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Constituent Communication Through Telephone Town Halls: A Field Experiment Involving Members of Congress

Telephone town halls are an increasingly prevalent method for members of Congress (MCs) to communicate with constituents, even while garnering popular criticism for failing to facilitate engagement and accountability. Yet scholars have paid little attention to the events and their effects, and even less to how they might be improved. To remedy this problem, we report on a field experiment in which four MCs joined their constituents in telephone town halls. Overall, participation in an event improved constituents' evaluations of the format in general, and of the MC in particular. Furthermore, we studied how these events might be improved by evaluating a reform—a single-topic focus with predistributed briefing materials—designed to enhance deliberative interaction. This reform enhanced effects on opinions of the format without significantly altering effects on attitudes toward the MC. Our results suggest that telephone town halls hold promise for constituents, officeholders, and democratic practice.

The town hall has been a defining feature of American democracy for centuries. In its ideal form, the term conjures Rockwellian images of public officeholders standing before their constituents, listening earnestly, and responding thoughtfully to questions and comments in a substantive, reason-giving,

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deliberative exchange. The town hall is perhaps the most direct way for constituents to provide input on legislation and hold representatives accountable for their actions. Members of the U.S. Congress have long held town halls in their districts, and, whether or not members meet these ideals, the town hall remains a cornerstone of constituent communication and the cultivation of legislators' home style (Fenno 1978).

Technology, however, is changing how members engage with their constituents (Bimber 2003; Fountain 2001). In particular, members of Congress (MCs) increasingly rely on telephone town halls. A telephone town hall is hosted on a software platform enabling the MC to dial out to a large volume of phone numbers and host an interactive conference call with constituents, potentially vastly more than could attend an in-person event.[1] In principle, therefore, telephone town halls offer substantially broadened and accessible opportunities for communication, increasing contact between members and constituents. And their use is growing. MCs participated in over 300 such events in the first six months of 2017 alone (Bethea 2017).

Despite their increasing prevalence, press coverage of telephone town halls paints them as frustrating events that leave participants with poor impressions of their utility for engaging with members and holding them accountable, core elements of representation.[2] For example, in an essay for the *New Yorker*, Charles Bethea writes that in a typical telephone town hall, constituents "listen to their representative recite talking points from a D.C. office in response to a small number of accepted, pre-screened questions. Many of these are softballs" (Bethea 2017). Others characterize the events as not merely unhelpful, but actively harmful. The Indivisible Project describes them as "sham" events where members manufacture perceptions of listening while addressing easy questions from strong supporters. Indivisible's website even featured a video of former Labor Secretary Robert Reich offering guidance on how to disrupt them.[3]

In contrast to the din of negative popular reports on telephone town halls, the scholarly literature is most notable for its near silence on the subject.[4] Despite their ubiquity, there is surprisingly little political science research on town halls of any kind.[5]

In this article, we focus on how telephone town halls contribute to representation and, more specifically, ongoing democratic accountability (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018). We address two sets of questions. First, we assess the effects of participating

in a telephone town hall—as currently practiced—on evaluations of the events and the MC who hosts. Our measures of platform-specific attitudes include whether constituents perceive the events to be a good way for MCs to hear constituent views, communicate positions, and explain actions. Positive attitudes toward events are necessary for constituents to want to attend, meaning they are instrumentally important for representation. Representation further depends on whether constituents trust and approve of their MCs, and so we estimate the effects of participation on measures of both. Finally, we track legislators' "presentation of self," which Fenno (1978) argues is central to home style, using a novel battery of questions derived from Fenno's list of characteristics that MCs seek to cultivate.

Second, we probe whether reforms might improve these evaluations. Current practice in telephone town halls is to hold a wide-ranging discussion open to any topic and invite constituents into the events cold, without preparation. We study the effects of a counterfactual design that alters both aspects of current practice, limiting discussion to a single topic and providing participants with briefing materials before the meeting. Focusing on a single issue allows discussion to go in-depth and forces elites to move beyond talking points, and briefing materials provide a common basis for discussion, compensating for the fact that most citizens do not have in-depth knowledge about policy issues. Although research on counterfactual institutional design is rare in legislative studies, it is common in other areas of academic research, including empirical deliberative democracy (e.g., Baccaro, Bächtiger, and DeVille 2014; Gastil et al. 2008; Morrell 1999). This scarcity in the literature is lamentable because understanding how the representative link relationship between office-holders and constituents can be improved is vital for the health of democracy (Neblo et al. 2017).

To answer these questions, we conducted a field experiment in collaboration with the Congressional Management Foundation,[6] which recruited four sitting MCs to participate. Each MC agreed to conduct a pair of telephone town halls: one closely replicating current practice and a second with our counterfactual design.[7] We recruited constituents from each congressional district into the eight events, administering surveys before and after each event. We analyze responses using a before-and-after design to estimate the effects of standard telephone

town halls and difference-in-differences to estimate the effects of the counterfactual design.

We find that participating in telephone town halls causes statistically significant improvements in constituents' evaluations of both the platform and MCs. Further, we find that our counterfactual design, in which telephone town halls focus on a single topic with briefing materials, improved attitudes toward the platform compared to the standard design. The two designs yielded largely similar effects on attitudes toward MCs. We conclude that telephone town halls improve representation and constituent communication and that the technology may be open to improvements both valued by constituents and beneficial for democracy.

Telephone Town Halls and Constituent Communication

Under current practice, telephone town halls resemble radio call-in shows (Evans and Hayden 2017, chap. 7), with the MC hosting and facilitating the conversation herself. Constituents are often contacted and invited into the event without advance notice, through a cold call that dials out to tens of thousands of phone numbers from a preloaded list. These lists are typically drawn from marketing databases rather than from lists of constituents who expressed interest in participating. Once connected, constituents may follow dialing instructions to enter a queue and ask the member a question on any topic. Since they are contacted through a cold call, participants cannot prepare, and their questions are generally top-of-the-head thoughts on a wide variety of local and national topics. The member's staff screens questions and sets the order in which questions will be presented to the member. Since telephone town halls can include thousands of constituents, many of whom place questions in the hopper, staff have considerable discretion over which questions are selected. In a typical, hour-long call, the member is only able to respond to about a dozen questions. These design elements, which typify telephone town halls, shape the experience that members and constituents have in these forums.[8]

Both MCs and constituents are likely to find these events attractive for several reasons. First, virtual events, including telephone town halls, accommodate thousands of participants, permitting MCs to reach larger proportions of their constituency than they could with many other formats, including in-person town halls. They are also convenient, as constituents

can participate without traveling to a specific location. Online town halls, which are also virtual events, are popular with both constituents and members (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018), and so there is good reason to suspect that telephone town halls might be as well.

