

Online Town Halls for the COVID-19 Crisis

Proven Methods to Connect, Learn, and Lead

April 3, 3:15 PM ET

*All audio is only available via computers.
Audio restrictions are due to security restrictions using
webinar software on congressional equipment.*

Challenges to Engaging Constituents

- Current systems favors mass email campaigns
- Difficult to engage diverse constituency
- Constituents often misinformed on issues
- Using higher-level technology is expensive

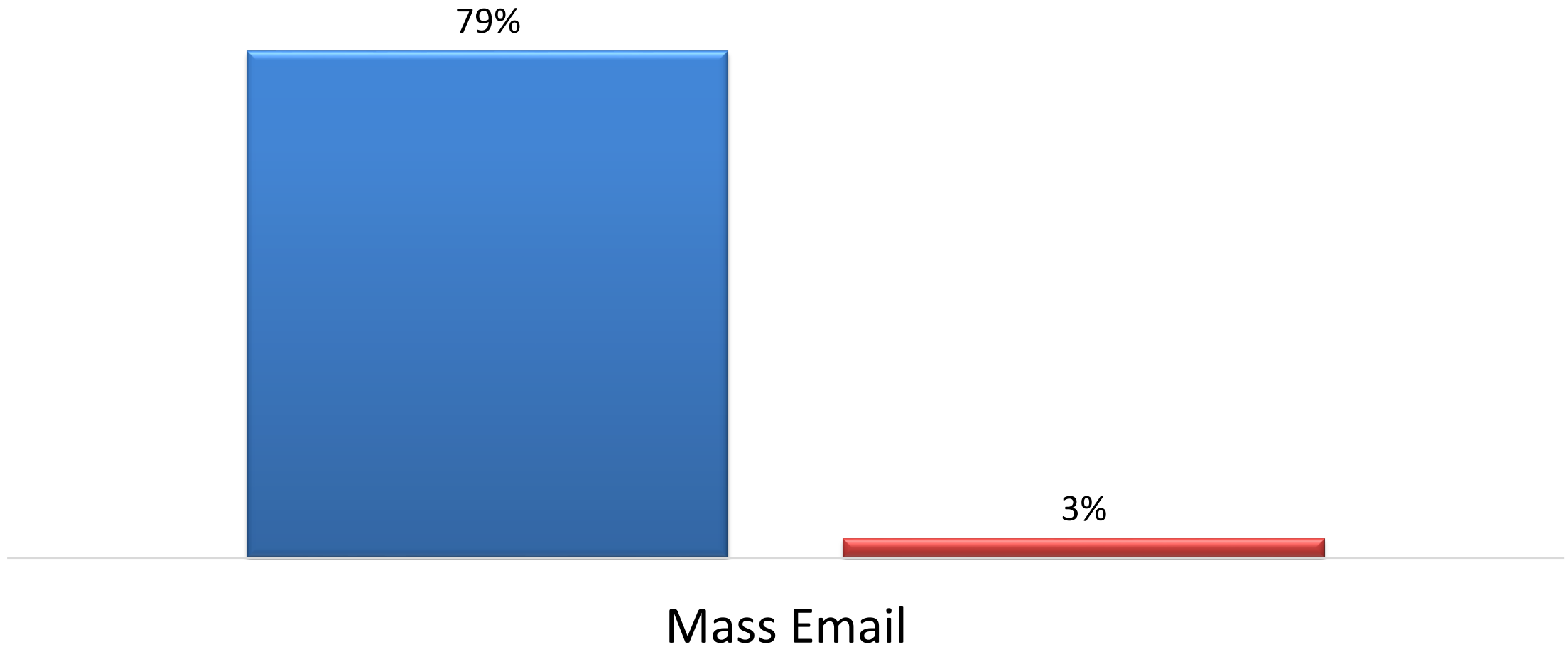
Is there really a way to enhance engagement in a meaningful way which will benefit both constituents and Members of Congress?

A Disconnect

Grassroots Organizers: “Which of these are your PRIMARY grassroots tactics/strategies that you currently employ?”

Congress: “If your Member/Senator has not already arrived at a firm decision on an issue, how much influence might the following advocacy strategies directed to the Washington office have on his/her decision?”

