Connecting to Congress

What is Connecting to Congress ?

Connecting to Congress (C2C) is an established research collaboration that is investigating new ways to use technology for constituent engagement. C2C partners with Members of Congress to identify evidence-based best practices for outreach and engagement using new tools and technologies. C2C launched in 2006 at an R1 research university, and our team has hosted over 25 individual online town halls with 17 bipartisan and bicameral Members of Congress.

C2C is now hosting a new round of online town halls with members of Congress, evaluating how newly available technologies can be used to create opportunities for authentic and substantive interaction between members and their constituents. C2C is seeking offices to participate in the current set of sessions. **There is no cost to offices to participate**.

The C2C team is a nonpartisan, research-driven set of scholars and civic-minded organizations. Team members have published widely about technology and constituent engagement in Congress. Detailed information about the C2C team is available upon request.

What is a "deliberative" online town hall?

All C2C online town halls follow 5 key principles, which make them "deliberative," ie. they facilitate constructive, two-way communication:
1. Special outreach to get a representative cross-section of constituents
2. Single issue to ensure focus, depth, and substance
3. Non-partisan background information on the issue in advance
4. Neutral third-party moderator
5. Candid, real-time participation by Member

The C2C team independently organizes and neutrally moderates each deliberative online town hall. Members participate in the sessions live via streaming audio and video. Constituents can easily join the sessions using desktop or laptop computers, tablets or mobile devices, and high-speed internet is not required for constituents. By following these principles, online events with C2C are able to bring members together in meaningful and informed discussion with a broad cross-section of their constituents. This discussion results in not only improved relationship, but actionable insights

What results can be expected from C2C events?

On average, Members of Congress who participated in our earlier C2C forums saw several positive outcomes, including:

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

Our current round of C2C events is already showing similar results. *Full reports that provide detailed data and summarize the results of recent C2C sessions are available upon request.*

How does a C2C event work?

Once a Member decides to participate, the C2C team coordinates with staff on key high-level decisions, but then handles all execution independently, to reduce the demands on staff.

- First, C2C staff coordinate with the office to schedule their online town hall and select the topic that the session will focus on.
- Once the event is on the calendar, the C2C team recruits a representative sample of constituents to attend the session using a variety of recruitment strategies (discussed with and approved by participating offices).
- C2C provides participating constituents with non-partisan briefing materials on the topic in advance of the online town hall. These background materials are written to a 9th grade level to be accessible for all participants. Participating offices review and approve these materials.
- On the day of the session, a C2C team member assists Member and staff with setup and technology. (Typically the only technology required is a laptop or mobile phone.)
- The one-hour session itself is streamed live to constituents who will be submitting their questions and comments to C2C team members. The C2C moderator will ask the Member questions in the order in which they are received, and questions are only screened out of the queue if they are off-topic, repetitive, vulgar, abusive or inciting. *In more than 1500 comments received in the C2C sessions to date, the team has* **never** *had to screen out a question for being vulgar, abusive or inciting.*
- Following the session, the C2C team provides the office with an in-depth report that analyzes the town hall session itself as well as surveys of participating constituents taken before and after the session. These reports will present analysis of the Member's approval, trust, and engagement gains as well as constituents' preferences and priorities about the issue at hand.

The C2C team is researching the effectiveness of these forums for congressional offices. To ensure that C2C events and reports are meeting the needs of Members of Congress, C2C asks staff in participating offices to complete brief interviews and surveys with our research team during their involvement with C2C.

The C2C team facilitates these online town hall sessions, at no cost to offices. C2C recruits constituents to join the Representative for the event, coordinates all technology and provides logistical support to the office during the event. *As a result, participation requires minimal effort and time from the office.*

Interested in trying a C2C online town hall?
Want to learn more?

C2C is committed to conducting these sessions with a bicameral and bipartisan group of legislators, and C2C is actively seeking out new partners for the current round of online town halls. To discuss this opportunity or request any additional information, please contact Director of Outreach Amy Lee at **amy@connectingtocongress.org.**