Second, telephone town halls enable MCs to speak directly to constituents even when the member is not physically in the district. This feature may be especially attractive to MCs with districts geographically far from DC. But all members would value this communication tool if it helps them to earn their constituents' trust and approval (Grimmer 2013). Trust, in particular, depends heavily on constituents' perceptions of common interest with their MC (Bianco 1994). To the extent that telephone town halls foster such perceptions, MCs and constituents may both find them beneficial. Even when policy positions between MCs and their constituents do not align, communication between the two can bring the constituents' views closer to those of their MC and increase approval (Broockman and Butler 2017; Cover and Brumberg 1982).

Third, beyond trust and approval, telephone town halls give MCs an opportunity to fine-tune their presentation of self (Fenno 1978). Citing Goffman (1959), Fenno defines "presentation of self" as the use of verbal and nonverbal expressions to convey—even manipulate—an impression in one's audience. For MCs, the desirable impressions can be summarized as "trust," but they go further to include the sense that a representative is qualified for her job, identifies with her constituents, and empathizes with their problems and needs. The telephone town hall mostly eliminates nonverbal channels. But in so doing, these events actually increase a MC's degree of control. In fact, MCs often engineer even more precision in these virtual events than they can with in-person town halls, for example, by selecting questions that emphasize the member's best characteristics. This capacity for finesse is not dissimilar to the choices in self-presentation on congressional websites (Adler, Gent, and Overmeyer 1998).

Finally, telephone town halls are inexpensive. Indeed, cost—in terms of dollars, staff time, and the member's time—may be the single most important factor in the increasing prevalence of the events. In general, the willingness of MC's to expend resources on constituent communication depends on many underlying characteristics, both personal and systematic. Different legislators develop different legislative styles (Bernhard, Sewell, and

Sulkin 2017), and some—district advocates, for example—may be more likely than others to reach out to constituents regardless of cost. Beyond style, electorally insecure members also spend more resources on constituent communication, with increasing urgency as elections approach (Peskowitz 2018). Thus, the relative value of telephone town halls will vary, and the events will likely be more common for some members, in some districts, at some times. But all MCs operate with limited resources, and telephone town halls can be both attractive and affordable.

Surveys of congressional staff indicate that MCs find these forums valuable as information resources and as opportunities for communication. The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) reports that 41% of congressional staff members consider telephone towns halls to be a "very important" tool for understanding constituents' views, and 45% view telephone town halls as a "very important" way to communicate the MC's positions and activities to constituents (Goldschmidt, Cooper, and Fitch 2011). Additionally, staff members suggest that the comments made during telephone town halls are given weight in MC's decision making. About 17% of staff say that comments from telephone town halls have "a lot of influence" on the MC's decision on issues where they have not already staked out a position, which is comparable to the level of influence staffers attribute to phone calls, individualized e-mails, and individualized letters (Goldschmidt, Cooper, and Fitch 2011). MCs and staff view telephone town halls as important contributions to different facets of their work in Congress. Given that legislators' perceptions of constituent beliefs inform their legislative behavior (Butler and Nickerson 2011), telephone town halls may be an important part of the legislative process.

Yet some of the qualities that make telephone town halls attractive to MCs—the large number of constituents reached and the level of control over the questions—may also limit their effectiveness as a tool to advance important goals of representative democracy. For example, when staff curate the questions that MCs answer, they inadvertently cultivate the perception that telephone town halls function more as public relations than as a conduit for citizen concerns—less a town hall than an infomercial. Rather than offering deep engagement with questions about challenging issues, constituents may perceive the events for what they often are: opportunities for MCs to address only questions that staff select to put them in the most favorable light. In addition,

the cold calls that bring participants into the calls limit constituents' ability to prepare for the call and develop thoughtful questions. Being one of thousands of participants on a call where only a dozen questions will be answered means most participants must remain passive, without the chance to interact directly with the MC. Ultimately, there is reason to expect that telephone town halls as currently practiced might actually leave constituents with overall negative attitudes about the platform and their representatives (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2004).

Democratic Desiderata and Counterfactual Deliberative Institutions

In many respects, citizens are the arbiters of democratic legitimacy. Well-designed democratic institutions should engender the justified perception among citizens that the platform enhances opportunities for accountability and communication and that members use the platform effectively. Our research design therefore measures perceptions regarding telephone town halls as an institution and their use within democratic representation. In this way, we assess the normative merits of telephone town halls by relying on constituents' perceptions regarding their experience rather than an external metric (Steiner et al. 2004). Furthermore, we not only assess telephone town halls as currently practiced, but we also explore whether there are counterfactual designs to the institution—designs not currently used in practice—that could enhance constituents' experience and satisfy democratic desiderata beyond any potentially attributable to current practices (Neblo et al. 2017).

To develop the counterfactual design for telephone town halls, we follow the approach to designing town halls from the Connecting to Congress (C2C) study, which had MCs interacting with their constituents on an experimental online platform (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018). The C2C study demonstrates that a well-designed town hall induces communication and participation, better approximating deliberative democratic ideals (Esterling, Neblo, and Lazer 2011; Minozzi et al. 2015; Neblo et al. 2010).

The C2C study simultaneously varied many design elements of town halls. In this first foray into studying telephone town halls, we make only two changes to the standard institutional design. First, instead of having an open-ended conversation, our counterfactual town halls focused in-depth on one specific policy

topic. We allowed the participating MCs to decide the topic for their experimental, single-topic town hall. Second, for these single-topic town halls, we distributed balanced, nonpartisan, factual reading material on that topic.

