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The Transformative Effects of Tele-Town Halls on Constituent Perceptions of Members of Congress— and Best Practices to Further Accentuate the Positives

**Research Report
October 2007**

Key Findings

Tele-Town Halls (TTHs) are an increasingly popular technique for office-holders to conduct very large-scale telephone conference calls with constituents at low cost. These calls are used to update constituents on Members' recent and upcoming activities, as well as to take calls from constituents and conduct "insta-polls" using telephone keypads.

Building upon anecdotal evidence of these TTHs' effectiveness, we set out to conduct the first-ever survey of TTH participants, as well as focus group discussions to better understand the TTH phenomenon.

These are the key findings:

- 1) Higher frequency of Member contact (of any type) correlates with multiple measures of higher job approval
- 2) If constituents hear from their Member often, they likelier to view the Member as a friend or acquaintance. If they don't hear from their Member, he remains a stranger
- 3) For a majority of constituents, Members are not contacting them regularly enough to satisfy them
- 4) Across different forms of outreach, frequency of non-campaign "touch" correlates to higher levels of satisfaction with Member's job performance
- 5) Printed newsletters viewed as the *best* use of taxpayer money to keep the largest number of people in one's district well-informed

- 6) Ironically, printed newsletters are also viewed as the *worst* use of taxpayer money to keep the largest number of people in one's district well-informed
- 7) In the abstract, it takes time to get constituents to warm up to the idea of a conference call with their Congressman. But once they join a call and begin to understand it, it strongly (and positively) transforms their view of their Congressman. The more TTHs a constituent attends, the higher the Member's favorability.
- 8) The TTH experience transforms constituents for a variety of reasons—not just one
- 9) The more TTHs constituents do, the more often they want to do them
- 10) Participation in TTHs correlates to improving levels of satisfaction with Member's job performance over the past four years
- 11) TTH participants prefer the telephone town hall to a traditional town hall by a nearly two-to-one margin; Non-TTH participants prefer the traditional town hall by a nearly three-to-one margin
- 12) The TTH "bounce" is dramatic among GOP constituents of GOP Members—but Democratic constituents on balance also respond favorably to TTH outreach by GOP Members

Best Practices

Following these findings, this report includes a list of 25 recommended "TTH Best Practices" to improve the execution of TTHs for practitioners and novices. These Best Practices are derived mainly from the focus groups along with some data from the survey.

Overview of Research

Presentation Testing conducted a two part research project in October 2007 to study the emerging communications process being adopted by Members of Congress known as Tele Town Halls (TTHs). We set out to answer two questions:

- 1) Are TTHs as effective as anecdotal feedback from Members suggests?
- 2) Assuming TTHs are effective, what practical steps can Members take before, during and after each TTH call to make them even more so?

The research consisted of a survey of 867 registered voters across six Congressional districts. We surveyed TTH participants in particular portions of three Congressional districts where Members have been actively hosting TTH calls. These three districts are the 6th District of Pennsylvania, the 2nd District of Kentucky, and the 3rd District of California. As control groups we also surveyed constituents in these same districts who never participated in TTHs, as well as constituents in three other districts in the same states where TTHs are not currently done: the 16th District of Pennsylvania, the 1st District of Kentucky, and the 40th District of California.

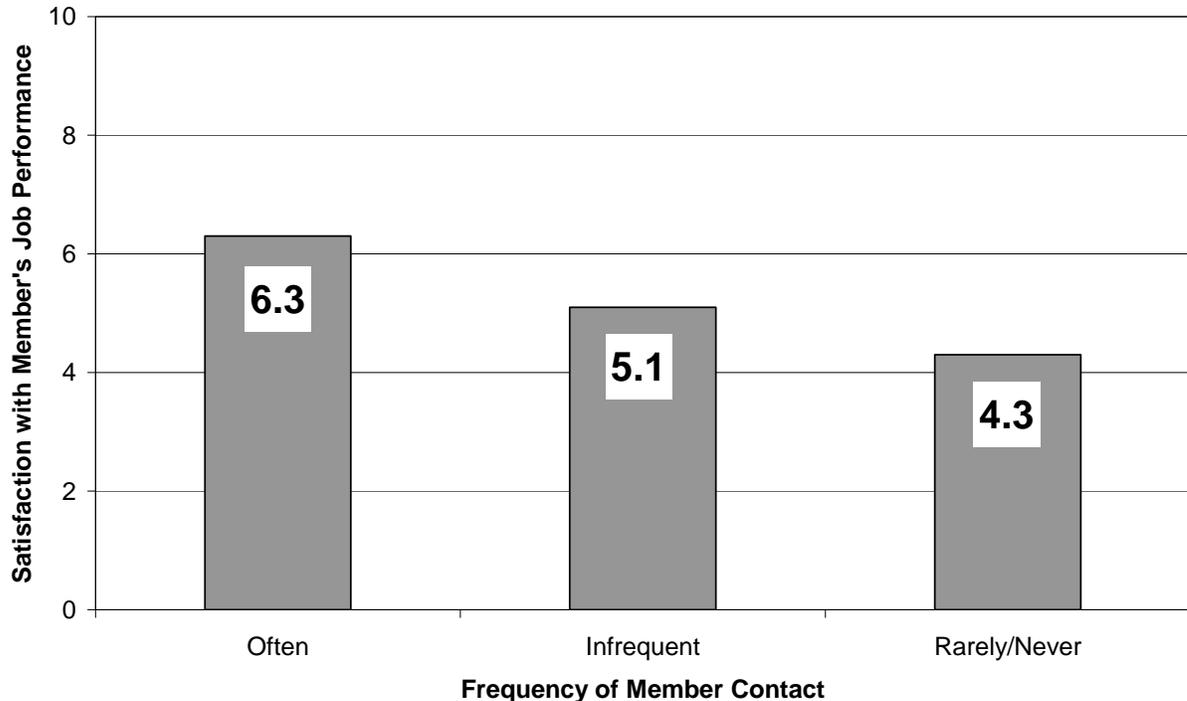
Following the survey, we conducted two focus groups in each of the three TTH-active districts. In Reading, PA, Bowling Green, KY, and Rancho Cordova, CA, one focus group consisted of registered voters who had never participated in a TTH, and another that had

participated. These groups were convened during the last two weeks of October, 2007, and each lasted between 90 minutes and two hours.

Key Findings

- 1) **Higher frequency of Member contact (of any kind) correlates with multiple measures of higher job approval**

More Contact = More Satisfaction



Voters who said they heard from their Congressman at least quarterly scored their Congressman's job performance at an average of 6.3 on a one-to-10 scale. Those who heard from him once every six months to a year rated job performance at an average of 5.1. And those who heard from their Congressman rarely or never scored it at 4.3.

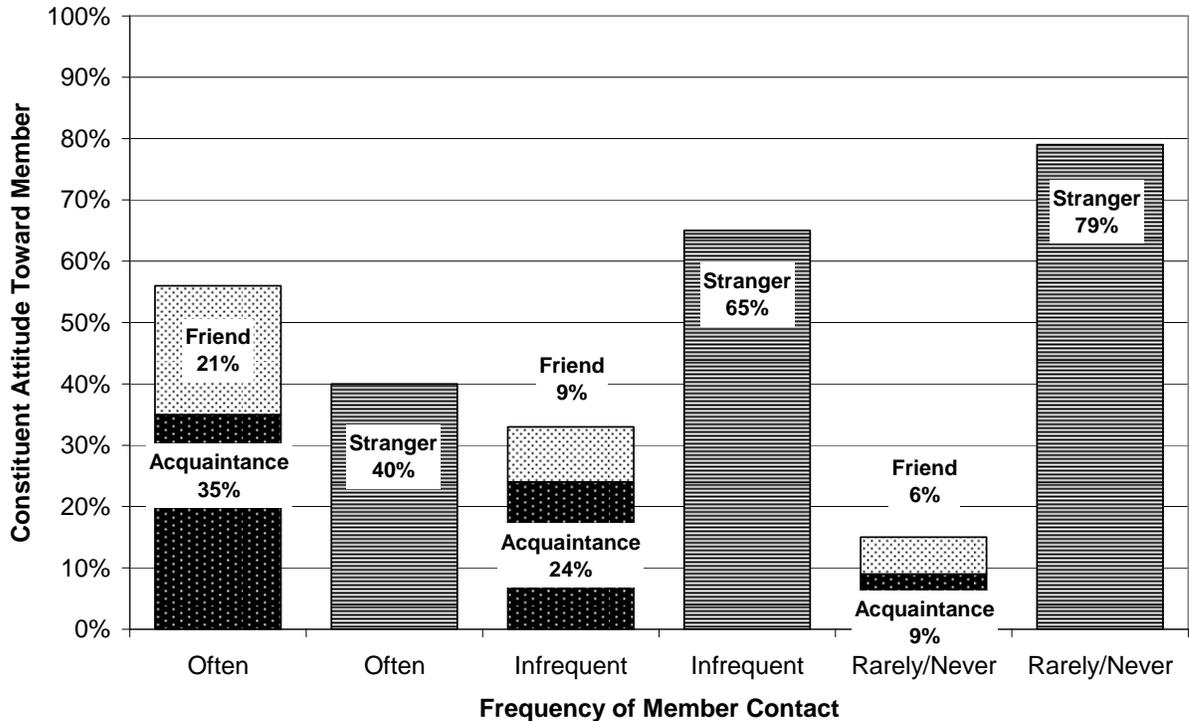
23% of voters who hear from their Congressman at least quarterly say their *satisfaction with their Congressman's job performance* is higher now than four years ago. Only 12% of those who hear from their Congressman once or twice a year say their satisfaction with their Congressman's job performance is higher now. Only 7% of those who hear from their Congressman rarely or never say their satisfaction with their Congressman's job performance is higher now. 35% of those rarely contacted say it is lower now than four years ago.

