



“Wow ... I would not have thought it!”

Considered Public Opinion about Making Congress Work Better

Report to the *Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress*
on Their Deliberative Town Hall

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Deliberative Town Halls & Public Opinion

Participants in standard town halls tend to be very unrepresentative of the population but have clear, stable opinions. Participants in standard opinion polls tend to be very representative of the population but have ambiguous, unstable opinions. Deliberative Town Halls (DTHs) recruit a representative group, and provide the information and varying points of view that help people crystallize their own views into clear, stable opinions based on good information and reasoned discussion. Public opinion emerging from Deliberative Town Halls, then, can better help public officials predict “latent public opinion” – what the public *will* think once they have had the chance to live under a policy change. As one of your DTHs’ participants who changed their mind exclaimed, “I had no idea Congress people had to pay their own lodging, food, and ground transportation. Wow – I would not have thought it!”

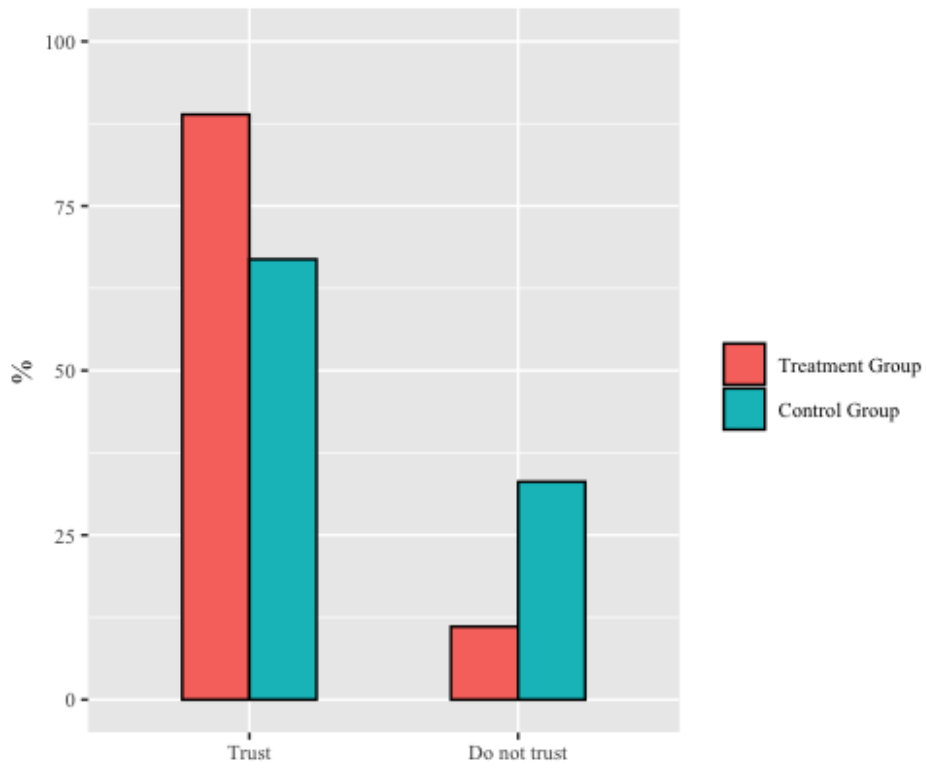
Background

On October 6th, 2022 the Institute for Democratic Engagement & Accountability (IDEA) at The Ohio State University hosted a Deliberative Town Hall (DTH) featuring the Chair and Vice Chair of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress (SCMC), Reps. Derek Kilmer and William Timmons. The purpose of the DTH was to hear from a nationally representative group of constituents about some ideas beyond the recommendations already considered and passed by the SCMC, to better understand how constituents thought about the potential policies as well as the general need to improve and modernize Congress. IDEA recruited over 6000 citizens from across the country to complete a pre-survey. Of those who were available and willing to attend the Deliberative Town Hall, IDEA randomly assigned some to a “surveys only” control group and invited the others to participate in the forum. Over 1400 constituents attended the online Deliberative Town Hall, with over 85% staying for more than an hour of the 90-minute discussion, an extraordinarily high retention rate compared to standard tele-townhalls. Nearly 1300 of the participants then went on to take a post-survey (also an unusually high retention rate), allowing IDEA to track the change in opinion among participants after engaging in the event. Demographically, participants were roughly representative of voters in terms of gender, age, education, race, and ethnicity (with the exception of significantly under-representing 18-24 year olds and those with a high school education or less).

