understand what constituents want and constituents must have ways to communicate those needs. We need avenues for understanding—true understanding of the diversity and breadth of stories, explanations, and experiences that make everyone vital to governance. If academics, representative institutions, and the public work towards building these avenues of understanding, we might have a better system for the long run.

As the young poet Amanda Gorman put so eloquently at the 2021 presidential inauguration:

“...victory won't lie in the blade, but in all the bridges we've made. That is the promise to glade, the hill we climb if only we dare. It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit. It's the past we step into and how we repair it.”

– Amanda Gorman, Presidential Inauguration, 2021

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## Appendix A.

### Recruitment



Hello!

My name is Sam McDonald and I am a doctoral student at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) in the department of Informatics. I am asking you to participate in a unique research project to test new technology for people to communicate with their government.

If you participate in this project, you will have a chance to win a \$500 Amazon gift card.

Speak directly with policymakers from your home in an online forum. Talk about issues your community cares about. If you participate, your voice will represent thousands of people where you live.

Your Member of Congress has accepted an invitation to be part of this research project.

If you wish to participate, you will be asked to take two 15-minute online surveys. You can take one right now and one in about a month. From all our participants, a randomly selected group will also attend an online forum with their Member of Congress from Feb 24th - March 1st. This forum will last one week online on a website called popvox.com. Participants can log-on and participate in the discussion whenever they like during that week.

The deadline to finish the first survey is February 18th.

To learn more about the study and to agree to participate, copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are at least 18 years of age, speak English, have access to a phone or laptop, and live in [redacted for anonymity] congressional district. You do not have to be a U.S. citizen to participate.

Transparency and accountability are important to our research team. Your contact information was purchased from the [redacted for anonymity] voter registration files. This information is available

for election, governmental, scholarly, or political research purposes. Please follow the link to opt out of future emails.

This work is conducted by researchers at UCI and is not sponsored by any Member of Congress.



## Appendix B.

### Code of Conduct

Before you start talking to your Member of Congress, you must read the following...

#### Rules For Conduct

**Remember the Human.** The people in this discussion were intentionally chosen to be diverse. Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, even if you disagree with them. When commenting you might want to ask yourself “Would I say it to the person's face?”

**Keep it Civil:** Criticizing the policymaker’s response is fine, attacking the policymaker personally is not.

Saying things like “You’re my elected official, you work for me” or “I won’t vote for you” will immediately shut down the conversation.

- OK: “Your argument ignores X and grossly simplifies the issue because...”
- OK: “That is simply not true because...”
- Not OK: “You are an incompetent buffoon and don't belong in this discussion.”
- Not OK: “People like you are exactly what is wrong with our country”

#### How to Impact Your Member of Congress

**Provide Value and Challenge.** Give the policymaker something to think about. Ask them questions and don’t be afraid to push back and challenge what they say. They want to hear from you!

**Share Your Story:** Policymakers love hearing stories from their constituents. If you have a personal story to share that is related to the topic being discussed, they want to hear it.

#### Disallowed Submissions

**Off-Topic Content:** The policymaker has chosen a single topic they want to discuss with you. Any comments that are not part of this topic will be reviewed and removed.

**Banned Post:** Threats or advocates of violence, exposure of personal information, trolling, personal attacks, hate speech, sexism/racism and soliciting will not be tolerated under any circumstances. Personal attacks include name calling, ad-hominem, demeaning, inflammatory, or other uncivil comments directed at other users.

If we decide your comment does not follow our rules, we will notify you of its removal and offer suggestions for an alternative format. We want you to have a say in the discussion, but we want to make sure you are doing so in a way that the policymaker will listen.

# Appendix C.

## Fact Sheet

### Homelessness in America and [Local] County: Fact Sheet

UCI researchers prepared this document for online discussions with Members of Congress. The researchers made every attempt to create a fact-based non-partisan document that provides an overview of the issue.

#### *What is Homelessness?*

A person is considered homeless if they are living in a shelter or sleeping in a place not meant to be used for sleeping, such as in a car, on the street, or in an abandoned building [1]. Chronic homelessness is when a person has a disabling condition and is homeless for at least a year [2,5].

#### *What Causes Homelessness?*

The primary cause of homelessness in America is a lack of affordable housing [2,3,4]. Unemployment, poverty, and low wages are other leading causes [3]. Domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and families [3].

#### *How Many People Are Homeless?*

In 2019, 568,000 people in the U.S. were homeless [5,11]. Of those, more than [#] were in [state], and nearly [#] in [county] [6].