30% of voters who hear from their Congressman at least quarterly say their Congressman's *willingness to listen to their concerns* is higher now than four years ago. Only 15% of those who hear from their Congressman once or twice a year say their Congressman's willingness to listen to their concerns is higher now. Only 5% of those who hear from their Congressman rarely or never say their Congressman's willingness to listen to their concerns is higher now. 28% of those rarely contacted say it is lower now than four years ago.

28% of voters who hear from their Congressman at least quarterly say their Congressman's *knowledge of issues that matter to voters* is higher now than four years ago. Only 16% of those who hear from their Congressman once or twice a year say their Congressman's knowledge of issues that matter to voters is higher now. Only 10% of those who hear from their Congressman rarely or never say their Congressman's knowledge of issues that matter to voters is higher now. 31% of those rarely contacted say it is lower now than four years ago.

2) If constituents hear from their Member often, they begin to view the Member as a friend or acquaintance. If they don't hear from their Member, he remains a stranger

More Contact = More Friendship



[+/-3.3%]

56% of people who hear from their Congressman at least quarterly view him as either a friend (21%) or an acquaintance (35%). 40% in this category continue to view their Congressman as a stranger.

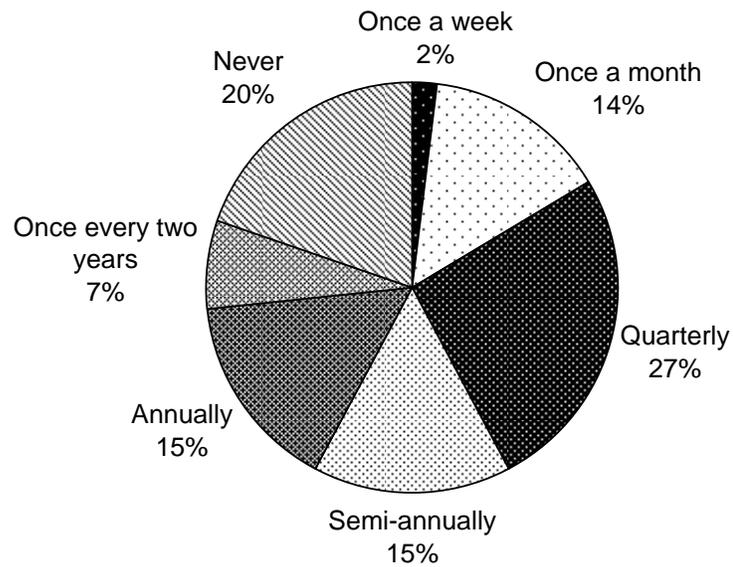
33% of people who hear from their Congressman once or twice a year view him as either a friend (9%) or an acquaintance (24%). 65% in this category continue to view their Congressman as a stranger.

15% of people who hear from their Congressman rarely or never view him as either a friend (6%) or an acquaintance (9%). 79% in this category continue to view their Congressman as a stranger.

Interestingly, we heard in the focus groups that constituents ideally want their Member to be not a friend or acquaintance per se, but more of an “ally,” someone who is “approachable,” “visible,” and a “watchdog” for their concerns.

3) For a majority of constituents, Members are not contacting them regularly enough to satisfy them

Constituents' Claimed Frequency of Contact by Member

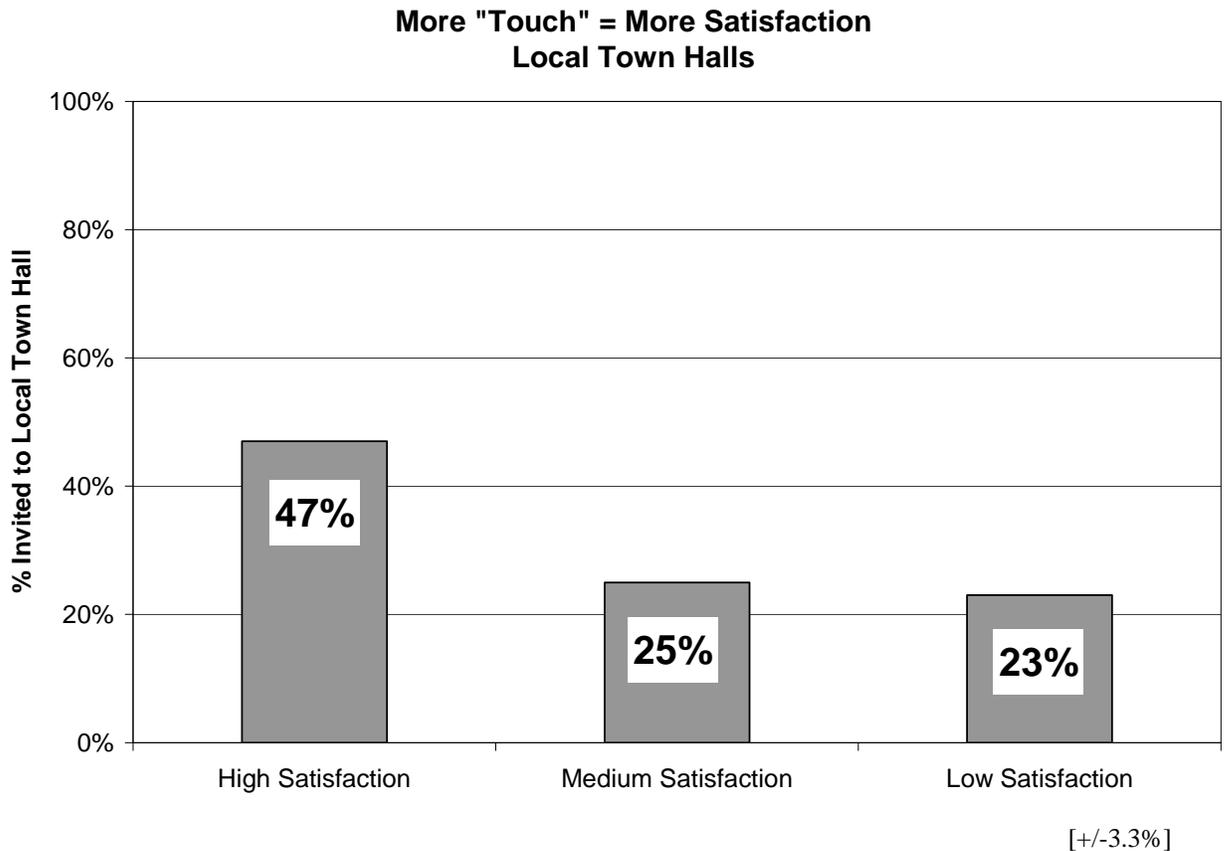


[+/-3.3%]

Our focus groups showed that most voters prefer to hear from their Member of Congress between once a month and once a quarter.