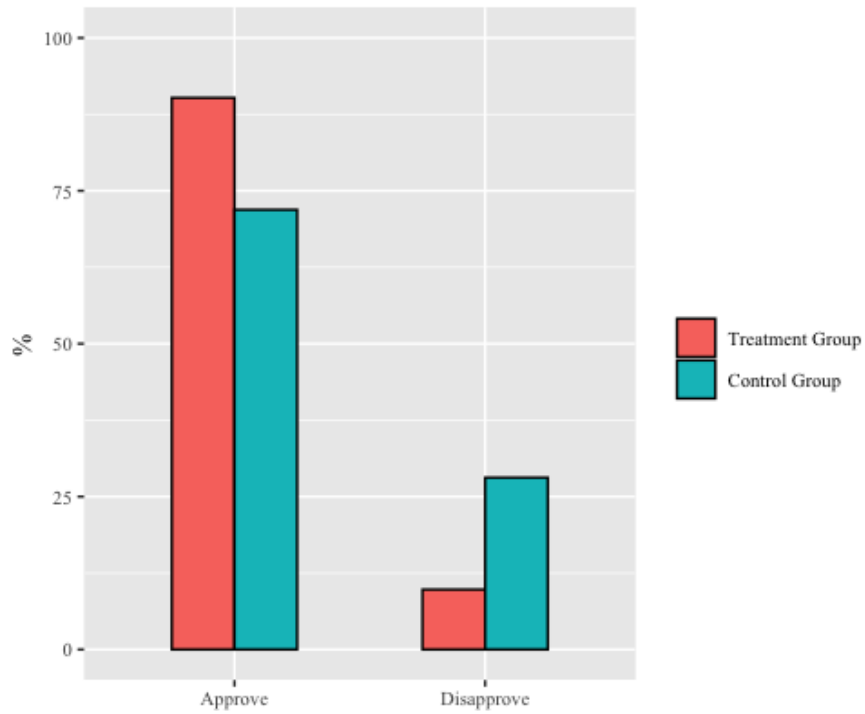
From the quantitative survey data and the qualitative data from the online Deliberative Town Hall itself, IDEA is able to report to the Select Committee:

- Effects of the on participants opinion of the Select Committee and Congress as a whole
- Participants’ satisfaction with the event and opinion of its usefulness
- “Deliberative public opinion” on the policies discussed
- Support of the policies under discussion at the state level
- Illustrative comments from constituents regarding the event and issues

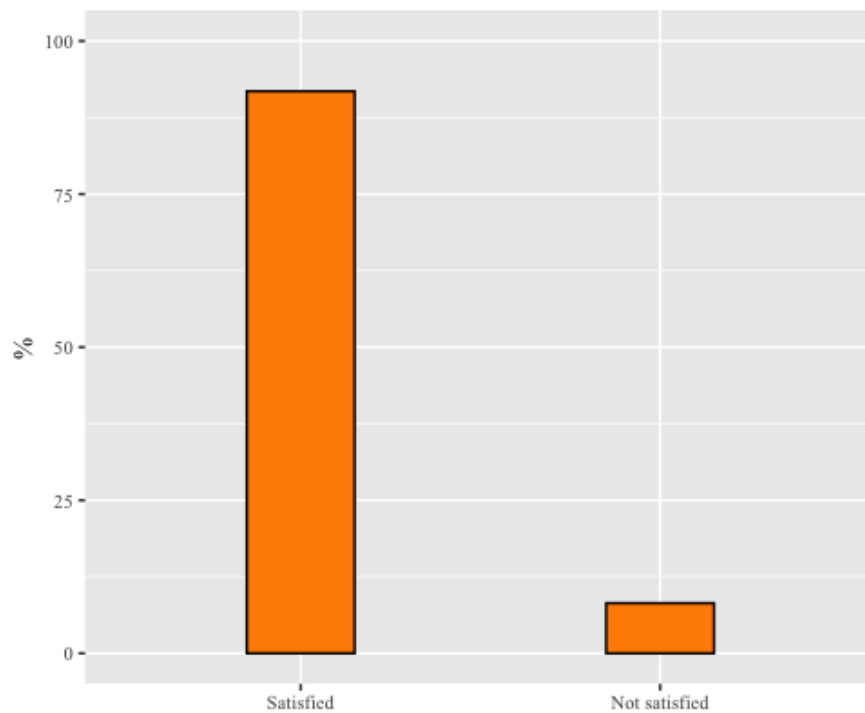
Participants Were More Likely to Trust SCMC