#### *Who is Homeless?*

The U.S. homeless population is 61% male. 5 73% are over 24 years old. 5 48% are white, 40% are African American and 22% are Hispanic/Latino [5]. 8% of the homeless are veterans, which is 50% less than in 2009 [5]. Between 2003 and 2018, the number of homeless students has doubled [15].

#### *Why Address Homelessness?*

Homelessness damages the health and well-being of both people and communities. It can cause long-term trauma and lead to early death. It also increases the cost to taxpayers by straining public services.

Between 2010 and 2018, homelessness in the U.S. decreased by 13%.7 However, some communities, like cities with growing housing costs, saw an increase in homelessness. [State]'s homeless population increased by more than [#] just between [year] and 2019. Homelessness in [local city] increased by 66% between 2010 and 2017 [8]. [Local] County has the [#]-largest homeless population in the U.S. for a county of its size [7,9]. Officials are calling the current situation a homelessness crisis in [state] [8].

#### *Possible Solutions and Tensions*

It is nearly impossible to create a one-size-fits-all solution to homelessness, but permanent housing with support services is generally viewed as an effective solution.<sup>1</sup>

Research is showing that housing the homeless could reduce taxpayer costs [2,7,12]. In [Local] County, a study by local academics and non-profits estimates that the county spent [#] million in 2014/2015 to address homelessness [2]. They also estimate that [local] County could save \$41.5 million per year if all chronically homeless individuals were placed into permanent supportive housing [2].

Creating more supportive housing could save costs and reduce immediate homelessness, but new housing for the homeless often stimulates local debates. Local residents raise questions about how many housing units or shelters to build, where to build them, and how they will affect local communities. These concerns create tension among local, state, and federal government proposed actions.

It is also unclear if new housing for the homeless will provide a long-term solution to the homelessness crisis as living costs continue to rise in certain communities. Solutions to try to prevent homelessness are also promising, including housing subsidies, supportive services, mediation in housing courts, and cash assistance for rent or mortgage [13,14].

### ***What Can the Federal Government Do?***

The federal government aims to end homelessness, or at least make it a rare and brief experience, especially for families, children and teenagers, chronically homeless people, and veterans [10]. To reduce homelessness, Congress creates public policies that fund and support federal agencies that provide housing, services, and support to the homeless. Some of these agencies include the Departments of Justice (DOJ), Labor (DOL), Homeland Security (DHS), Veterans Affairs (VA), Health and Human Services (HHS), and Housing and Urban Development (HUD). These agencies provide aid such as emergency food and shelter, healthcare, transitional housing, substance abuse treatment, runaway and youth support programs, and veteran reintegration programs [10].

The federal government primarily uses a Housing First approach to homelessness. This means that the homeless are placed in permanent housing before they receive services such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation, medical treatment, or job-seeking assistance. There is some disagreement over this approach. The White House Council of Economic Advisers would like to reform the Housing First approach. It has found evidence that federal Housing First efforts have not played a major role in the decline in homelessness [14]. However, there is also strong evidence that housing the homeless reduces the total number of days a person remains homeless, and many federal agencies and personnel still advocate for a Housing First approach [14].

From 2009 to 2018, the federal government increased homelessness funding by nearly \$6 billion each year [7]. Congress is holding meetings and prompting conversations on a range of issues related to homelessness. Policy proposals included the Ending Homelessness Act of 2019, which could provide \$13.27 billion over five years to critical federal housing programs [7]. There are also policy proposals focused on increasing support for homeless veterans and making the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness a permanent federal agency [7].

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[1] Homelessness: Targeted Federal Programs. U.S. Congressional Research Service (October 18, 2018). <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=817726>

[2] *[Redacted for anonymity]*

[3] Homelessness in America: Overview of Data and Causes. National Law Center of Homelessness and Poverty (January 2015). [https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Homeless\\_Stats\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Homeless_Stats_Fact_Sheet.pdf)

[4] Deploy Housing First Systemwide. United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (August 15, 2018). <https://www.usich.gov/solutions/housing/>

[5] 2019 Point in Time Estimates of Homelessness in the U.S. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2019). <https://www.hud.gov/2019-point-in-time-estimates-of-homelessness-in-US>

[6] *[Redacted for anonymity]*

[7] Homeless in America: Examining the Crisis and Solutions to End Homelessness. Hearings before the Committee on Financial Services. 116th Congress (February 13, 2019). <https://financialservices.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=402093>