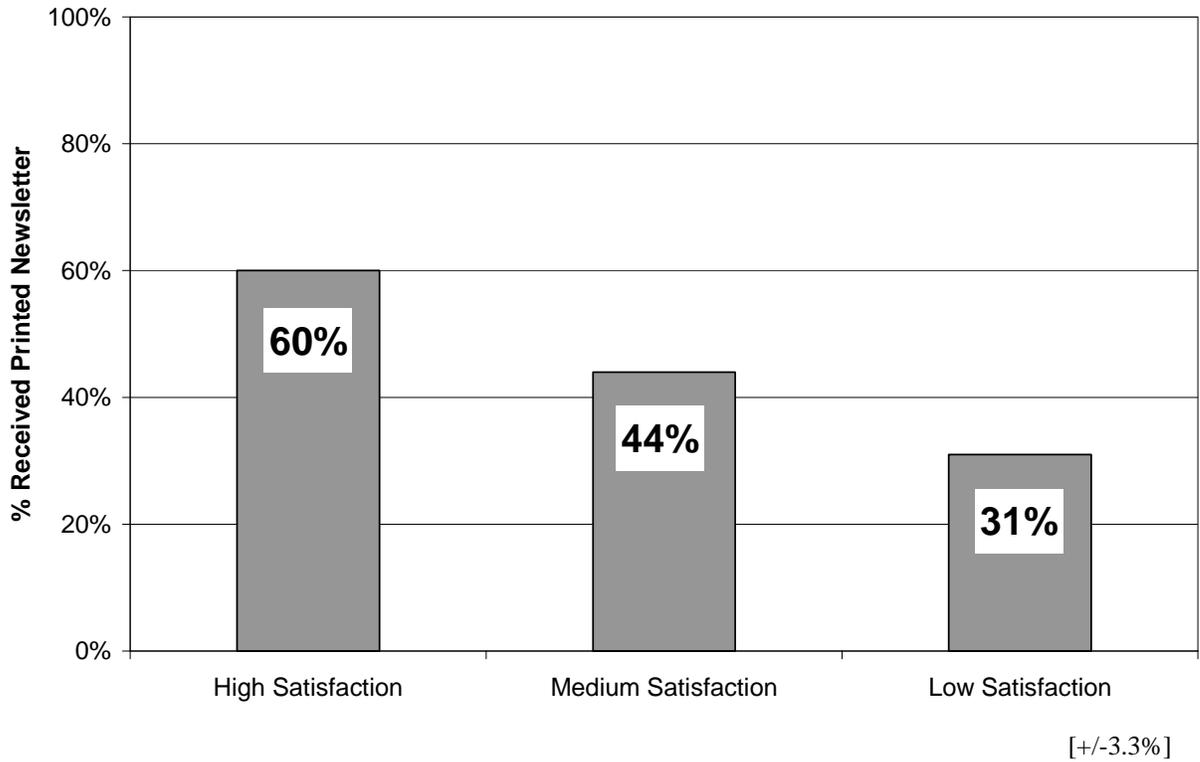
(See Finding 9, below: The more TTHs constituents do, the more often they want to do them.)

4) Across different forms of outreach, frequency of non-campaign “touch” correlates to higher levels of satisfaction with Member’s job performance



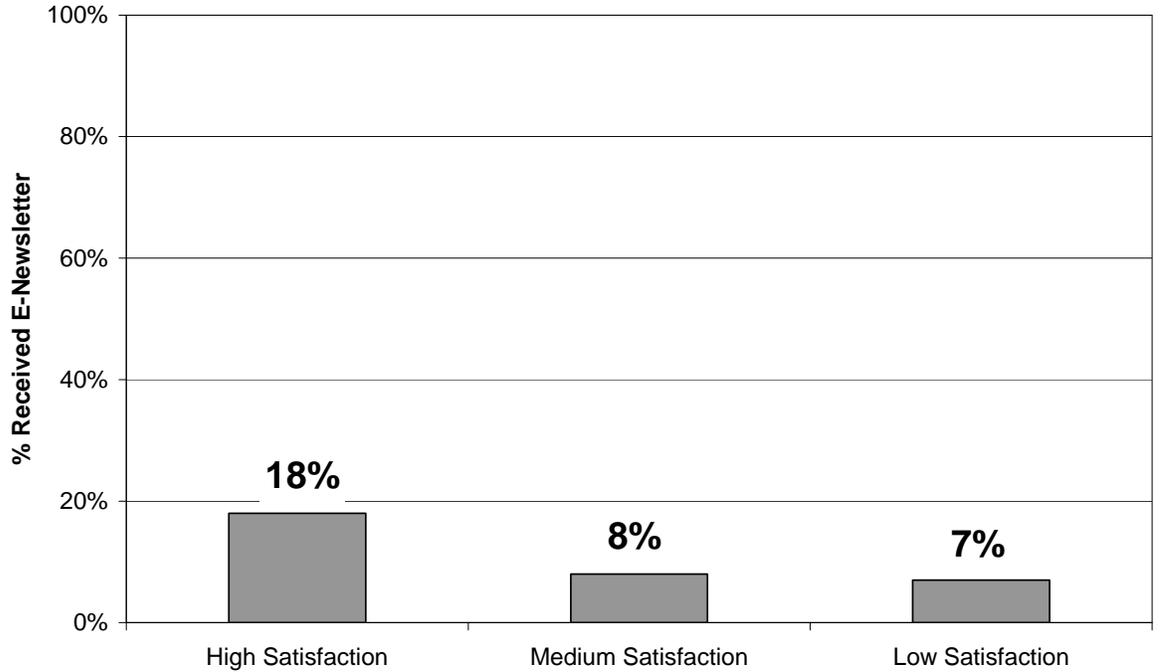
Among those who say they have a high level of satisfaction with their Congressman’s job performance, 47% have been invited to a local town hall meeting with their Congressman in the past three months. Among those who say they have a medium level of job satisfaction with their Congressman, 25% have been invited to a local town hall meeting. Among those who say they have a low level of job satisfaction, 23% say they have been invited to a local town hall meeting in the past three months.

More "Touch" = More Satisfaction Printed Newsletters



Among those who say they have a high level of satisfaction with their Congressman's job performance, 60% have received a printed newsletter from their Congressman in the past three months. Among those who say they have a medium level of job satisfaction with their Congressman, 44% have received a printed newsletter from their Congressman. Among those who say they have a low level of job satisfaction, 31% say they have received a printed newsletter from their Congressman in the past three months.

More "Touch" = More Satisfaction E-Newsletter

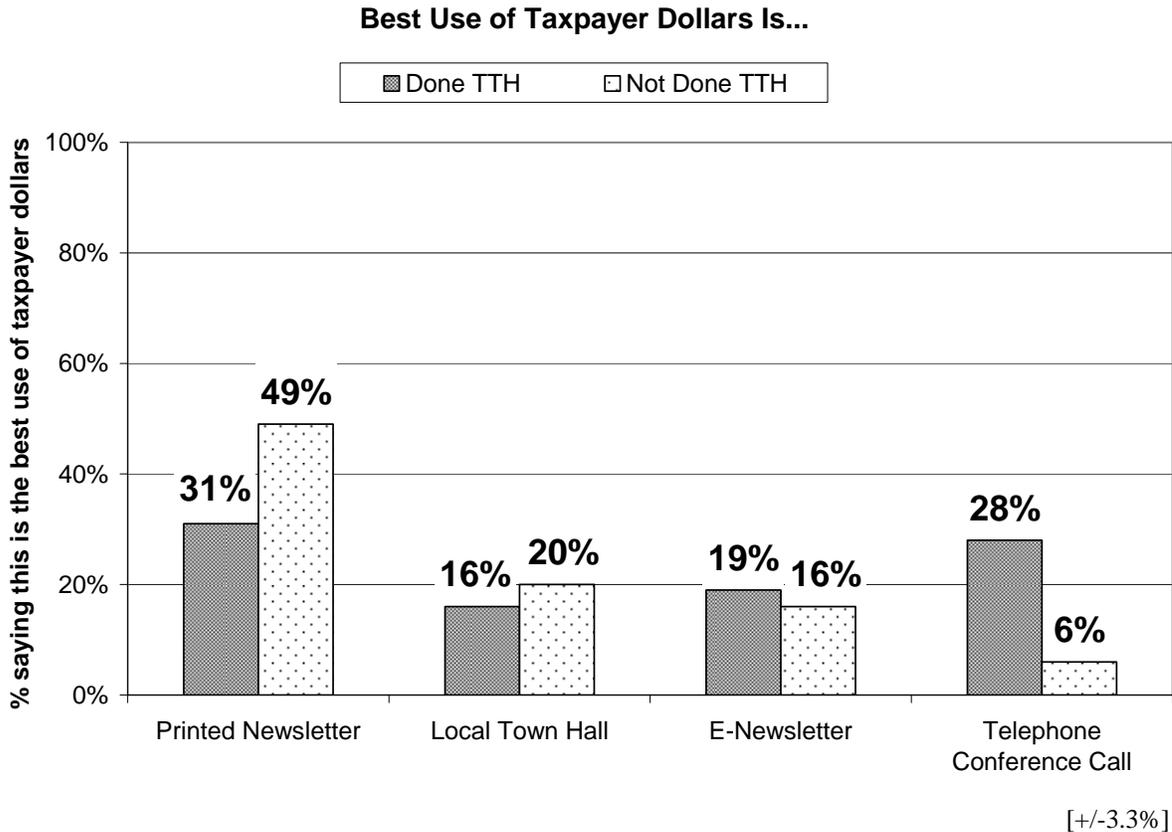


[+/-3.3%]

Most constituents do not receive an email newsletter from you. Indeed, in our study, 84% said they never received an email newsletter.