Focusing on a single topic and providing background materials may induce more constructive discourse than typical open-ended telephone town halls, since these reforms enable constituents and MCs to make connections between policy ideas and discuss the topic in greater depth. With more constructive conversation, constituents may view the platform more positively as a contribution to democratic practice. In addition, focusing for an hour on a single policy topic could allow MCs to demonstrate their knowledge of the topic, developing a more positive presentation of self and, in turn, possibly enhancing constituents' trust and approval of their MC. Alternatively, the reforms could backfire on the MC, as constituents may become frustrated when they are discouraged from asking about the topics of most interest to them.

Research Questions and Study Design

We seek to answer two sets of questions. First, what is the effect of participating in a telephone town hall on constituents' attitudes toward the platform and their MC? And second, does our counterfactual institution—the single-topic design and provision of background materials—blunt these effects, enhance them, or make no difference at all?

To answer these questions, we designed and implemented a field experiment. Four MCs agreed to participate in two telephone town halls with their constituents.[9] The *control* group of constituents participated in an event modeled closely on the prevailing standard telephone town hall format, in which callers are not directed to focus on a single topic and no briefing materials were provided beforehand. In contrast, the *treatment* group participated in a single-topic town hall and, before the event, they received short (two-page) briefing materials based on Congressional Research Service reports.[10] Each participating MC hosted one standard, control telephone town hall and one modified, treatment telephone town hall. Using the language of clinical trials, our research design compares the "experimental treatment" to the "standard treatment," rather than to a true control group, and such a design typically yields smaller treatment effects.

To recruit participants, we sent out e-mail invitations to a large number (tens of thousands) of adult residents in each congressional district about two weeks prior to the first session in that district. The invitation listed the dates and times of two upcoming telephone town halls with the member and allowed the constituent to self-select one or the other of the two sessions.[11] Each pair of events was scheduled close together, on similar dates and times, so that selection among the two sessions was likely to be arbitrary and unrelated to the treatment effect, thus limiting the differences between those assigned to the treatment and the control conditions.[12] For example, if a MC held his or her first (regular) session on a Tuesday at 5 pm, the MC's second (treatment) session would be Tuesday of the following week at the same time.[13] Participants had until two days before the actual session to sign up, at which point they were given the pretest.[14] Three days before their assigned session, participants were sent a reminder, and, for the treatment group, told that the town hall would be about a single topic and provided with briefing materials.

For each of the four MCs, more than 100 constituents from the corresponding congressional district preregistered for a telephone town hall scheduled to be hosted by their MC.[15] At the time of the scheduled session, the telephone town hall software platform dialed all the registered participants at the phone numbers they provided. To ensure that the number of participants in these events mirrored those in a normal telephone town hall, we conducted additional random call-outs using the recruitment list. After these random call-outs, the peak number of participants, on average, for the eight different telephone town hall sessions hosted was 491 constituents.[16,17] We did not label the registered participants, so that those conducting the town hall were not aware of who was registered and who was not, and, therefore, could not give registered participants special treatment.

Of those we contacted, 1,005 constituents consented to participate in the study, were enrolled, and responded to the pretest survey. To better capture the natural setting of a telephone town hall, we did not offer monetary incentives, which are usually important to ensure high rates of completion in later waves on panel surveys. Therefore, most of these respondents did not attend the telephone town halls or complete the posttest survey. Compared to high-quality, well-compensated panel surveys, attrition in our case was high, about 78%. Ultimately, we analyze the set of respondents who completed the pre- and posttest

surveys, a total of 222 individuals, with sample sizes of 98 in the treatment group and 124 in control.[18]

Each town hall lasted one hour. The calls began with an announcement by the host, a member of the research team, who stated that CMF was convening the town hall as part of a research project aimed at improving the practice of telephone town halls. The host then opened a mini-poll, to which participants could respond by pressing buttons on their phone. The mini-poll question simply deepened engagement for respondents who entered early, as the remaining participants dialed into the session.[19] These announcements were followed by a brief opening statement by the MC. The member then led a question-and-answer session for 45 minutes.

Participants asked questions by pressing 0 on their phones. They were placed into a conversation with one of the town hall staff, most of whom were research staff rather than congressional office staff. These town hall staff members asked the constituents to state their first name, the city or town where they lived, and their question. The staff member then typed a one-sentence summary of the question in the telephone town hall software "back office," placing the name, town, and question on a line in the queue not visible to constituents. Questions were screened by the research team only for profanity, which did not occur. We used a simple rating system, where participants were given five stars if they asked a coherent question and one star if they did not. Other rating categories were not used. Finally, a member of the MC's staff observed the list of one-sentence summaries of questions, the ratings, and the residence of the caller, after which he or she determined the order of the questions.

Just prior to the end of the session, the host announced the mini-poll results, the MC gave a closing statement, and registered participants were reminded to take the posttest survey. The link to complete the posttest survey was distributed to registered participants by e-mail immediately following the end of the telephone town hall. While the vast majority of registered participants finished the posttest survey immediately after the session, reminders were sent out, and some responses came in as much as seven days later.

As this description indicates, other than the single-topic focus and background materials modification in the treatment condition, both versions of the telephone town halls were conducted in a manner similar to current practice. However, to

implement a systematic study in the natural setting of telephone town halls, we did deviate from traditional telephone town hall design in minor ways in both control and treatment conditions. All participants in both conditions knew that our research team was hosting the town hall rather than the member, as would be the case in a typical town hall. In addition, while the member led the discussion, a member of CMF's staff served as the host. The research team's convening of the town hall and CMF's role as host might have an impact on the prospects for external validity, although the events did closely reflect the circumstances of telephone town halls hosted by third parties. Lastly, the recruitment e-mails, sent to constituents in advance of the scheduled telephone town halls to ensure that we had sufficient numbers of participants, allowed constituents to sign up and preregister for a telephone town hall session, a departure from typical practice where constituents are cold-called without advance notice.

These deviations from current practice helped structure a systematic study of telephone town halls. In fact, the deviations do not substantially change the telephone town hall experience or structure—the treatment and control conditions both very closely approximate the typical telephone town hall. In particular, the host only lightly moderated. In each case, the member was the one to engage with constituents and was almost the only one to speak after the opening statement. Additionally, the member's staff had full control over question selection and order.