Participants Were More Likely to Approve of SCMC



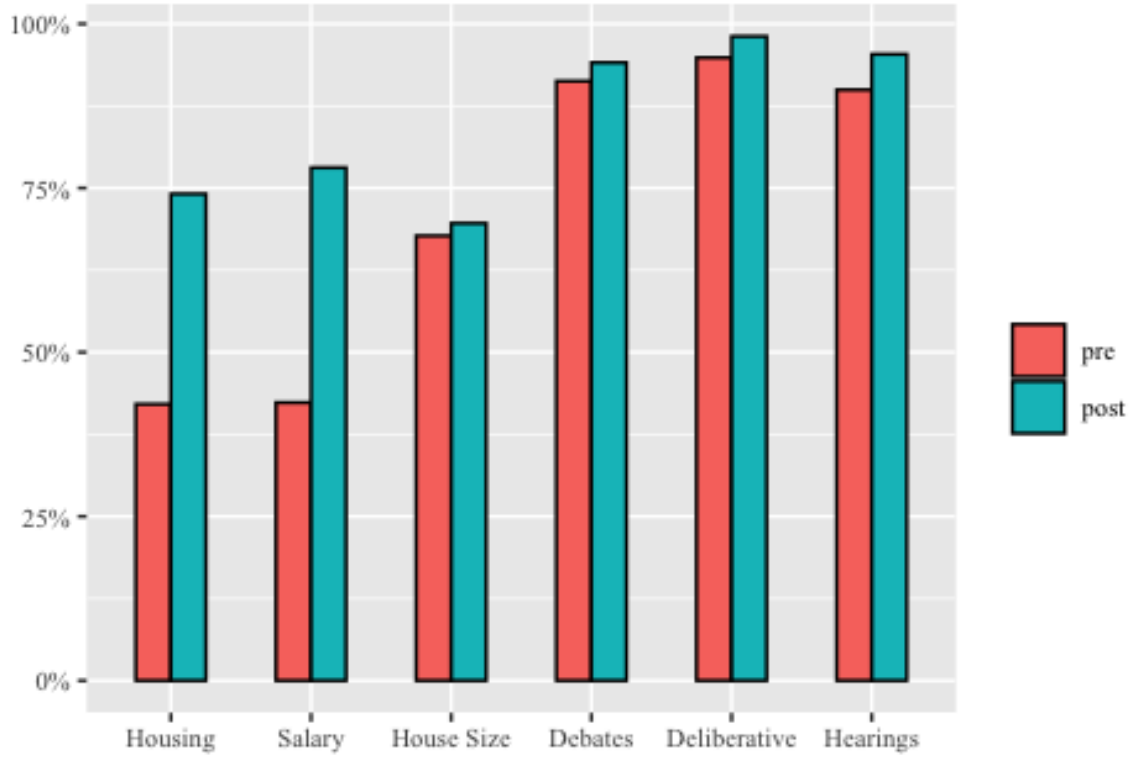
Participants Were Very Satisfied with DTH



Constituents also wrote in comments during the Deliberative Town Hall regarding what they found most useful about the forum and why, including the following:

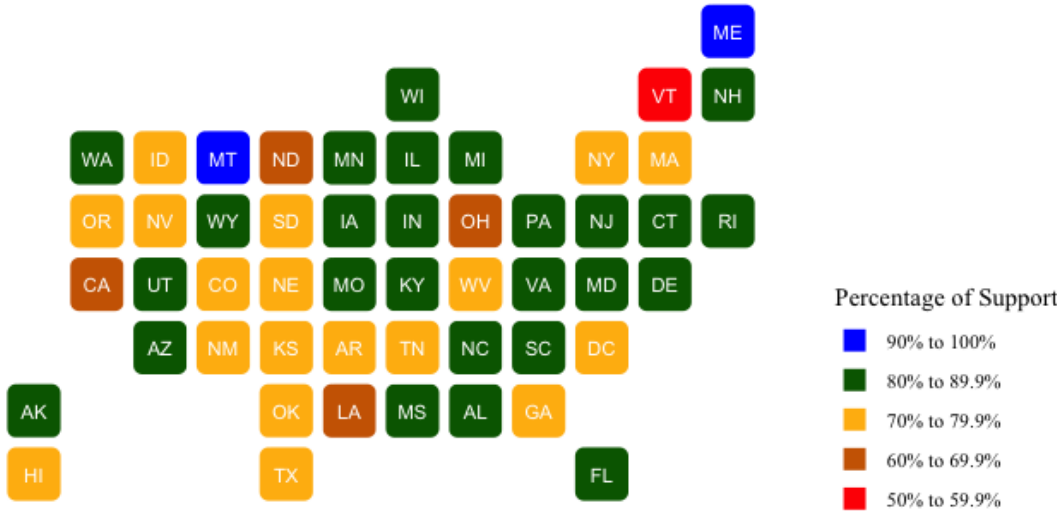
- *Thank you all! This was both very interesting and refreshing to see two Congresspeople from different parties agreeing and acting civilly to each other.*
- *Thank you! Very interesting and refreshing to hear from Representatives who are willing to be open and honest.*
- *I would love to do this again.*
- *Even though I didn't have many questions – I learned SO much from this! It helps to understand how Congress works, and how it doesn't. I think this needs to be taught in schools. Thank you for inviting me!*
- *Thank you! I really enjoyed this. I am 25 and feel I don't have much of a voice and this was nice.*
- *Thank you for hosting this meeting! It has been an eye-opening and learning experience. I'm walking away with many things to think about and consider.*