[8] *[Redacted for anonymity]*

[9] The 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (December 2017). <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2017-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

[10] Home Together: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent Homelessness. US Interagency Council on Homelessness (2019) [https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/Home-Together-Federal-Strategic-Plan-to-Prevent-and-End-Homelessness.pdf](https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Home-Together-Federal-Strategic-Plan-to-Prevent-and-End-Homelessness.pdf)

[11] Every year, the Department of Housing and Urban Development requires funded organizations to count the number of people experiencing homelessness in their communities. These are called Point-in-Time (PIT) estimates. <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/hdx/pit-hic/>

[12] Permanent Supportive Housing: Evaluating the Evidence for Improving Health Outcomes Among People Experiencing Chronic Homelessness. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (July 2018). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519595/>

[13] Strategies for Preventing Homelessness. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research (May 2015). [https://www.huduser.gov/Publications/pdf/Strategies\\_for\\_preventing\\_Homelessness.pdf](https://www.huduser.gov/Publications/pdf/Strategies_for_preventing_Homelessness.pdf)

[14] The State of Homelessness in America. The White House Council of Economic Advisers (September 2019). [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-State-of-Homelessness-in-America.pdf?mod=article\\_inline](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-State-of-Homelessness-in-America.pdf?mod=article_inline)

[15] Federal Data Summary School Years 2015-16 Through 2017-28. National Center for Homeless Education (January 2020). <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Federal-Data-Summary-SY-15.16-to-17.18-Published-1.30.2020.pdf>

## Appendix D.

### Survey Protocol

#### Pre-Survey

**Instructions:** This survey will ask a maximum of 24 questions. This should take no more than 8 minutes to complete. First, we are going to ask you five questions about your opinions on politics and government. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1. I consider myself well-qualified to participate in general political discussions.

Strongly agree

Agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

2. I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.

Strongly agree

Agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

3. I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people.

Strongly agree

Agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

4. Most Members of Congress DON'T care what people like me think.

Strongly agree

Agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree  
Strongly disagree

5. People like me DON'T have any say about what Members of Congress do.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

**Instructions:** Now we are going to ask you eight questions about the United States Congress. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

6. Congress works on everyone's behalf.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

7. Congress makes decisions based on what citizens want.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

8. Congress represents all citizens.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

9. Today's American democracy works well.

Strongly agree  
Agree

Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

10. Congress's decisions are transparent.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

11. Who is your Member of Congress? It is ok if you don't know. Please provide your best guess or state "I don't know".

[6 options, redacted for anonymity]  
I don't know

12. What is your general opinion of Congressperson [X]?

Strongly approve  
Approve  
Somewhat approve  
Neither approve nor disapprove  
Somewhat disapprove  
Disapprove  
Strongly disapprove

13. Have you ever contacted a Member of Congress?

Yes  
No

**Instructions:** Please answer these four questions about your most recent experience contacting a Member of Congress.

14. Was this Congressperson [X]?

Yes  
No

15. I feel that the Congressperson and/or their staff was listening to what I had to say.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

16. I feel that I could express my opinions openly during my contact with the Congressperson and/or their staff.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

17. I feel that Congressperson [X] used the input from me in their policy decision-making.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

**Instruction:** Last section. We need to collect some information about you. Please answer these six questions.

18. How old are you?

18 - 24  
25 - 34  
35 - 44  
45 - 54  
55 - 64  
65 - 74  
75 - 84  
85 or older

19. What is your gender?

Male  
Female  
Prefer to self-describe: \_\_\_\_\_

20. Do you identify as Hispanic, Latinx, or of Spanish Origin?

Yes  
No



21. What is your race? You may choose multiple.

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Black or African American

White

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

22. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or something else?

Republican

Democrat

Independent

Something Else: \_\_\_\_\_

23. What is the highest level of formal education you have completed?

Less than a high school diploma

High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)

Some college, no degree

Associate degree (e.g., AA, AS)

Bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, BS)

Master's degree (e.g., MA, MS, MEd)

Professional degree (e.g., MD, DDS, DVM)

Doctorate (e.g., PhD, EdD)

24. What is your household income?

Less than \$20,000

\$20,000-\$34,999

\$35,000-\$49,999

\$50,000-\$74,999

\$75,000-\$99,999

\$100,000-\$199,999

Over \$200,000

Prefer Not to Say

## **Post-Survey**

**Instructions:** How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1. I consider myself well-qualified to participate in general political discussions.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