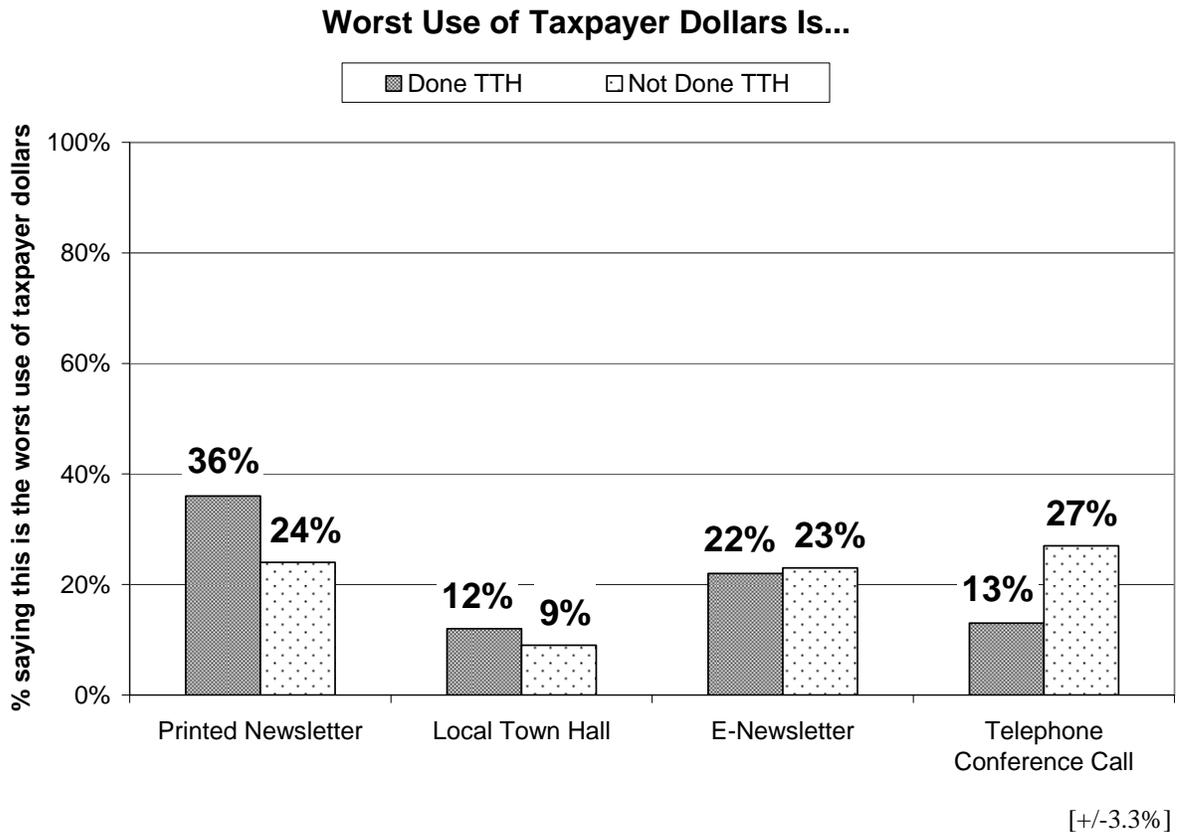
Yet, among those who say they have a high level of satisfaction with their Congressman's job performance, 18% have received a newsletter from their Congressman in the past three months. Among those who say they have a medium level of job satisfaction with their Congressman, 8% have received an e-newsletter from their Congressman. Among those who say they have a low level of job satisfaction, 7% say they have received an e-newsletter from their Congressman in the past three months.

5) Printed newsletters viewed as the *best* use of taxpayer money to keep the largest number of people in one's district well-informed



We heard consistently in our focus groups that printed newsletters have the advantage of ease and universality: You can read it whenever you want, and (in theory) everyone receives one. Those who thought the printed newsletters are the best use of taxpayer dollars said the other forms of communication are just not as convenient, or require taking a pro-active step to sign up.

6) Ironically, printed newsletters are also viewed as the *worst* use of taxpayer money to keep the largest number of people in one’s district well-informed



As much as there was an active contingent saying that printed newsletters were the best use of taxpayer dollars, there was an equally opinionated group who thought they were the worst. In large part, we heard many comments about the newsletters looking like junk mail, or containing very dated information, or failing to highlight issues that were coming up in Congress. Several people thought the newsletters were too glossy and thus too expensive to produce, causing them to wonder, “How much did *THIS* cost?!?”

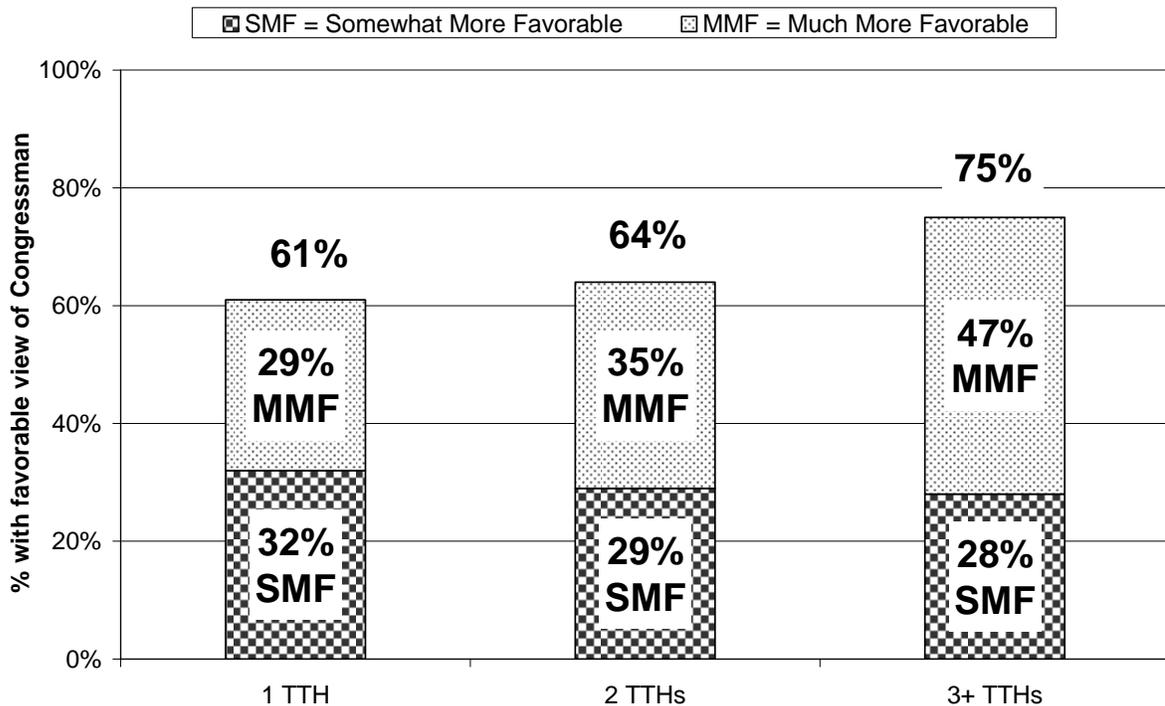
We heard several recommendations to make the newsletter look more like a traditional black and white letter in an envelope so that people would open it and take it seriously.

7) **In the abstract, it takes time to warm up constituents to the idea of a conference call with their Congressman. But once they join a call and begin to understand it, it strongly (and positively) transforms their view of their Congressman. The more TTHs a constituent attends, the higher the Member’s favorability.**

Among those who have never participated in a conference call with their Congressman, 63% say they would *not* be interested in participating. We saw initial resistance to TTHs among groups of non-participants, some of whom didn’t fully grasp the concept of their Congressman actually calling them directly and inviting them to stay on a call. We heard other initial concerns driven by the *perceived* inability to ask a question, or by a lack of desire to stay on a call for a long period of time, or the expectation that the Congressman would take questions that are of no interest to the typical listener.

What was so interesting was that during our focus groups, as the calls were described to those who’d never participated in one, focus group attendees became more and more interested and curious.