Participants Increased Their Support for Policies

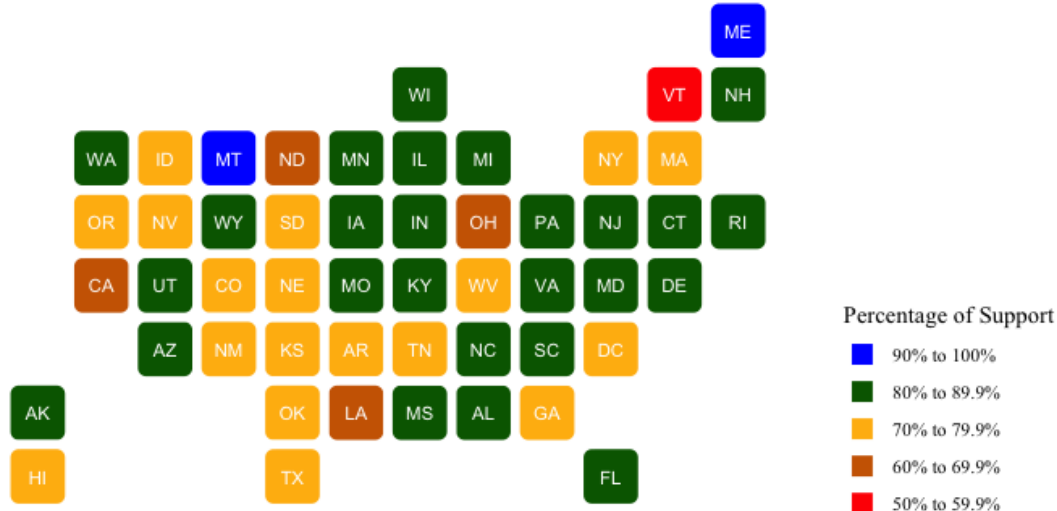


Estimates of DTH participant post-opinion by state

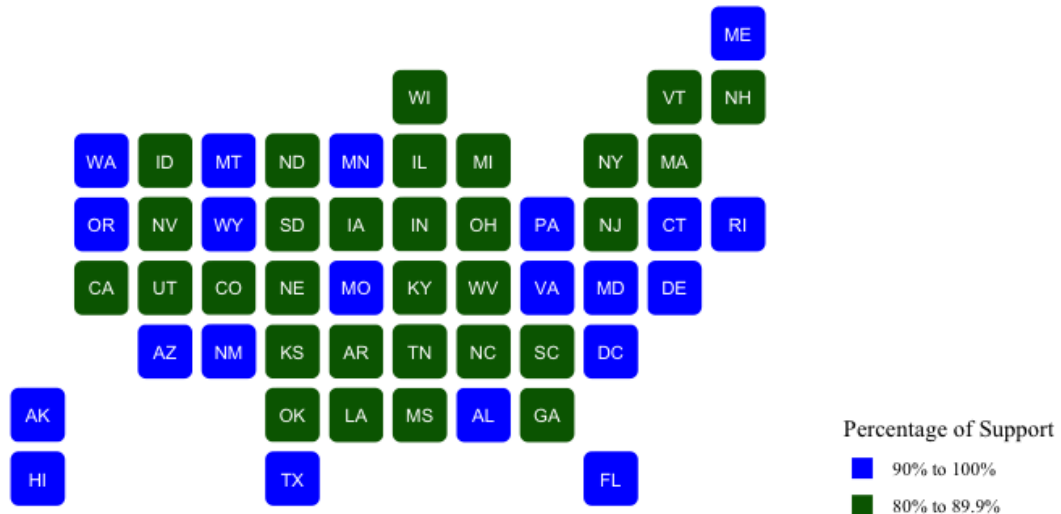
Increase MRA to Pay Staff Better



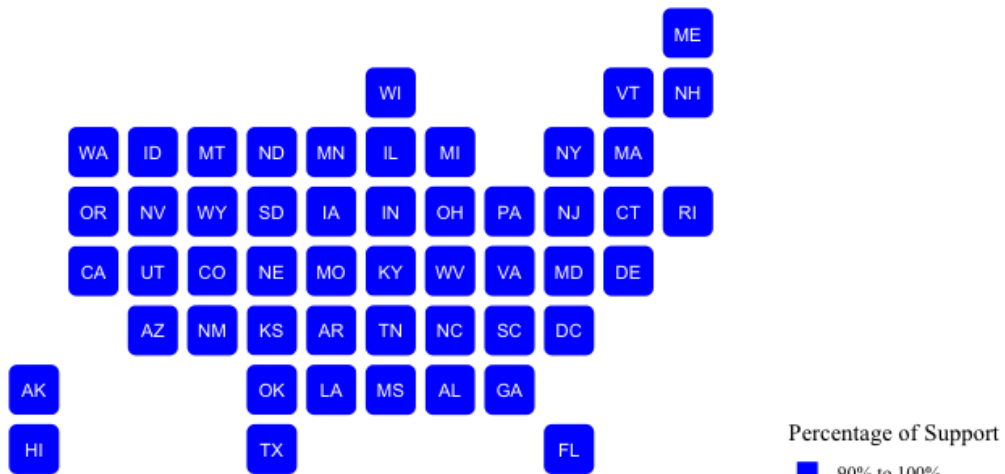
Allow MRA to Reimburse Member Housing Expense