Measurement and Statistical Methods

The surveys fielded before and after the telephone town halls featured several identically worded questions, including three sets of questions from which we derive outcome variables. The first set focuses on whether telephone town halls were perceived as a good way to communicate with MCs. To develop these questions, we rely on the concept of directly representative democracy (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018), which emphasizes the importance of two-way conversations between members and constituents, and the need to develop and reinforce institutions to reconnect citizens to representative government. We fielded three questions, each on a seven-point scale ranging from "Strong Disagreement" to "Strong Agreement":

> *Good to Hear Views:* "Telephone town halls are a good way for Members of Congress to hear the views of their constituents."
>
> *Good for Communicating Positions:* "Telephone town halls are a good way for Members of Congress to communicate their policy positions to constituents."
>
> *Good for Explaining Actions:* "Telephone town halls are a good way for Members of Congress to explain their actions in Washington, D.C."

Our other sets of questions focused on the MCs themselves. The second set includes standard items to assess levels of trust and approval toward the MC:

> *Trust MC:* "How much of the time do you think you can trust [MC], your member of Congress, to do what is right?" (*Always*, *Most of the Time*, *Some of the Time*, *Not at All*)
>
> *Approve of MC:* "Do you approve or disapprove of the way that [MC] is handling his job as a Congressperson?" (five-point scale ranging from *Strongly Approve* to *Strongly Disapprove*)

Finally, following Fenno (1978), our last set of questions asked respondents the degree to which a range of characteristics typified their MC. We derived each item from Fenno's list of characteristics members seek to cultivate with their presentation of self. Participants were asked:

> *Presentation of Self:* "Thinking about [MC], in your opinion, how well do each of the following words describe [him/her].

Respondents were presented with the characteristics Fenno (1978) lists as essential: "compassionate," "dishonest," "fair," "knowledgeable," "weak," "accessible," "qualified," and "understands people like me," and for each characteristic, responses possible included "Extremely Well," "Quite Well," "Not Too Well," and "Not Well at All," along with a "Don't Know" option. On the pretest, "Don't Know" was a very common response for these items. We therefore coded these items so they were either 0 or 1, where 1 meant a positive evaluation and 0 meant a negative evaluation or "Don't Know."[20] This measure effectively reverse-codes

the negative evaluations ("dishonest" and "weak"), so that all the resulting variables have the same orientation.

The pretest survey included questions to tap important covariates and therefore enable a balance test between experimental conditions. Our experiment was meant to hew as closely as possible to the natural experience of attending a telephone town hall. As such, we did not offer monetary incentives to participants. Consequently, we were forced to limit our surveys as much as possible, to limit nonparticipation and roll-off. That said, we did include two questions that we expected to be strong predictors of both enrollment in and completion of the study: (1) a standard branching question to measure participants' party ID and (2) a four-point measure of political interest. Balance on these covariates and the pretest values of all outcome variables was excellent across the board (see Table A2 in the online supporting information).

To estimate the effects of attendance and the moderating effects of our modified design, we estimated a set of multilevel regression models.[21] Each model focuses on a different set of questions: one for attitudes toward telephone town halls, another for trust and approval, and a third for evaluations of members' presentation of self. In each case we have multiple questions, 13 total, raising the risk of multiple comparisons problems. Multilevel models are appropriate in these circumstances, as they partially pool responses together, reducing the risks of false positives due to sampling variability (Gelman, Hill, and Yajima 2012).[22] Specifically, we estimate the multilevel model:

$$y_i \sim \alpha_i + \beta_1\, treatment_i + \beta_2\, post_i + \beta_3\, treatment_i \times post_i$$

$$\alpha_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_{MOC[i]} + \alpha_{question[i]} + \alpha_{respondent[i]},$$

where i is an observation, y_i is a survey response for a given question, and $treatment_i$ and $post_i$ are both dichotomous indicators. In particular, $post_i$ equals 0 for responses on the pretest survey, and 1 for responses on the posttest. Similarly, $treatment_i$ equals 0 for the open-topic telephone town halls that did not include briefing materials, and 1 for the single-topic events for which materials were provided. The data set has a multilevel structure, with observations grouped together by MC, question, and respondent,

so we include random intercepts at each level (Gelman and Hill 2006, 484–85).[23]

Our *Attitudes Toward Town Halls* model combines three questions, the *Trust and Approval* model includes two, and the *Presentation of Self*, eight. Below we refer to the parameter α_0, which is the intercept of the α_i equation, as the "overall mean" that summarizes all respondents' pretreatment attitudes on the relevant set of items. In the difference-in-differences framework, β_2 is the *post – pre* change in attitude on the relevant item set among the control participants; and β_3 is the difference-in-differences estimand for that set of items. Note that β_3 is the coefficient on an interaction term and so estimates the *difference* between the averages of attitudes in the treatment and control conditions, but the total pre-post change for those in the treatment group is given by the sum $\beta_2 + \beta_3$ (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006). So, for example, if β_2 is large and positive, and β_3 small and negative, this would mean that participants in both conditions increased their attitudes on that measure, but the effect was less positive for the treatment group.[24]

We use these models to answer both of our sets of questions. First, we focus on estimates of the coefficient on $post_i$, which we interpret as the effect of participation in a telephone town hall for members of the control group, who attended events emulating current practice. Although this coefficient is not often interpreted causally in differences-in-differences designs, such an interpretation is plausible in our case based on a before-and-after design. To justify such an interpretation, we assume there were no events between the pretest and posttest that affected outcomes, except for participation in the telephone town hall itself.[25] Based on this assumption, we interpret this coefficient as the causal effect of participation in telephone town halls for the control group.

This assumption is facially plausible for two reasons. The two measurement points were close together—participants completed the pretest survey a maximum of three weeks[26] before the event itself and completed the posttest survey immediately following the events. The median time between pretest and posttest completion was 12 days (9 for the control group and 14 for the treatment group). It is unlikely that other events affecting participants' attitudes toward telephone town halls or MCs occurred within this short window. Moreover, given that the events were held at different times for each MC, it is unlikely that outside events would change opinions consistently across sessions. Thus,

from an a priori perspective, it seems plausible that this design would yield well-identified causal estimates.