Greater TTH Exposure = Higher Member Favorability



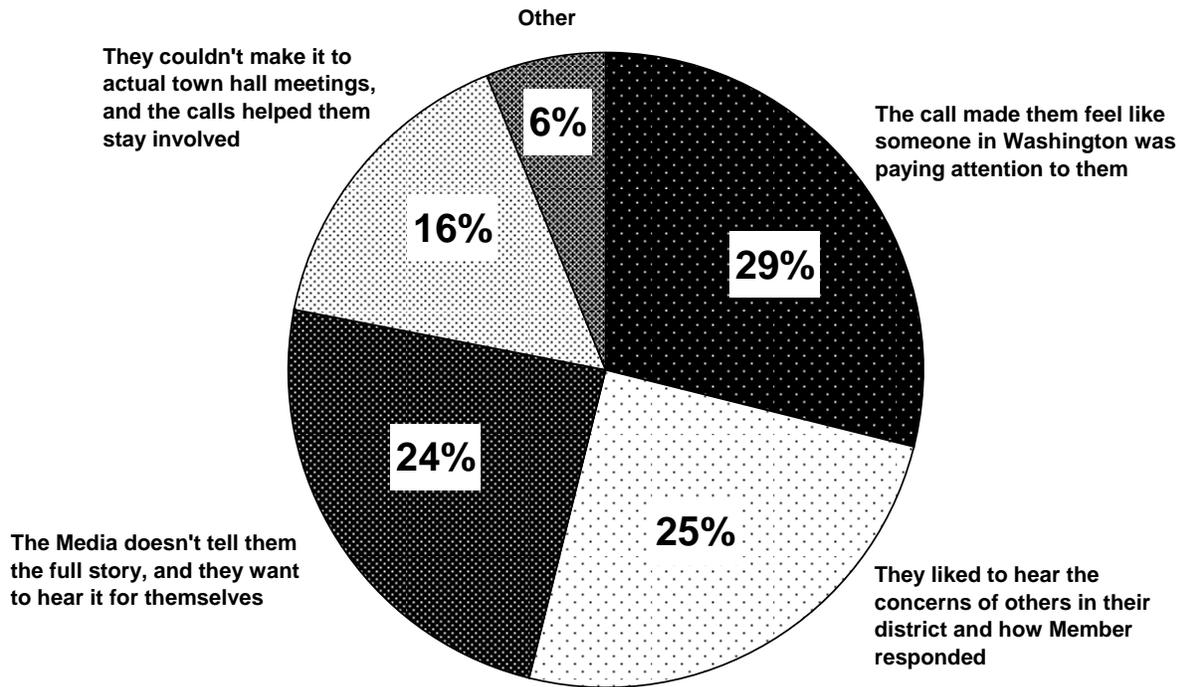
[+/-6.4%]

We also found in the survey that the more people participate in the TTHs, the more they gained a positive view of their Congressman.

Among those who said they’d done one TTH, 29% said they had a much more favorable view, and 32% said they had a somewhat more favorable view. Among those who said they’d done two TTHs, 35% said they had a much more favorable view, and 29% said they had a somewhat more favorable view. And among those who said they’d done three or more TTHs, 47% said they had a much more favorable view, and 28% said they had a somewhat more favorable view.

8) The TTH experience transforms constituents for a variety of reasons—not just one

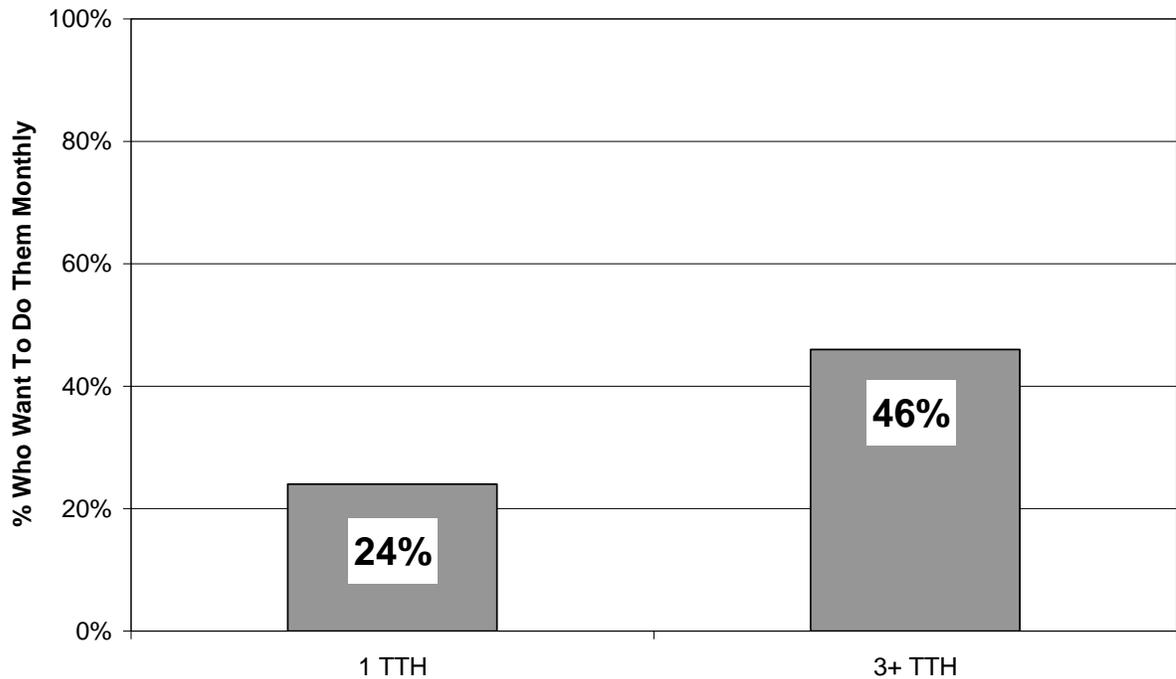
Why TTHs Made Constituents More Favorable Toward Member



[+/-6.4%]

9) The more TTHs constituents do, the more often they want to do them

**The More TTHs Constituents Attend,
The More Frequently They Want To Do Them**



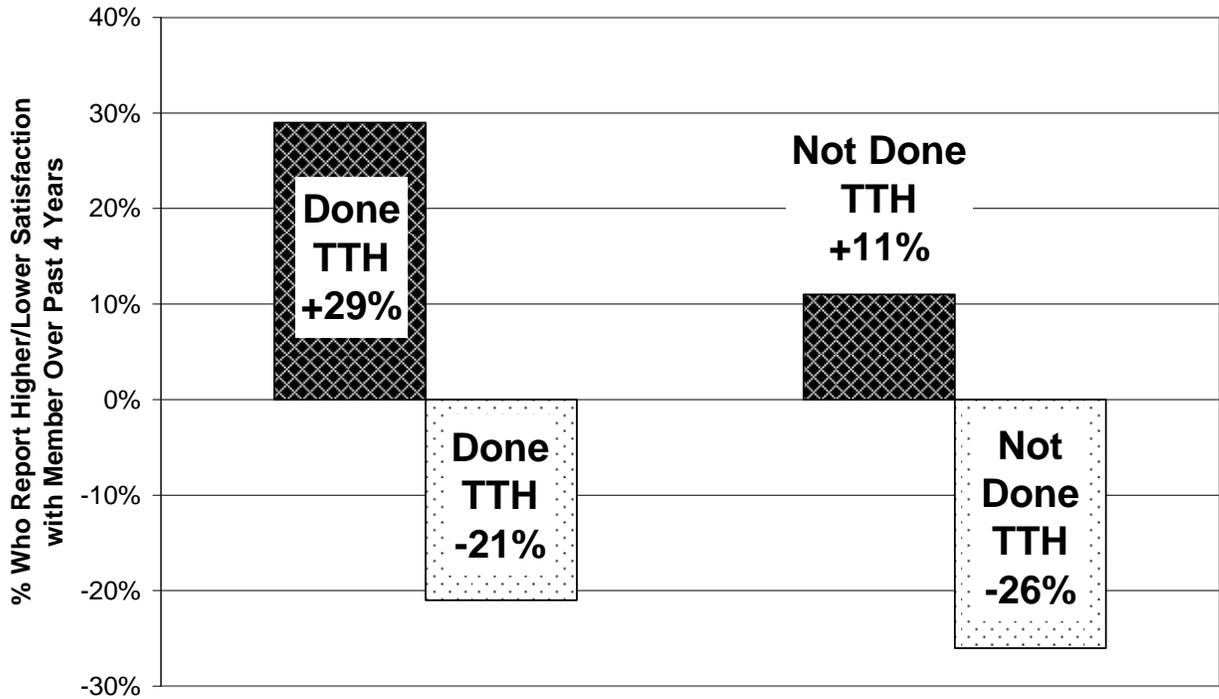
[+/-6.4%]

Among those who have done just one TTH, 24% would like to do them once a month. Among those who have done three or more TTHs, 46% would like to do them once a month.