- "Primary" Grassroots Strategy
- "A Lot of Influence" on Congress



Members have adequate time and resources to understand, consider and deliberate policy and legislation



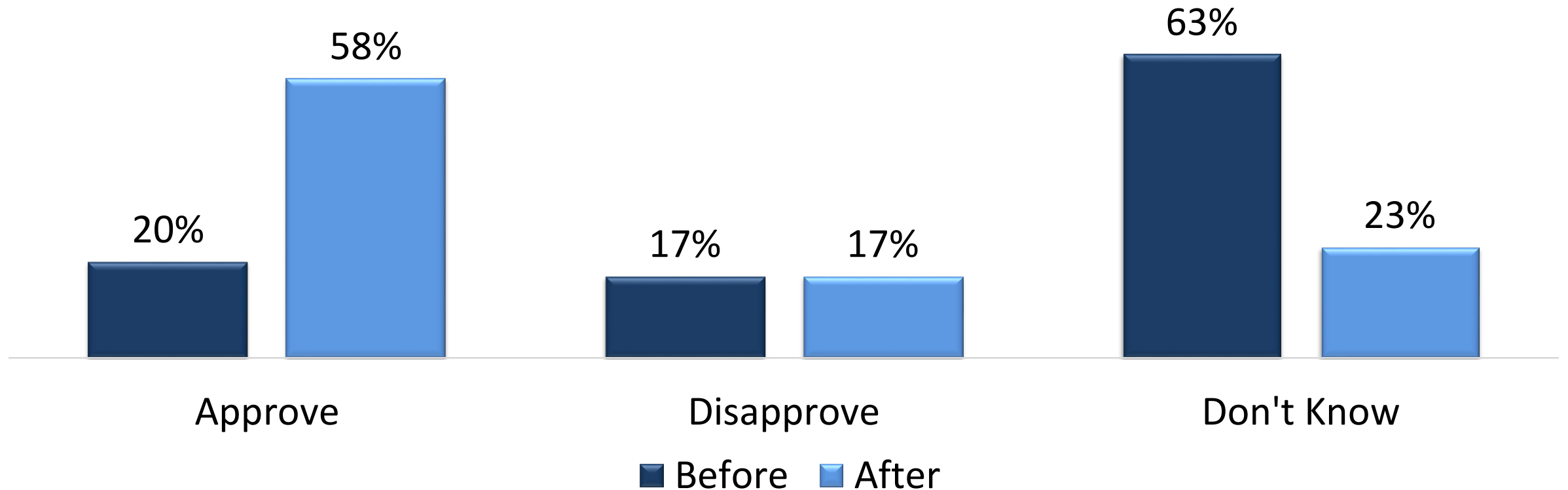
■ Very Important ■ Very Satisfied

Online Town Hall Meeting Survey Question

Do you approve or disapprove of the way your Member of Congress is handling the issue of immigration?

Online Town Hall Meeting Survey Question

Handling Immigration



Agenda

- Methodology of Novel Online Town Hall Meetings
- Results of Novel Online Town Hall Meetings
- Coronavirus Online Town Hall Meeting Pilot Program

Credible Communication Is Essential

“The World Health Organization (WHO) believes it is now time to acknowledge that communication expertise has become as essential to outbreak control as epidemiological training and laboratory analysis.”

- WHO Outbreak Communications Guidelines

“For someone to move to action, (they) must see a personal benefit to taking the action and believe the action can be accomplished.”

“Seeing or hearing that others are taking actions...can be a powerful social influence.”

— CDC Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication manual

Methodology of Novel Online Town Hall Meetings

Online Town Hall Meeting Research

- Project Team
 - Congressional Management Foundation
 - Ohio State University
 - University of California
 - Harvard University
- 13 Members of Congress
- 2 Topics (Immigration, Torture and Rendition)
- Online Webinar Format

What's Different

- Special outreach to get a representative group of constituents
- Single issue to ensure focus, depth, and substance
- Non-partisan background information on the issue in advance
- Neutral third-party moderator

Results of Novel Online Town Hall Meetings

Special Outreach

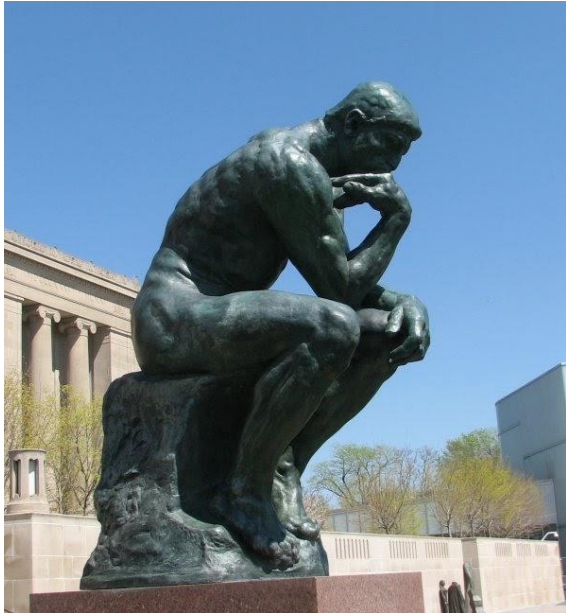
The citizens who participated were more representative of the country *than the electorate*.