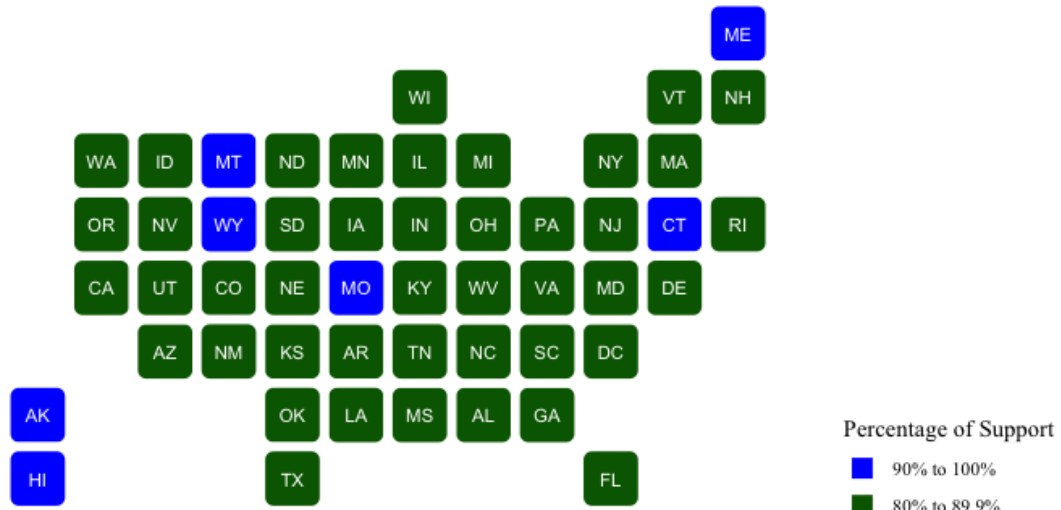
Establish Weekly Oxford-Style Debates



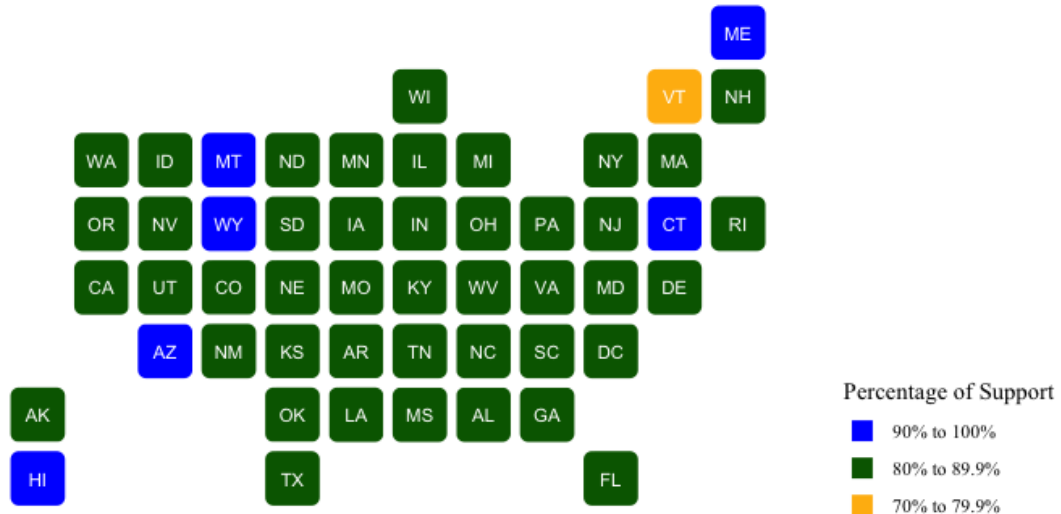
Provide Opportunities for Deliberative Engagement with Representative Samples of Constituents



Incentivize Alternative Hearing Formats



Increase Size of House



Constituent Comments & Rationales

Constituents submitted nearly 400 substantive questions and comments. A large percentage of comments tied Congressional dysfunction directly to polarization and the divides in our country. More than half of the remaining comments and questions focused on specific policies included in the background information participants received in advance. Among these policy-related questions and comments, the items about reimbursing Members for D.C. lodging expenses, adjusting the MRA to allow increased salary for congressional staff, and increasing the size of the House, received the most engagement. Below we present an illustrative sample of the comments and questions on each of the major themes covered in the Deliberative Town Hall:

Causes of Congressional Dysfunction

- Thank you for taking the time to do this panel and read these questions. This committee is seriously interested in modernizing congress and reaching across party lines to work together. What message(s) would you like to send to your co-representatives and senators and their constituents who agree that the system is broken, but continue to break the system (or in the example of one of my senators – quit)?
- The problem is that pork counts more than people -- every bill gets loaded with pork and the end result of the bill is buried and denied because of pork
- Fix congress by putting average [people] in there.
- We need to build relationships more than ever right now, and the internet has made everyone an Ahole.
- The problem is that Congress has abdicated their responsibility as the legislative body of the federal government and instead let the president govern by executive fiat. It is a broken body and that is the reason they are seen as less trustworthy than a used car salesman.