What's important is that no matter how many TTHs one has participated in, a large majority feel that the ideal frequency of participation is between once a month (37%) and once a quarter (36%).

10) Participation in TTHs correlates to improving levels of satisfaction with Member's job performance over the past four years

TTH Exposure = Greater Satisfaction with Member's Job Performance Over Time

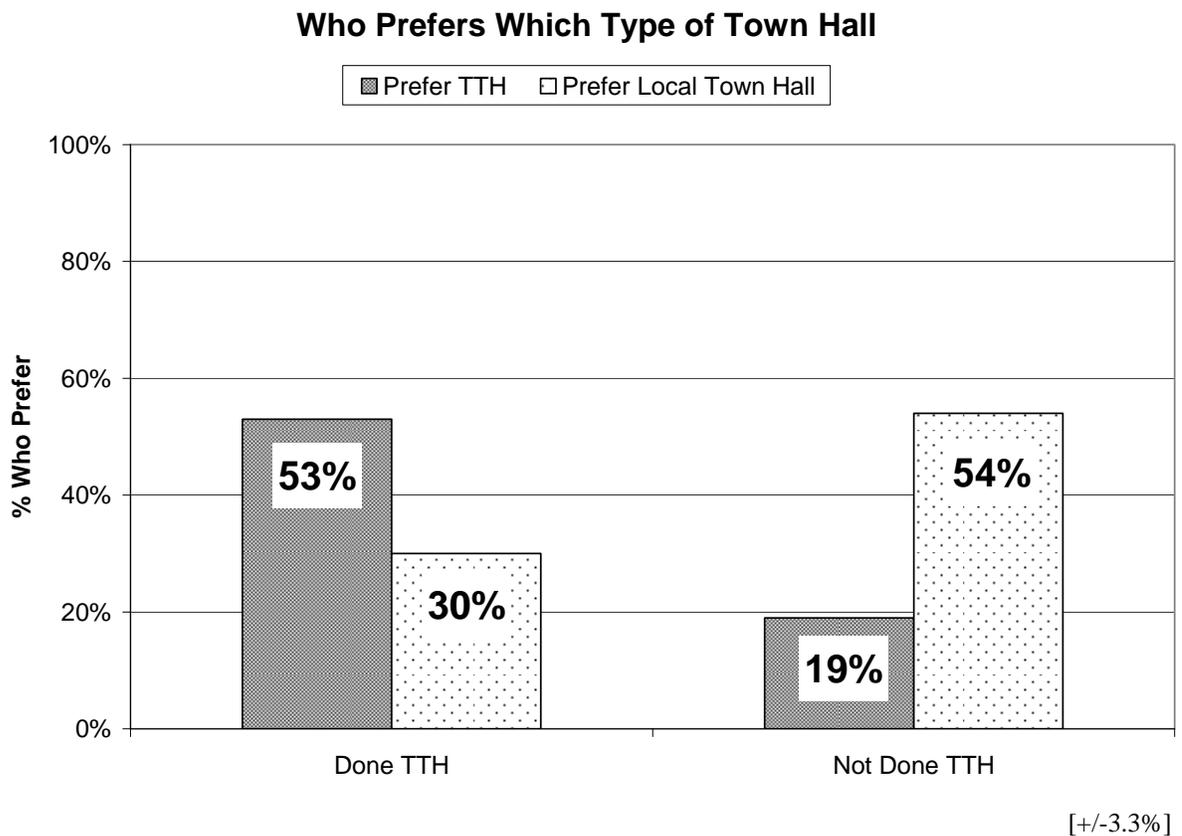


[+/-3.3%]

Among those who have participated in TTHs, 29% say their satisfaction with the Member's overall job performance has risen in the past four years; 21% say it has fallen; 48% say it has remained the same.

Among those who have not participated in TTHs, 11% say their satisfaction with the Member's overall job performance has risen in the past four years; 26% say it has fallen; 58% say it has remained the same.

11) TTH participants prefer the phone town hall to a traditional town hall by a nearly two-to-one margin; Non-TTH participants prefer the traditional town hall by a nearly three-to-one margin

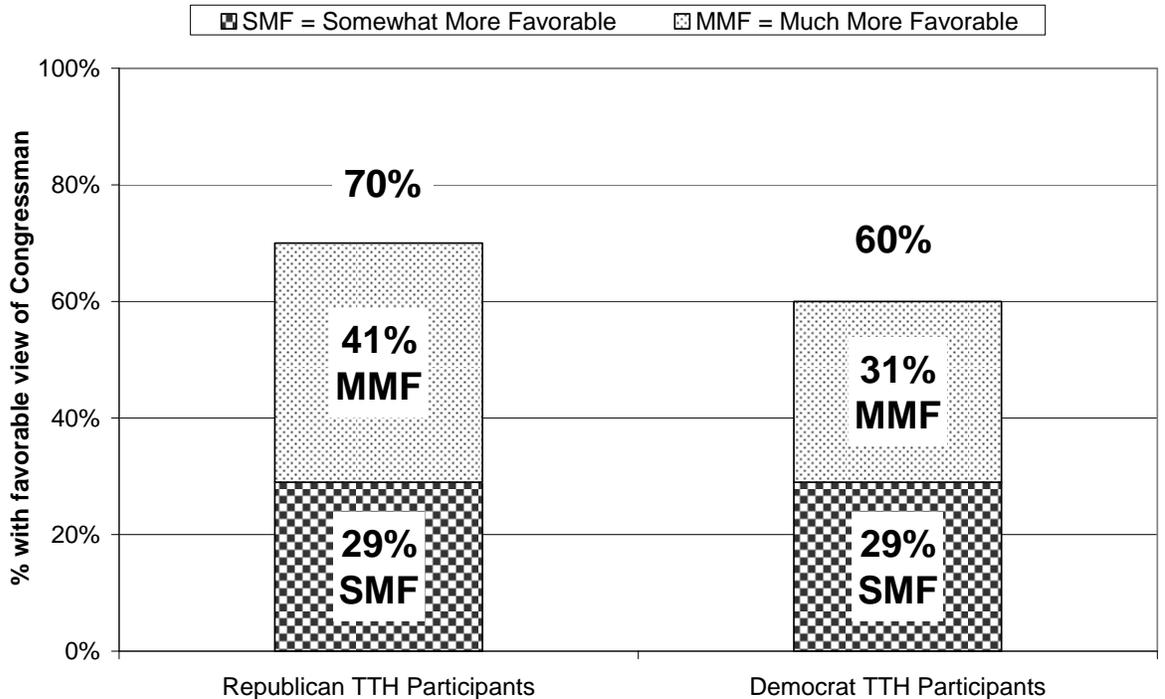


53% of people who have participated in a TTH prefer a conference call with their Congressman to a traditional town hall. 30% of people in this category would prefer the opposite: the traditional town hall over the conference call.

54% of people who have never participated in a TTH prefer a traditional town hall to a conference call with their Congressman. 19% of people in this category would prefer the opposite: the TTH over the traditional town hall.

12) The TTH “bounce” is dramatic among GOP constituents of GOP Members—but Democratic constituents on balance also respond favorably to TTH outreach by GOP Members