Participants weren't just "the usual suspects"
In fact, the sessions particularly attracted citizens who become disenchanted and disengaged.

Participants were less aggressive and more persuadable.

Single Issue



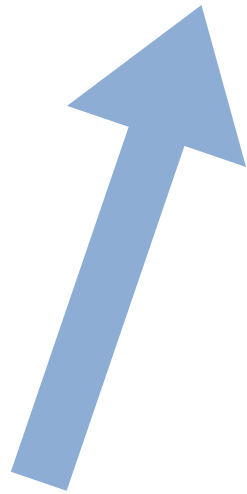
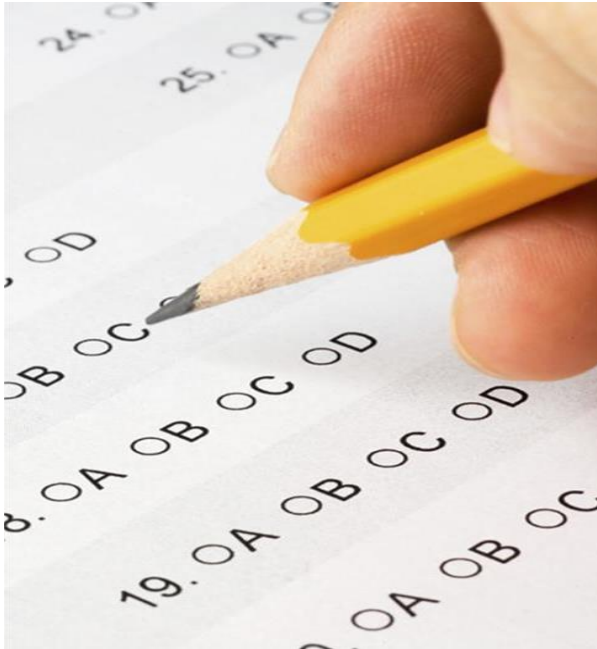
The conversations were high-quality.

The conversations were not simplistic or just talking-points

Members Were Persuasive.

Participants moved 14 points toward their Member.

Non-Partisan Information



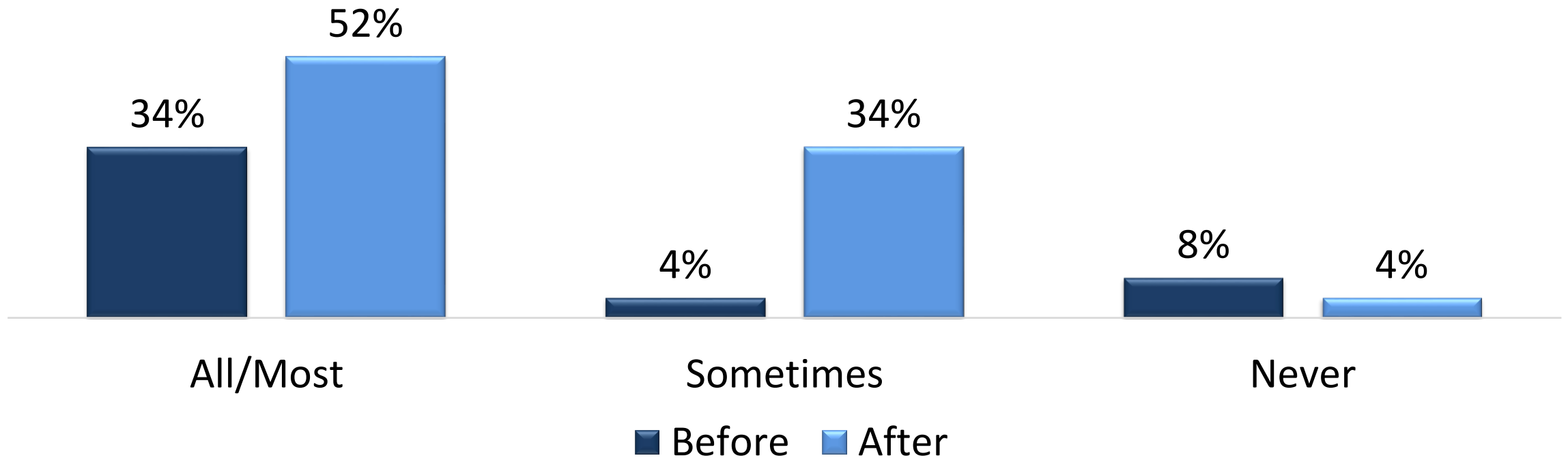
Constituent Learned.