Nevertheless, this assumption could still be violated in practice. For example, this effect would be confounded if, between the survey waves, negative media coverage of an MC led to negative attitudes, even spilling over to the telephone town hall survey items. Therefore, to validate this assumption, we conducted an analysis of Google searches during the time of the study. The results of this show that no member had search volumes more than 17% of their five-year maximum (Figures A2 and A3 in the online supporting information), and that overall search volumes were not above average for any of the members (Table A11). We also searched Lexis-Nexis for all news articles including the MCs. Of the 829 we found, only 37 were in national outlets likely to have a substantial following, and almost all of them dealt with broader political context, rather than focusing on the actions of the particular MC (Figure A4; Table A12). The upshot of this analysis is that there is little evidence of negative media coverage that might confound our identification.

We also use these models to assess how the single-issue and background material intervention enhanced the effects of telephone town halls on constituent attitudes. To answer this question, we focus on the coefficient β_3 on $treatment_i \times post_i$, the standard estimator for the difference-in-differences estimand (Angrist and Pischke 2008). We interpret this coefficient as causal under the parallel paths assumption, which requires that the untreated potential outcomes for the treatment group have similar trends as they had in the control group. Parallel paths is a strong assumption; however, our design is based on an intervention, and subjects did not know about the details of their session upon preregistration. Therefore, we assume that selection into treatment is ignorable and hence that the parallel path assumption is plausible.

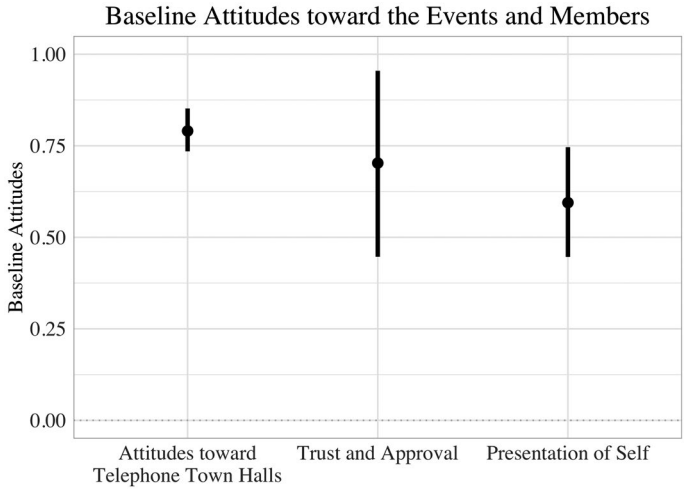
Our findings are local to constituents who select into a telephone town halls and the kind of MCs who participated in our study. Under our design, we can evaluate the reactions to the telephone town halls among those who accepted our invitation to participate and so may be predisposed to believe the events worthwhile. Indeed, pre-telephone-town-hall survey responses indicated high baseline levels of support for telephone town halls as good ways for members to communicate their views and to hear about the views of their constituents. We cannot evaluate reactions among those who did not participate, and nonparticipants

may hold generally negative views about telephone town halls, possibly seeing them as controlled platforms that can filter out dissenting views. In future research we plan to try to address this important question. That said, our self-selected sample remains meaningful, as it is possible that those who attend might end up being disappointed with the experience.

The Consequences of Participating in Standard Telephone Town Halls

We start by presenting the baseline approval for the MCs and towards telephone town halls. To estimate these baselines, Figure 1 plots the overall means for each question group based on our three models. These estimates reflect attitudes prior to the events having occurred. Participants in telephone town halls already have high levels of reported satisfaction with telephone town halls, even before participating. They are also mostly positively disposed toward the MC. We observed this tendency qualitatively during the telephone town hall sessions, where the

FIGURE 1
Baseline Attitudes Toward Events and Members



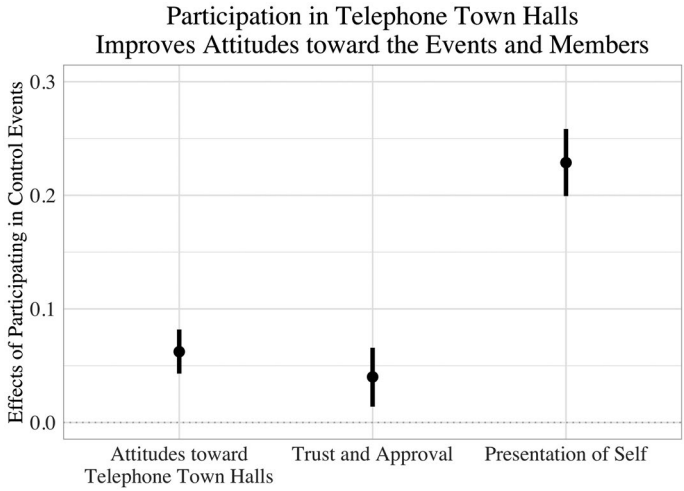
Note: Baseline attitudes toward events and members, as measured by intercepts from regression models. In all three cases, the baseline attitudes exceed the 50% mark. The figure displays means and 95% intervals. All outcome variables range from 0 to 1. Details for models appear in Appendix Table A3.

questions posed by constituents were generally supportive of the MC's positions. This finding is not too surprising, since participants are unlikely to select into the study unless they believed their time would be well spent.

We next look at the overall impact of participation in town halls on citizen attitudes, both about the town halls as a platform for communication and about the participating MC. Here we are conducting the simple difference analysis for the control group. We find significant, and generally positive, outcomes from participating in the telephone town halls. Figure 2 displays the before-and-after comparisons for the control group, who participated in the standard town hall, as estimated by β_2. In all three cases—for telephone town halls, trust in and approval of the member, and the presentation-of-self items—we see positive, statistically significant results.