TTH Exposure "Lifts" Both R and D Constituents



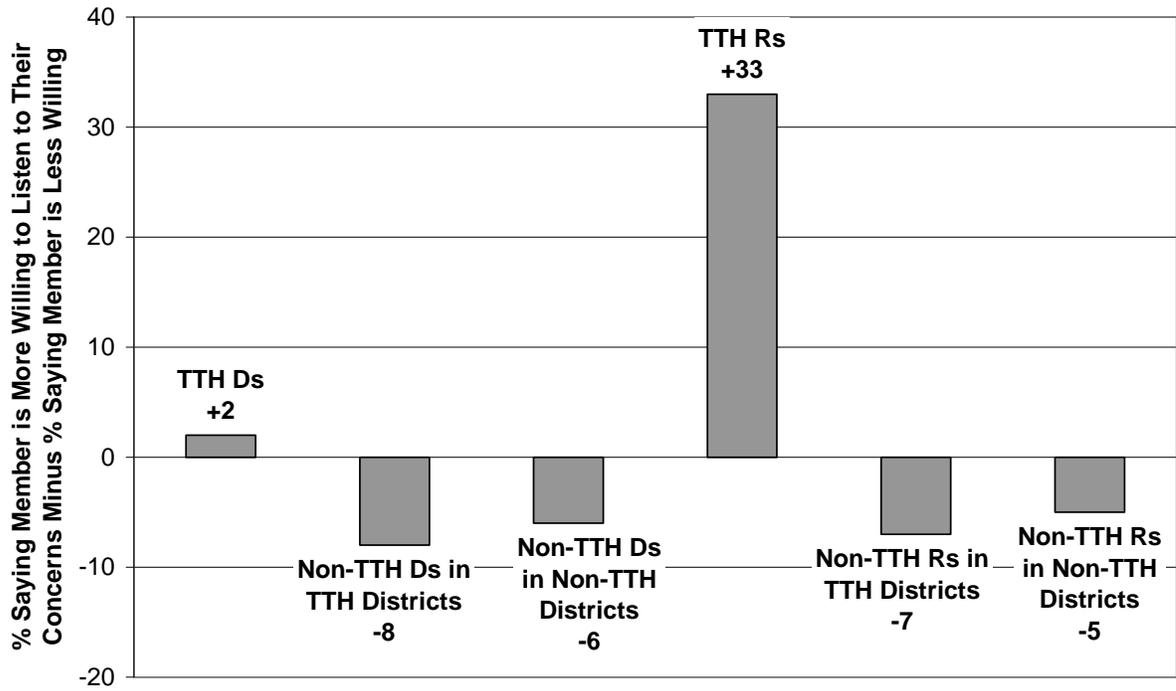
[+/-6.4%]

Importantly, participating in at least one TTH caused both Democrats and Republicans to have a much more favorable view of their GOP Congressman. Seventy percent of Republicans said they had either a much more favorable (41%) or somewhat more favorable (29%) view of their Congressman after participating in a TTH. Sixty percent of Democrats said they had either a much more favorable (31%) or somewhat more favorable (29%) view of their Congressman after participating in a TTH. Only 11% of participants came away with a less favorable view of their Congressman after the TTH.

Among Republicans who had participated in a TTH, their mean satisfaction score for the Member of Congress was 7.1 (on a zero to 10 scale). This compares to 5.3 for Republicans in the same districts who had never done a TTH, and 5.5 for Republicans in districts where TTHs have not been conducted at all.

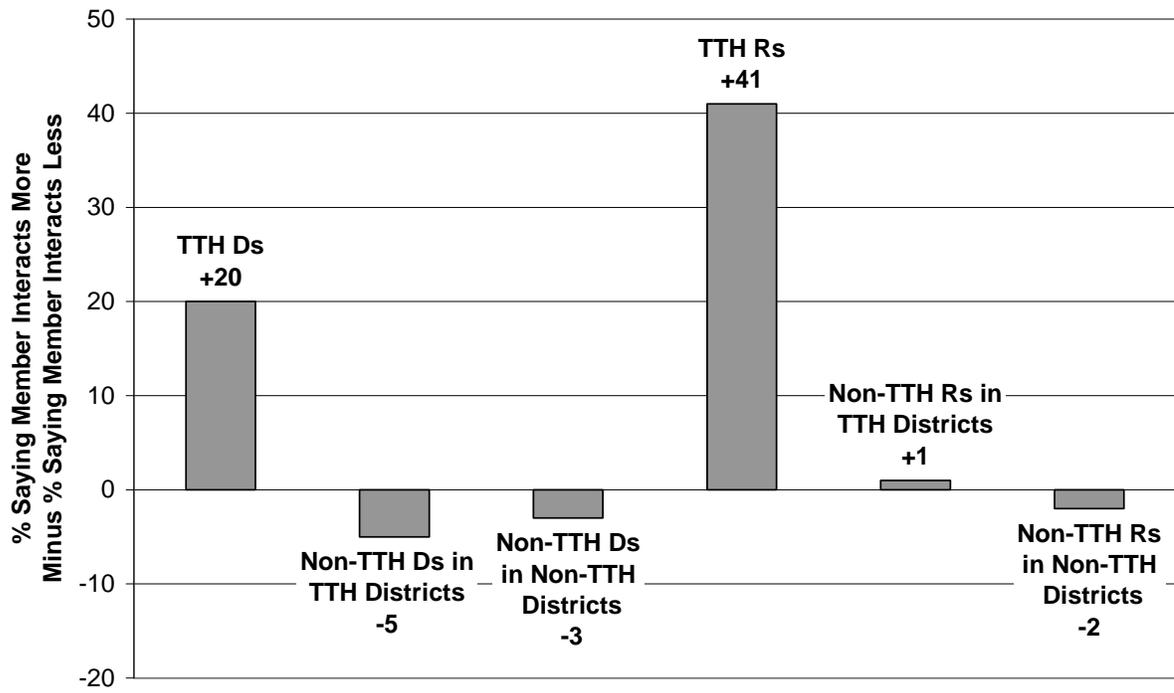
Among Democrats who had participated in a TTH, their mean satisfaction score for the Member of Congress was 5.0 (on a zero to 10 scale). This compares to 4.7 for Democrats in the same districts who had never done a TTH, and 4.7 also for Democrats in districts where TTHs have not been conducted at all.

Willingness To Listen Your Concerns -- Change Over 4 Years



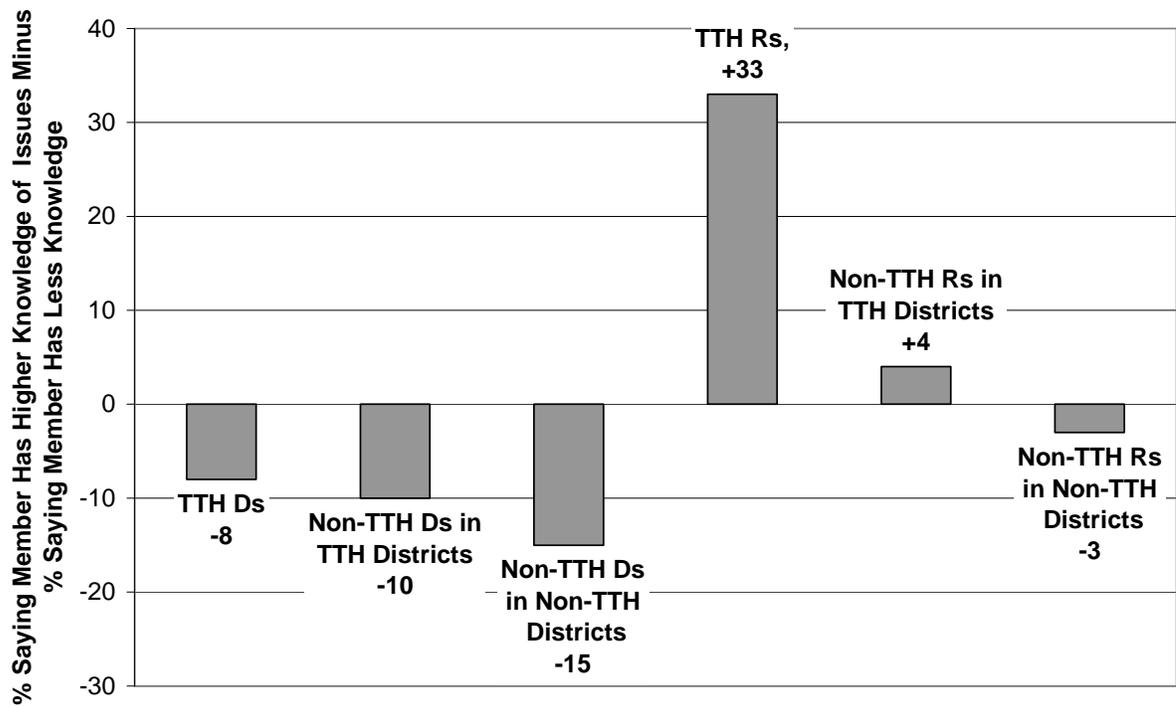
[+/-3.3%]

Interaction with Constituents -- Change Over 4 Years



[+/-3.3%]