Correct answers on a policy “quiz”
Increased by 50%

Results

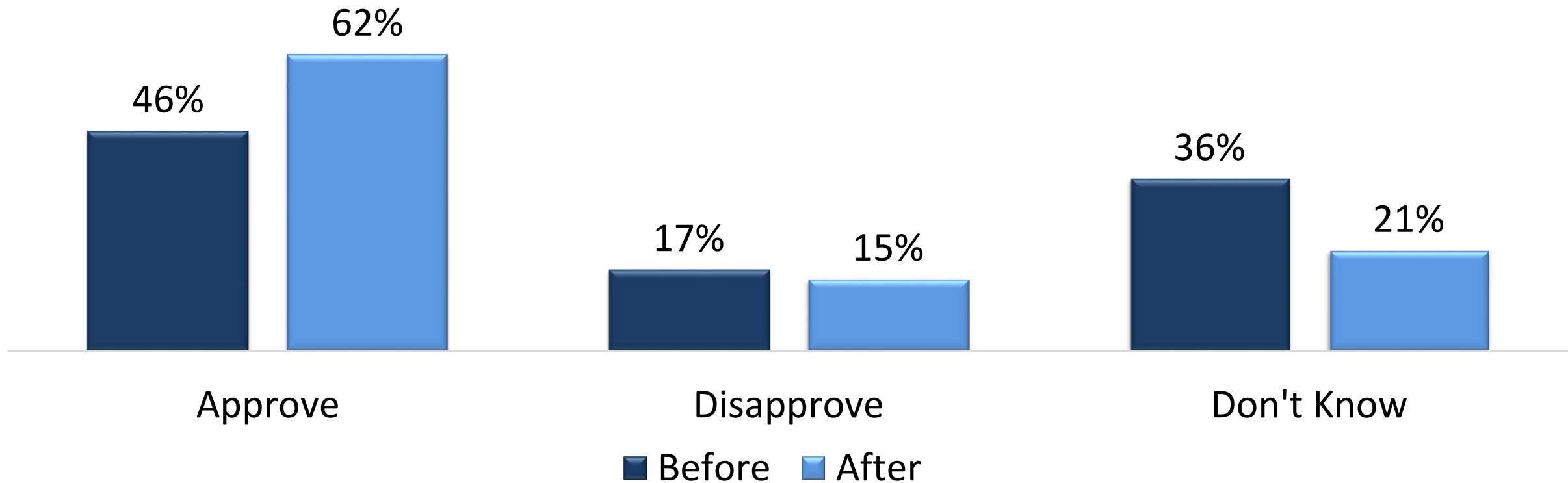
Neutral Third-Party Moderator

Trust Member to do the Right Thing



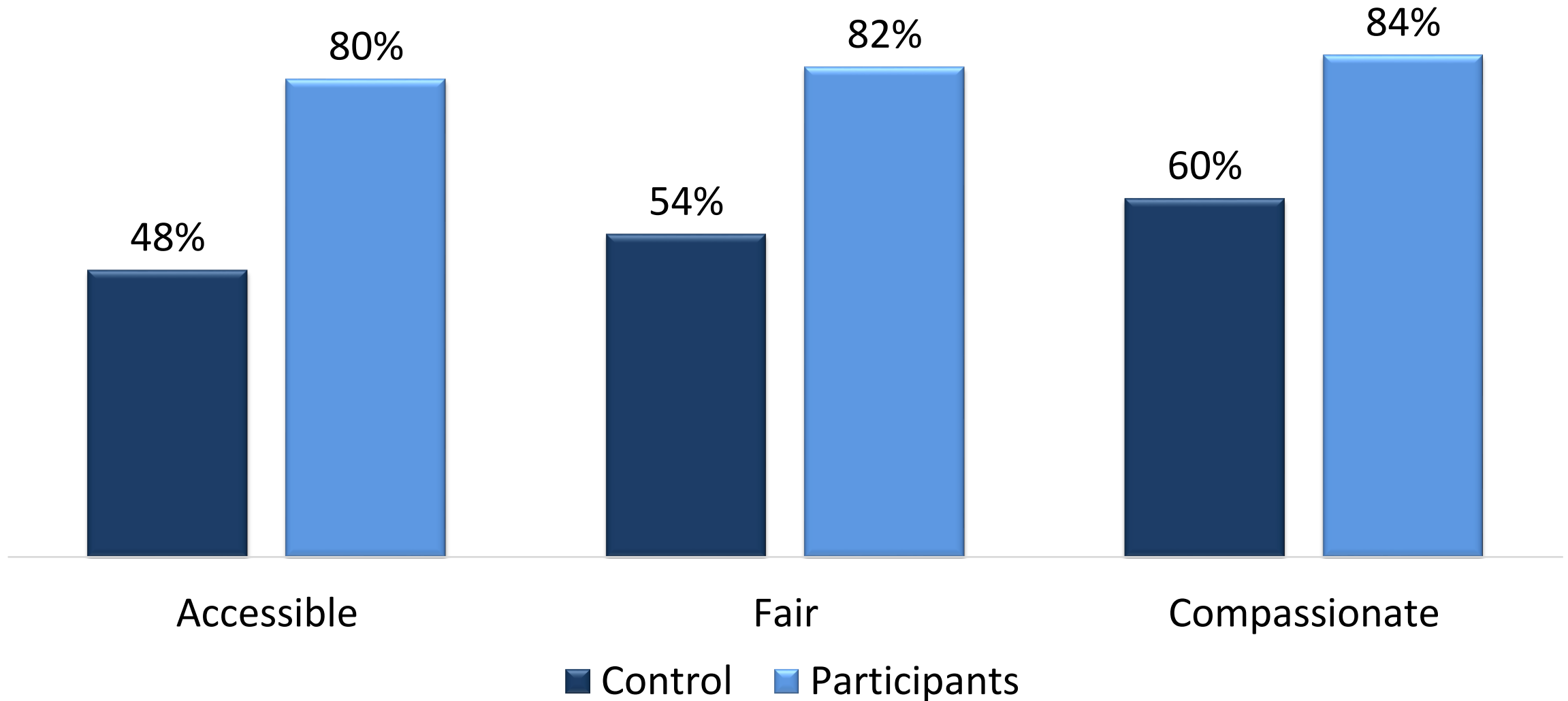
Do you approve of the way that your Member of Congress is handling his/her job as a Congressperson?

Do you approve of the way that your Member of Congress is handling his/her job as a Congressperson?



How would you describe the Member of Congress?

How would you describe the Member of Congress?



Constituents Were Very Enthusiastic



- 95% found the forums “very valuable for our democracy”
- 97% would like to participate in future sessions
- They told friends and family

What Constituents Said . . .

- *“This was a great forum. It actually made me feel like I had a voice in government.”*
- *“I believe we are experiencing the one way our elected representatives can hear our voices and do what we want.”*
- *“I don’t agree with everything he said, but it was good to get feedback from someone like him who is supposed to be working for us.”*
- *“That he is having this dialogue online is a great thing, and I would like to see much more of this, with all senators and congressmen.”*

Coronavirus Online Town Hall Meeting Pilot Program

Coronavirus Online Town Hall Meeting Pilot Program

Premises

- America is experiencing a public health crisis unlike anything the nation has faced in at least 100 years.
- Congress is struggling with how to play a constructive role in a partisan environment during a presidential election year.
- As with containing any pandemic, personal behavior must be changed on a large scale. In essence, this is a communications challenge as much as a health challenge.

Coronavirus Online Town Hall Meeting Pilot Program

- Bipartisan Presenters
 - More credible to constituents
 - Easier to recruit constituents who don't identify with your Member's party
- LOCAL Health Expert
- Online and Telephone Opportunities for Constituents to Participate
- Collect Survey Results on Impact of Program
- If Successful...

REPEATED THROUGHOUT THE NATION
WITH DOZENS OF MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Coronavirus Online Town Hall Meeting Pilot Program

Participation Includes

- Host and facilitate deliberative online town halls engaging a broad cross-section of constituents on emerging policy issues
- Produce reports that summarize trust and approval of members, and constituents' informed opinions, priorities, and motivations on policy
- Help offices integrate this information and new technology into office workflows

Lessons for Congressional Offices

- Strongly consider including elected officials from other party in forums
- Distribute independent data in advance
- Honestly survey constituents to assess performance and adapt

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