All outcomes variables range from 0 to 1, so these estimates can be interpreted as increased fractions of the scale. The average difference between respondent attitudes toward telephone town halls before and after the event is a rise of about 6% of the scale,

FIGURE 2
Participation in Telephone Town Halls Improves Attitudes Toward the Events and Members



Note: The figure depicts average differences between pretest and posttest among participants in standard telephone town halls. The figure displays means and 95% intervals. All outcome variables range from 0 to 1. Details for models appear in Appendix Table A3.

which is not insubstantial given, as we showed in Figure 1, that the distribution of pretest responses was substantially right skewed. For trust and approval, the effect was smaller, about 4%, but for presentation-of-self items, was substantially larger, at about 14%. These effects are moderately sized for attitudes toward the institution (Cohen's $d = 0.32$), small for trust and approval (0.14), but relatively large for the presentation-of-self items (0.50). Details on the regressions appear in Table A3 in the online supporting information.[27]

Thus, in spite of their generally bad reputation in the media, telephone town halls as they are currently practiced appear to be generally approved of—at least by the kinds of constituents who currently participate and for the sort of MCs recruited for this study—and participation increases their satisfaction. We see a similar pattern for attitudes toward the member. The results for both sets of measures suggest that, rather than these forums frustrating this type of constituent, telephone town halls enhance evaluations of the MC.

However, the high baseline evaluations we observed in Figure 1 suggest caution. Whether these results would be the same for those who start less supportive of the MC or whether this was primarily a result of the well-known tendency for people in congressional districts to like their particular MC (even as they generally disapprove of Congress) remains an open question. During the e-mail recruitment for each session, many respondents wrote back to us to state they would not engage in a telephone town hall with a representative with the opposite party. That we see such high approval on the pretest confirms that constituents tend to self-select into telephone town halls based on their previous support of the member.

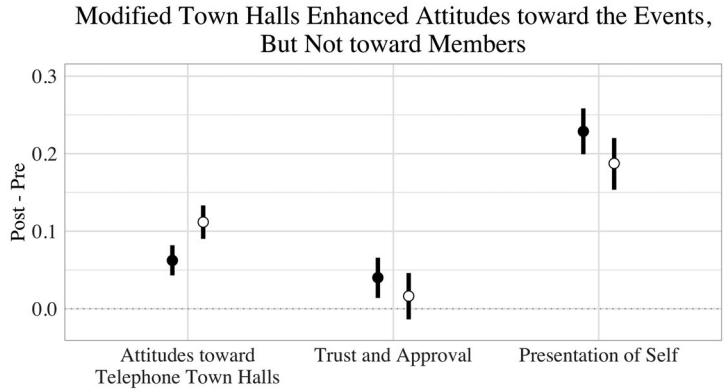
To shed some light on whether telephone town halls have the potential to win over less supportive constituents, we fit three auxiliary linear models, restricting the sample to only those respondent-question pairs where pretest attitudes were in the bottom half of the scale.[28] In all three cases, the point estimates from these subsample regressions more than double those from the full sample. The estimates for presentation-of-self are larger by a factor of 3, and attitudes toward telephone town halls are larger by a factor of 5. While we do not suggest that this is dispositive evidence that those constituents who start less supportive of MCs or events will necessarily see such increases—this group of respondents did agree to attend these events, despite their pretest responses, after all—we do take this as suggestive evidence that these positive changes may generalize.[29]

The Enhanced Effects of the Single Topic Design

In this section, we examine the impact of our intervention, which modifies the standard telephone town hall to focus on a single topic and included briefing materials. As we noted above, our evaluation of the intervention is based on a differences-in-differences design—we rely on scheduling similarity to ensure assignment is unrelated to potential outcomes. Changes attributable to the modified design are thus enhancements to the effects of attending these events.

Returning to general opinions of the telephone town hall, Figure 3 indicates positive and statistically significant effects of our intervention, increasing the effects of attending a standard event. Constituents seemed to prefer the single-topic focus and briefing materials to the standard open-topic format, with an increase of about 5% of the response scale. This effect is small-tomoderate, with a Cohen's *d* of 0.25. This finding suggests that

FIGURE 3
Modified Town Halls Enhanced Attitudes Toward the Events, But Not Toward Members



Note: The single-topic/briefing materials ("Modified") intervention significantly increased the pre-post difference in evaluations of telephone town halls themselves, but did not affect the effects on attitudes toward the members. All pre-post differences are statistically significant except for the change in Trust and Approval for the modified telephone town halls. Outcome variables range from 0 to 1, and the figure displays means and 95% intervals of Post – Pre. Details for models appear in Appendix Table A3.

critics of telephone town halls are not entirely wrong; constituents seem on average to prefer events that hew more closely to more democratically appealing criteria (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018), even when that means their questions and comments are constrained to focus on a prearranged topic.

In contrast, we observe negative, small, statistically insignificant effects for attitudes toward the MCs. For both general trust and approval, and detailed presentation-of-self items, the intervention caused at most very small declines in evaluations compared to the standard town hall, on the order of about 0.02 on the 0–1 scale. Importantly, this result compares differences between designs; *both designs improved constituents' perceptions of their members.* Attendance at either standard or modified events yielded statistically significant increases in evaluations of the member, with the sole exception of modified town halls and trust/approval of the member.

We interpret these findings to mean that constituents' attitudes about MCs do not depend significantly on the institutional framework in which they interact. In retrospect, this point makes sense. Focusing on a single topic likely makes the conversation more coherent and thorough and hence increases constituents' satisfaction with the event's design. Moreover, members have opportunities to engage in effective presentation of self in both cases, whether displaying breadth by answering questions on a variety of topics, or depth by answering probing questions on a single topic. Indeed, the null findings serve as a reassuring test of the design itself, as the mechanisms that connect the treatment to the member-centric outcomes are less obvious than those that connect the treatment to attitudes about telephone town halls themselves. That we found insignificant effects of the single-topic treatment on attitudes toward the member implies the plausibility of the identifying assumptions that warrant causal inferences.

When considering the prospects for members to adopt our alternative design, this pattern of results might be taken two ways. On the one hand, it would seem that there is no especially compelling reason for MCs to adopt these reforms, unless they would appeal more to those who do not currently select into standard events. On the other hand, there seems to be no apparent disadvantage for members to adopt reforms like the single-topic town hall, and they might attract new constituents into the process. To the

extent that such reforms are democratically desirable, and might even mollify critics, MCs may benefit from adopting them.