Partisan Conflict & Calls for Bipartisanship

- A truly collaborative legislative branch is what congress is supposed to be. They should all be working together for the betterment of all Americans. The current partisan approach is broken. They are all too worried about which party has the power.

- We have lost the skill of agreeing to disagreeing. We can be on opposite sides of the fence and still meet in the middle. The mentality of my way or the highway is not the appropriate way to handle our great nation.
- The institutional processes of Congress as they are sound like they are doing nothing but reinforcing the partisanship and division
- Maybe publicizing those ‘leaders’ that obstruct efforts to problem-solve and build relationships [should be] “outed” for that
- With gerrymandered districts, there is little incentive to work across the aisle. There is more a threat from a primary challenger, than the opposing party. Working across the aisle is not looked upon favorably by the base of each party.
- Conflict Entrepreneurs - great name. You need to get ahold of mass media that promotes lies and extremely partisan news coverage.

Increasing MRA to better pay and retain staff

- Congress deserves a raise. Staffers deserve a raise. And a housing allowance. Technology needs to be upgraded. ASAP.
- If Congressmen/women would stress that raises would be used for staffing as well as improvements to office efficiency it would go over better.
- A former staffer (someone I know from school) pointed out that increasing staff allocations would have to include some rules on how it is divided among the staff (salary caps for senior staff relative to junior folks).
- With the internet I would think government employees can stay home and work the way we are now and save the money traveling.

Adjusting MRA to allow reimbursement of Members’ lodging expenses

- In the discussion about adjusting the MRA to allow it to reimburse Members’ D.C. lodging expenses, it was mentioned that there were other ways to make it possible for less-wealthy people to serve in Congress, such as increasing Member salary, but that this was viewed as politically unpalatable by Members themselves. Why?

- Can we provide housing for representatives, such as a dormitory for the days they are session?
- Don't you think proposing more money for Congress people is tone deaf in this economy with inflationary pressures hurting the American people?
- I'm astonished to hear the financial burden of members when all we hear for years is about their extravagant benefits.
- There were years I didn't get a raise. but I think they should get some compensation for meals and travel.
- I had no idea Congress people had to pay their own lodging, food, ground transportation. Wow. I would not have thought it!
- The perception is that members of congress are largely very wealthy. I'd support allowing hotels to be covered by the allowance, but I wouldn't support higher salaries for members.

Increasing Size of the House

- Expand the house, add one year to the term of office.
- I am greatly in favor of increasing the size of the House. If it costs more to have an objectively more democratic government then so be it.
- Talk to Alaskans – by definition we have smaller number of constituents and we do EXPECT more local responsiveness -- BUT, it is on the REPRESENTATIVE to actually DO that work.

Deliberatively engage with random samples of constituents

- Do you blame us [for wanting more of this]? We all have questions because we are never included in the decisions the House makes.
- Very interesting, how do you also deal with so many constituents at one time and still try to form policy from what you get from them?

- I think part of the onus of increased engagement lies with us as constituents as well. A lot of people have no idea who their representatives are or even how to contact them, it's up to us to educate ourselves and meet you halfway

Incentivizing Alternative Hearing Formats and Oxford-Style Debates

- Hearings are generally seen as partisan circuses. Anything to change that would be great.
- Your committee – great on collaboration. So many others Reps are grandstanding. How do you help your fellow Reps to do similar?
- What methods and research do you do to guide your [committee's] meetings?
- Less speechifying and sound-bite seeking can surely only be good
- Honestly, even though I watched C-span as a geeky middle school kid, maybe taking cameras out of committee meetings or hearings is a good start -- to reduce it JUST being a place to get a soundbite for tv.
- If the current format of debate is seen as not currently working why not replace it with a more collaborative debate and not keep both as discussed in the background information provided?
- I am grateful they are shooting down the idea of losing the cameras. CSPAN is such a great resource to know firsthand account of what goes on in DC without any reporting bias.