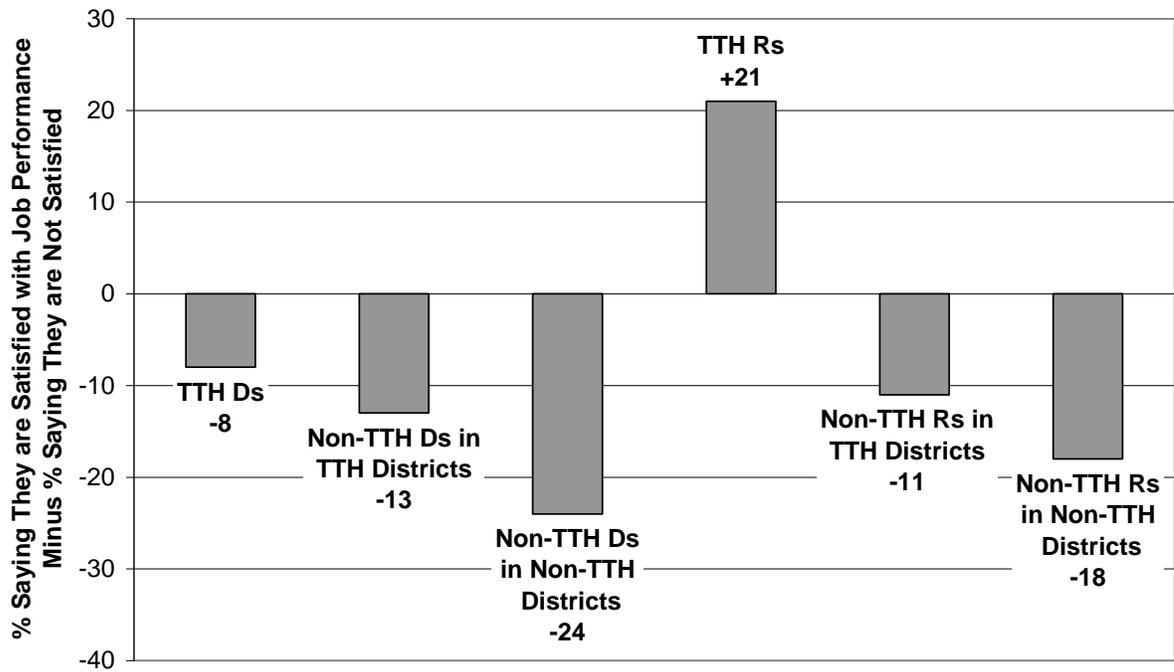
Knowledge of Issues That Matter -- Change Over 4 Years



[+/-3.3%]

Overall satisfaction with their Member's job performance

**Overall Satisfaction with Their Member's Job Performance --
Change Over 4 Years**



[+/-3.3%]

Best Practices for Conducting Congressional Tele-Town Halls (TTHs)

Prior to the call

- 1) Limit the geography of outbound calls to particular cities or towns near one another, as opposed to taking a smattering from all over the district. When you spread the outbound calls far and wide, and then on the TTH announce where each caller is from, you undermine the intimacy that a TTH call offers. Geographic diversity within the district leads listeners to think there's a huge number of people on the call—an impression you don't want to leave if you don't have to. You want people to think you are calling only people who live near them, and that you're focused on that localized community's concerns.
- 2) Expand your selection criteria for phone numbers to call. Most of the people in our focus groups who had not participated in a tele-town hall would very much like to attend one.
- 3) Give constituents advance notice that the calls are taking place. The ideal amount of lead time is one week. You can leave a brief, automated voice message with the approximate time they can expect to receive a call on a given evening.
- 4) Limit calls to weekday evenings. Sixty-four percent of respondents in our survey who had participated in TTHs said that weekday evenings were preferable either to weekends or daytime during the week. The best time on a weekday night varies from person to person, but with older people you generally want to start a bit earlier (7:00 p.m. or so), and for parents with children you want to start later (8:30 or so, after young kids go to bed). Do not *start* a call any later than 8:30 p.m.
- 5) For those districts with pockets of “challenging constituents,” be sure to conduct TTHs with those constituents, too. There is considerable goodwill built up by merely doing TTHs and showing that you're listening, even among those who oppose your point of view.

At the beginning of the call

- 6) During the automated message inviting people onto the call, indicate at what time the call will end. This will give people a sense of whether they want to make the time commitment, and know they're not signing on for hours of conversation.
- 7) Announce you plan to limit the scope of issues in the first half hour to three or four hot-button issues that you specify. This gives you more control over the agenda and ensures that issues that are on most constituents' minds are addressed in full. It also signals to listeners that people with narrow agendas won't dominate the call. But also be sure to announce that at an appointed time during the call (at 20 minutes past the hour, for example) you will welcome calls on any subject.
- 8) Take a few minutes at the beginning of the call, before taking questions, to talk about what you've been doing recently in Washington and what you're going to be working on in the next month.

During the call

9) Get callers with personal concerns off the call immediately by referring them to staff. Show all appropriate sensitivity, but tell the caller that they should call a specific person at the office the next day, and give that staffer's first name and phone number. Listeners get very impatient with calls that have no perceived bearing on their lives, or that go on too long.

10) Remind participants the call is live and not recorded. The easiest way to do this is to periodically say what time it is, or announce how much time is left for people to call in.

11) Conduct an instant survey with call participants (by instructing them to push the keypad on their phones) to get immediate feedback on pending issues before Congress. The more interactive you can make the call, the longer people are willing to listen. Remember: The top reason people say the TTHs enhance their view of their Congressman is that they show that someone in Washington is paying attention to their concerns. Building upon that sentiment is crucial to strengthening your TTH outreach.

12) Indicate that the calls are not screened. About half the people in our focus groups thought that the calls *were* screened. You build considerable goodwill by signaling that you do not screen your calls and you welcome all comers. Our most skeptical people said that merely saying you don't screen the calls is still not enough. The best way to get this point across: Use a bit of humor. Wait until a hostile caller gets on the phone, and when he or she is done with the question, say something like this: "Well, as you can probably tell, we obviously don't screen our calls..."

13) If you know a caller personally, don't make it sound like you're old buddies when he/she gets on the line. When that happens more than once on a call, it leads some listeners to conclude that the call is staged and not spontaneous. Keep in mind: Most of the folks on the call don't know you personally, and it sounds surprising to them that you might know multiple people who are randomly calling in. You might say something warm but innocuous to a familiar caller, such as: "I'm delighted to have you on the conference call tonight."

14) Use the TTH as an opportunity to drive people to your website. Most have not visited it, but they intuit there's useful information there. Also encourage them to sign up for your e-newsletter while on the home page. What you should *absolutely not do* is use the website as a crutch during the TTH; in other words, do *not* tell a caller that the answer to a question can be found on the website. Answer the question in full on the call, and then say that if they want even more detailed information, they can find it at your site. And be sure to give out the URL (website address).

15) Remind participants that they can put you on their speaker phone if they have one. We heard some people say it was annoying to have to hold a phone to their ear for an hour, so you can do them a favor if you gently remind people that they may have that speaker option on their phone. You can also turn it into a family event, where you can encourage parents to bring their kids in to listen in the same room.

16) Mention the fact that you're one of the first people in Congress to use this new technology, and that you've been leading others in Congress to adopt it as well. Constituents like to hear evidence that you're able to persuade other Member of Congress to do something; it shows you have some clout to get things done, even if not issue-specific.

17) Cite how previous TTHs have influenced your thinking on specific issues—even if they didn't necessarily change your overall position. We heard from some TTH participants that being on the call sounded “more like the Congressman was giving out information as opposed to answering questions.” You want to convey that you are truly listening, and that you are empowering them merely by asking questions of you on a call.

At the end of the call

18) Remind callers they can push a particular key on their phone and leave a message at the end of the TTH, and a staff member will call back soon with an answer (and actually follow up). When offering this, it would be very useful to have your TTH provider dial an automated, *immediate* reply call to each person leaving a message, indicating that the constituent's message was indeed received, that you look forward to reviewing it, and that a live person from your office will be calling back within 48 or 72 hours. We heard concerns that people had left messages and were uncertain for days whether they were received. ALSO: In a couple of instances people left messages and never received a follow-up from staff. This left a very bad impression in the minds of constituents.

19) Announce that you will be uploading the audio of the tele-town hall onto your website, so those who missed part of it can download it. (You can easily convert it into a podcast that's downloadable.)

Other recommendations:

20) Aim to reach each household once per quarter. More often is too often; less often is not enough. At the end of each call, announce in what month you will be calling them again.

21) Limit each TTH to one hour, maximum.

22) When you dial phone numbers where no one is home, and leave a message indicating you were inviting them to a TTH, give them a way to learn about what you're doing in Congress. The best way is to send them to your website and let them download the audio of the TTH or possibly a transcript. Merely leaving a message saying that the constituent missed the TTH is not viewed as having any intrinsic value.

23) Do *not* invite guest experts to join you on the call. Constituents want to hear you and you only.

24) Do not indicate how many people are on the call. They assume there are far fewer than there actually, and you don't want to dilute the intensity of “touch” that comes with TTHs.

25) Take these calls seriously, and study how to get them right. At least half the people we spoke with who have participated in TTHs said the main way they determine whether they're satisfied with your job performance is based upon the TTHs.