Robustness and Moderation by Party ID

We performed some auxiliary analyses to probe the robustness of our findings. First, we reestimated all models using fixed effects (see Table A4 in the online supporting information), finding broadly similar results to those shown in the figures above. We also used fixed effects models to estimate the effects of attendance and treatment on a question-by-question basis (see Table A6). There was limited variation in point estimates within each question group. For example, estimates for the items measuring attitudes toward telephone town halls ranged from 0.05 to 0.08. Similarly, limited ranges emerged for each question group and for treatment effect estimates.[30] Random slopes models confirm this limited variation by question, suggesting that our theoretically informed categorization of questions was appropriate.

There may also be differences in attendance and treatment effects based on respondents' party identification, although we did not develop and do not test hypotheses here. All participating MCs were Democrats, and so we reestimated our multilevel models for the subsample of respondents who were Democratic identifiers (including leaners) and for the subsample of Republicans. Results appear in Tables A7 and A8 in the online supporting information.[31] Interestingly, there was widespread similarity in inferences across the groups. Only two differences appeared between subsamples. The effect of attendance on trust and approval seems limited to copartisans; in fact, there was a negative point estimate for this effect among Republicans. And the treatment effect on attitudes toward telephone town halls seems concentrated among Democrats; here, too, the effect for Republicans was negative. There are good reasons, however, for caution in interpreting these moderated effects. Not only did we lack theoretical predictions for either effect, the sample of Republican participants was small (n = 35). Future work should explore the interplay between party similarity and modes of constituent communication.

Discussion and Conclusion

Telephone town halls increasingly dominate the conversations that representatives have with their constituents, and, in

retrospect at least, it is easy to see why. The results of this study should be interpreted with caution—given the small numbers of MCs and sessions and the less-than-optimal sample and randomization process, we can only state the local effect of exposure to telephone town halls local to these members who agreed to work with us and the participants who selected into the town halls. Nevertheless, our field experiment has revealed that constituents who currently select into telephone town halls find them to be a useful communication platform, and they develop more positive evaluations of their representatives after participating. These results suggest why telephone town halls are so popular among MCs; they are an effective platform for MCs to reach many constituents at once *and* cultivate trust, approval, and positive impressions of MCs among participants. Adding more deliberative elements seems to further improve the perceived utility of telephone town halls as a communication platform, and at essentially no cost to the MC herself.

There are a number of future directions for this research. First, expanding this research to test if the relationships observed herein hold up in more powerful studies is critical. The ideal design would include a true control group, where some participants who volunteered to participate are randomly excluded from the telephone town halls. Such a design would help to rule out confounds from external events, such as the vagaries of media attention.

Second, different methods of recruiting for telephone town halls should be utilized in experiments. One of the largest challenges we faced in implementing this project was recruiting constituents to participate in the sessions. Participating offices and our collaborating organizations suggested that the difficulties we had with recruiting were unusual, but we could not identify why this was the case. Further research focused on recruitment may help both in future studies and in MCs' efforts to attract broad audiences for their own telephone town halls.

Third, further efforts should be made to understand the extent to which our results are local to the sorts of constituents who attended and MCs we recruited. The citizens who chose to attend these telephone town halls were likely predisposed to believe the events were worthwhile. There likely were many citizens, both those who identify with the political party of the legislator and perhaps especially those who do not, who did not participate out of the assumption that the event would not be worth their while

and would not provide sufficient opportunities for disagreement and dissent. Relatedly, our MCs were all Democrats from coastal areas who were interested in participating. We have no theoretical reason to expect effects to depend on partisanship or geography, but it seems plausible that legislative style would moderate the effects of these events. We conjecture that district advocates, in the sense of Bernhard, Sewell, and Sulkin (2017), will be especially effective, and future research should address this question.

Finally, virtual town halls should be used to explore more counterfactual institutions for citizen engagement and interaction with MCs (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018). As we have shown, telephone town halls provide an interesting mechanism for studying different designs to facilitate deliberation and communication. Experiments should also be conducted using different technologies and tools. Some remote town hall providers have begun linking the town halls into Facebook and other video formats. The challenge going forward is to design and test platforms fostering inclusion, rational discourse, and perceptions of legitimacy.

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NOTES

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1. The term "tele-town halls" is the trade name of a product from one vendor. The general term is "telephone town halls."

2. See, for example, http://www.theintell.com/opinion/letters/fitzpatrick-s-constituents-want-many-town-halls/article_4a15a394-cd5e-5c97-bf6e-3f7df353c5fe.html, accessed March 13, 2019.

3. https://www.indivisibleguide.com/resource/tips-tele-town-halls/, accessed August 28, 2018. This page has been taken down, but the video can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoSfHWHSp8k, accessed March 13, 2019.

4. To our knowledge, the only existing study of constituent reactions to telephone town halls comes from a 2007 research report from the Congressional Institute (2007). This report describes results from surveys and focus groups conducted with registered voters in six congressional districts. Respondents

who self-reported as participants in these events reported greater satisfaction with their MC's job performance than did nonparticipants.

5. A search of the literature turned up essentially no research on in-person town halls beyond Fenno (1978). Etzioni (1972) proposed the potential of remote town halls with audio and visual communication via television- and telephone-conferencing technology, but this project yielded only a single publication (Etzioni, Laudon, and Lipson 1975).

6. The Congressional Management Foundation (http://www.congressfoundation.org/) is a nonpartisan organization that works directly with members of Congress and congressional staff to improve office operations and enhance interactions with constituents.

7. CMF worked with us to develop the research design and manage the telephone town hall platform, taking the lead in implementing the research in the field. We were able to host these events with generous funding from the Democracy Fund and the cooperation of two commercial vendors who work with MCs to recruit participants and host telephone town halls.