2. I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

3. I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

4. Most Members of Congress DON'T care what people like me think.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

5. People like me DON'T have any say about what Members of Congress do.

Strongly agree  
Agree

Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

**Instructions:** Now we are going to ask you questions about Congress. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

6. Congress works on everyone's behalf.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

7. Congress makes decisions based on what citizens want.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

8. Congress represents all citizens.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

9. Today's American democracy works well.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

10. Congress's decisions are transparent.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

11. Who is your Member of Congress?

[6 options, redacted for anonymity]  
I don't know

12. Were you selected to attend the online discussion with your Member of Congress?

Yes  
No

13. Congressperson [X] works on the everyone's behalf.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

14. Congressperson [X] makes decisions based on what citizens want.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

15. Congressperson [X] represents all citizens.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

16. Congressperson [X]'s decisions are transparent.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

17. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of Congressperson [X]?

Strongly approve  
Approve  
Somewhat approve  
Neither approve nor disapprove  
Somewhat disapprove  
Disapprove  
Strongly disapprove

**Instructions:** Please answer questions about your experience participating in the online discussion.

18. Did you read the fact sheet on homelessness that was provided by the researchers?

I read all of it  
I read some of it  
I did not read it

19. Did you leave a comment for [X] in the discussion?

Yes  
No

20. Did you read comments left by other people in the discussion?

Yes  
No

21. What was one thing you learned from participating in this online discussion with [X] on the topic of homelessness?

---

22. Was there something in this project that prevented you from posting your own comment?

---

23. Was there something in this project that prevented you from participating in the discussion?

---

**Instructions:** The topic of the online discussion was homelessness.

24. How important do you think it is for Congress to address homelessness?

Very important  
Somewhat important  
Not important

25. How much do you agree or disagree with Congressperson [X] perspective on addressing homelessness?

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

26. I feel that Congressperson [X] was listening to what her constituents had to say.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

27. I feel that constituents could express their opinions openly during the discussion with Congressperson [X].

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

28. I feel that Congressperson [X] will use the input from this discussion in her policy decision-making.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

29. I feel that Congressperson [X] was listening to what I had to say.

Strongly agree  
 Agree  
 Somewhat agree  
 Neither agree nor disagree  
 Somewhat disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly disagree

30. I feel that I could express my opinions openly during my discussion with Congressperson [X].

Strongly agree  
 Agree  
 Somewhat agree  
 Neither agree nor disagree  
 Somewhat disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly disagree

31. I feel that Congressperson [X] will use the input from me in their policy decision-making.

Strongly agree  
 Agree  
 Somewhat agree  
 Neither agree nor disagree  
 Somewhat disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly disagree

**Instructions:** In the questions below, please indicate your thoughts on Congressperson [X] before and after your participation in this study.

32. Congressperson [X] works on the everyone's behalf.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Before the study	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
After the study	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

33. Congressperson [X] makes decisions based on what citizens want.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Before the study	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
After the study	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

34. Congressperson [X] represents all citizens.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Before the study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
After the study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

35. Congressperson [X]'s decisions are transparent.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Before the study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
After the study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

36. What is your overall approval of Congressperson [X]?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Before the study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
After the study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Instructions:** How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

37. Online discussions like these are a good way for Members of Congress to hear the views of their constituents.

Strongly agree

Agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

38. Online discussions like these are a good way for Members of Congress to communicate their policy positions to constituents.

Strongly agree

Agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree



Strongly disagree

39. Online discussions like these are a good way for Members of Congress to explain their actions in Washington, D.C.

Strongly agree

Agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

40. I think my Members of Congress should continue to have online discussions like these.

Strongly agree

Agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

41. Any additional comments on the discussion?

---

**Instructions:** We are going to ask you eight questions about the POPVOX website.

42. I feel the POPVOX platform is a viable space to have online discussions with elected officials.

Strongly agree

Agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

43. The researchers chose to have this POPVOX discussion last one week. If this project happens again, would you prefer that the discussion last...

Less than a week

The same (i.e., one week)

More than a week

44. I think the POPVOX website was easy to use.

Strongly agree

Agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

45. I found the POPVOX website to be simple.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

46. I could use POPVOX without the support of a technical person.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

47. I would imagine that most people would learn to use POPVOX very quickly.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

48. I feel very confident in my ability to use POPVOX.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

49. I could use POPVOX without having to learn anything new.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

50. Any additional feedback for POPVOX?

---

51. Please use this space provide any feedback to the researchers on the experience, the platform, the Member, or anything else you would like to mention.

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