The Select Committee itself

- I applaud everything this [Modernization] Committee is doing and how well they appear to be working with one another. Fixing the institution is complex and important.
- This sounds like the most important committee that is ignored in Washington.

Some Take Aways:

Congress Investing in Itself Is Not a Third Rail After People Deliberate

On two of the policy items, constituent support rose dramatically (from 46% to 74% for *Housing* and from 46% to 79% for *Salary*). Three other issues saw more modest increases but only because “Pre” support was so high there was not much room for growth. Those three issues ended up with gigantic majorities in support on the Post among DTH attendees (98% for *Deliberative Engagement*, 95% for *Hearings*, and 94% for *Oxford Debates*). Even the issue with the smallest gains and lowest absolute support still garnered a solid super-majority on the Post among attendees (70% for *Expanding the House*). Taken together these issues were extremely popular among those who deliberated, and the Chair and Vice-Chair were very persuasive on the issues that did not already have overwhelming support.

Participants Expressed Significantly Higher *Trust* and *Approval* of the Select Committee¹

The Select Committee garnered considerably higher *Trust* and *Approval* among attendees than the control group, and attendees substantially increased their support from pre to post. (It is important that both improved since, of those randomly chosen to be invited, particular kinds of people may have accepted the invitation.)

This Kind of Deliberative Constituent Engagement Reached Beyond “The Usual Suspects”

The town hall attracted constituents from every walk of life. Indeed, constituents who started with a lower opinion of Congress were actually more likely to participate because the invitation ran counter to their experiences and expectations. Our previous research has shown that much of what is thought to be public apathy is really public frustration. When elected officials send credible signals that these forums will be different, the frustration actually gets transformed into energy. This speaks to the attractiveness of the opportunity to engage in a meaningful, substantive conversation with a Member of Congress, as opposed to thinner forms of engagement which attract only the already politically-engaged. And the participants were not disappointed – an overwhelming majority (of even those who started with an abysmal view of Congress) came away thinking that this time was very different, and very valuable.

“Deliberative Public Opinion” is likely to predict the future better than standard polling.

Responses to standard opinion polls are notoriously unstable and poor at predicting future attitudes and behavior in most cases. The main reason is that most people have not thought in depth about most issues. So small changes in wording or recent events can move their response around quite a bit. Deliberative forums give people a chance to really think through an issue and imagine what it would be like to live under different policy options. It should be no surprise,

¹ Remarkably, there is also preliminary evidence that the positive experience with the Select Committee created a coat-tail effect that significantly increased participants’ *Trust* and *Approval* of Congress as a whole by 10% or more. *At the time of writing, however, this finding requires further analyses to check its robustness.*

then, that deliberative public opinion is more likely to predict people's opinions *after* Congress has acted and people have had the opportunity to experience the results. Thus the results we present here are likely to be much more robust and predictive than standard poll numbers.

Constituents Want Deliberative Town Halls as a Regular Part of Policymaking

Constituents were satisfied with the event and the contributions from the Chair and Vice-Chair at very high rates. The overwhelming majority think that such events are valuable for our democracy, felt like they learned a significant amount from participating, and said that what they learned affected their opinions. Finally, we estimate that *in every state* support exceeds 90% for practices like Deliberative Town Halls. People overwhelmingly believe that consulting with a representative sample of constituents in a deliberative format should be a regular part of the policymaking process.

Conclusion

As demonstrated above, the Deliberative Town Hall significantly changed constituents' opinion of the Select Committee and their opinions on the various policy items. It attracted those not already engaged to weigh in and increased participants' sense that the government is responsive to people like them. What would be the result if committees like Education and Labor had a similar discussion with constituents about workforce development? Or if Science, Space and Technology consulted with constituents on their ideas about the possibilities for regulating artificial intelligence? Such committees might find that policies they believe would be effective but might be politically unpalatable, might not be so after the fact with better communication, as was the case regarding reimbursement of lodging expenses for Members here. By integrating the findings from deliberative constituent engagement into their decision making, committees could earn significant gains in trust and approval, not only on the issue under discussion, but in the institution as a whole.