8. For a sample transcript, see http://www.nj11thforchange.org/june_27_2017_tele_town_hall, accessed September 24, 2018.

9. MCs were recruited by the Congressional Management Foundation as part of its Congress 3.0 project. We attempted to recruit from a variety of ideological backgrounds and geographic locations. Our four participants ended up being all Democrats and from coastal states. They were Mark DeSaulnier (D-CA 11th), Mark Takano (D-CA 41st), Rick Larsen (D-WA 2nd), and Seth Moulton (D-MA 6th). These four Democratic members are not representative of the full Congress, but their participation greatly enhances external validity. Additionally, while there are profound political differences between constituents in the study districts and constituents from other regions, we are unaware of any theoretical reason to expect differences in constituents' responses to these events in other congressional districts.

10. Briefing materials appear in the online supporting information. These materials were written by CMF, which is nonpartisan. Most attendees were not study participants and thus did not have access to these materials ahead of time. The MCs selected the topics. In three cases, the topic was healthcare, and in the fourth case, the topic was energy and the environment.

11. Constituents were recruited for participation primarily through e-mail using a commercially available list of residents within the MC's district, with the list of e-mail addresses provided by a political microtargeting firm. The e-mails were linked to a form that asked them for their availability for one of the two town halls and administered a short pretest survey.

12. Because the treatment condition relied on information provision prior to participation and because we wanted to keep registration open for as long as possible, we were not able to randomize participants to treatment and control condition. We therefore relied on the similarity of telephone town hall times to support our ignorable assignment strategy. Since town halls were held at the same time on similar days of the week, we expect that the overwhelming

factor driving which of the two sessions a person signs up for will be their personal schedule, which is likely not linked to political attitudes. While this is suboptimal compared with randomization, it does provide a prima facie level of ignorability. Since the two sessions were never at the same date and time, however, it is possible that one selection variable would be a tendency to procrastinate or put things off, but it is unclear how that personality trait would be correlated with the outcomes we describe below.

13. The one exception to this was the Moulton sessions. The first session, in this case, took place on a Thursday, and the second session took place two weeks later on a Wednesday. Both were held during the same time of day (6 pm EST).

14. The one exception was the Takano sessions, which had been scheduled for March 2016 but then an error in the software erroneously excluded study participants from the session. As a result, we rescheduled the session for May 2016, but we kept the registrations and pretest surveys from the March session. This affected only a small fraction of our respondents. For the full distribution of time lapses between pre- and posttest, plus a discussion of the effect of this software error, see Figure A1 in the online supporting information.

15. The number of preregistered participants varied across the four MCs: DeSaulnier (429), Larsen (146), Moulton (128), and Takano (237). Participants could indicate they were available for both sessions scheduled for their district, and these were randomized into a session.

16. The peak participation levels varied substantially across the sessions, from a low of 182 participants in DeSaulnier's treatment telephone town hall session to a high of 897 participants in Larsen's control telephone town hall session.

17. While each telephone town hall session had several hundred callers at its peak, not all were participants in the study. The numbers of enrollees who completed portions of the pre- and post-surveys by MC were DeSaulnier (116), Larsen (47), Moulton (17), and Takano (42).

18. To test whether attrition was correlated with covariates, we used pretest responses to estimate a model of attrition and reporting (see Table A1 in the online supporting information). Only three of the 13 pretest values of outcome variables were significant. Moreover, the directions of these three coefficients were incoherent; higher approval and lower evaluations of dishonesty were associated with decreased likelihood of attrition and reporting, while higher evaluations of whether the MC "understands people like me" were associated with higher likelihood. The model is weakly predictive; the in-sample area under the ROC curve is only 0.69. We interpret these analyses to suggest there may be at most small differences between enrollees and attendee-reporters.

19. For open-topic sessions, the poll question was: "All in all, do you think things in the nation are generally headed in the right direction, or do you feel things are off on the wrong track?" (press 1 for yes, you think our country is headed in the right direction; 2 for no, you think our country is on the wrong track; 3 for if you're unsure, or have mixed feelings). For the sessions

on healthcare: "Where do you stand on the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare?" (press 1 if you oppose it and want it repealed; 2 if you support it or want it improved; 3 if you're unsure/don't know or have mixed feelings). For the energy and environment sessions: "How important do you think it is for the government to address climate change?" (press 1 for very important, 2 for somewhat important, 3 for not important).

20. Results are robust if we exclude the Don't Knows as missing and use the scale as it is.

21. The results we report are robust to models including fixed effects for respondents and questions. We omit the treatment indicator and member fixed effects because of collinearity. See Table A4 in the online supporting information.

22. This modeling framework also permits us to use all responses provided by participants, even in the case of partial missingness.

23. All models were estimated with the *rstanarm* package developed by the Stan Development Team (2016) in the **R** statistical computing environment, with four chains, 1,000 warm-up iterations, and 1,000 sampling iterations for each model. Relevant statistics indicate that all three models converged.

24. To explore whether attendance or the modified condition had pronounced effects for different questions within a model, we also estimated models with question-level random slopes on treatment, post, and their interaction. None of the estimated random slopes had a large magnitude, and the estimates of overall means were virtually identical to the models without random slopes. These findings indicate that effects were distributed in a similar way within each set of questions and that our theoretically informed categorizations were appropriate.

25. A second possible confound would arise if participants experience demand effects, such as a Hawthorne effect from participating in the experiment. The potential for demand effect is present in any randomized experiment and is inherent to the design.

26. The only exception was a few participants in the Takano sessions that we describe in footnote 15 above and Figure A1 in the online supporting information.

27. Results are robust to the use of fixed effects models; see Table A4 in the online supporting information for details.

28. For details on models, see Table A5 in the online supporting information.

29. In a previous study modifying town halls for an online forum, Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer (2018) also find that trust and approval of members of Congress increases among participants in their online town halls. Their constituent samples in the study were more broadly representative than the self-selected samples here, suggesting the possibility that the increased approval and trust among telephone town hall participants may also hold for constituents who view their members less favorably.

30. Because we have so many comparisons (26 in total), naïve interpretation of *p*-values from separate models risks multiple comparison problem;

similar reasoning motivates our preference for multilevel models (Gelman, Hill, and Yajima 2012). We therefore refrain from reporting *p*-values for these robustness checks.

31. Fixed effects versions of the models appear in Tables A9 and A10 in the online supporting information.

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Supporting Information

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