

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT · RESEARCH SYNTHESIS

MASS-SCALE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Telephone town halls: the onramp to inclusion in modern democracy.

A synthesis of a decade of research, polling, and case studies — comparing telephone, online, and in-person engagement, and showing why phone-based forums have become the most scalable, accessible channel for officials who need to hear from everyone.

**68%**

of Canadians say elected officials don't care what they think

SFU Wosk Centre · n=3,524 · 2019

86%

say governments should consult them before major decisions

EKOS Research

37%

actually feel they have a real say

Environics Institute

INTRODUCTION

Why mass-scale engagement is suddenly the only kind that counts.

Mass-scale stakeholder engagement refers to outreach methods that involve large numbers of citizens in public dialogue or consultations. Traditional in-person town halls and public meetings have long been used, but they often suffer from low and unrepresentative turnout. In the last decade, new channels — especially telephone town halls — have emerged as popular tools to engage thousands of people at once via a live, phone-based forum.

This report synthesizes recent research (2015–2025) on the effectiveness of telephone town halls, compares them to webinars, video forums, and in-person meetings, and summarizes case studies, public opinion data, and best practices. Telephone town halls are essentially large conference calls — often outbound-dialed to constituents — that enable officials to present information, take questions with moderated Q&A, and even poll participants in real time. The goal is to combine the reach of broadcast media with the interactivity of a town hall, in a more convenient and scalable format.

Below, we examine key performance metrics of telephone town halls, compare engagement channels, highlight real-world case studies (with an emphasis on Canadian contexts), present findings from public opinion polls on engagement preferences, and list proven operational best practices and technology considerations for running telephone town halls at scale.

20%

OF CANADIANS HAVE PARTICIPATED IN A MUNICIPAL CONSULTATION

62%

SAY THEY "DON'T HEAR ABOUT" PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS IN TIME

68%

BELIEVE ELECTED OFFICIALS DON'T CARE WHAT PEOPLE LIKE THEM THINK

EFFECTIVENESS · METRICS & ROI

Reaching audiences traditional formats can't.

Participation and reach

Telephone town halls have demonstrated the ability to engage far larger audiences than traditional face-to-face meetings. Instead of the few dozen attendees typical at a local in-person meeting, telephone town halls can accommodate thousands of participants in a single event. A 2023 province-wide telephone town hall in Alberta with the Premier and finance minister drew about 20,000 people on the line — far beyond what any physical town hall could hold. Organizers achieve this by dialing out to tens of thousands of phone numbers; one recent pair of events contacted 200,000 residents via text and voicemail invites and then auto-called those who didn't opt out.

Typical connection rates (answering the phone and staying on) range around 20–30% of numbers dialed, meaning an outbound list of 10,000 could yield a few thousand listeners. This "push" outreach overcomes a major barrier of traditional consultations — lack of awareness — since 62% of Canadians say they often "don't hear about" public consultations in time. By proactively calling residents, telephone town halls invite participation rather than relying on citizens to seek out meetings.

“Virtual forums like telephone town halls enable officials to reach larger proportions of their constituency than they could with many other formats, including in-person town halls.”

— polisci.osu.edu, summarizing a field study with U.S. Members of Congress

Demographic reach and inclusion

Telephone town halls may engage a somewhat different audience than online webinars. They tend to be especially useful for reaching older or less tech-connected residents who still reliably use telephones. In Canada, older citizens are slightly more likely to have ever engaged in any municipal consultation, and telephone-based outreach can capitalize on that. Unlike internet-based forums, phone events include those without computers or who are uncomfortable with Zoom-style technology. Notably, telephone town halls have been used to reach diverse language groups by offering events in multiple languages.

By removing barriers of location and offering direct dial-in, telephone town halls broaden the demographic spectrum of voices. Younger people often ignore unsolicited calls, but the increasing use of advance SMS invitations helps notify cell phone users and improve youth participation. Overall, the telephone format lowers many barriers — no travel, no internet, no public-speaking anxiety — which is especially important because 40% of Canadians report "I don't like participating in group discussions" as a reason for not engaging in person. Participants can listen anonymously and only chime in if they choose.

Depth and quality of dialogue

A common critique is that telephone town halls might sacrifice depth of discussion for scale. Questions from the public are often unscripted "top-of-the-head thoughts on a wide variety of local and national topics," since participants are contacted without much advance preparation. In a typical one-hour call, only about a dozen questions can be addressed by the official due to time constraints, even if thousands are listening.

However, recent experiments show that format design can substantially improve quality. A field study involving U.S. Members of Congress compared a standard free-for-all telephone town hall to a reformatted one focusing on a single policy issue with background materials provided to constituents in advance. Participants in the focused, single-topic event reported a more substantive and satisfactory experience and came away with improved attitudes toward the platform. Researchers concluded that telephone town halls can improve representation and constituent communication when designed deliberately.

Participant satisfaction and trust outcomes

There is evidence that well-run telephone town halls can boost citizens' trust in officials and satisfaction with the engagement process. In a controlled experiment, constituents who participated in a single-issue virtual town hall with their Member of Congress became significantly more likely to view their representative as accessible and fair, and trust in the Member to do the right thing rose from 38% before to 52% after just a single one-hour session.

Remarkably, on a specific policy issue (immigration), approval of the representative's handling jumped 38 percentage points among participants after the call, from 20% to 58% approval. A separate large-sample survey found that regular telephone town hall participants rate their politicians much more favorably than those who have never joined a call. People who had experienced telephone town halls preferred this format to traditional in-person town halls by nearly a 2:1 margin, whereas those who never tried one tended to prefer the familiar in-person format.

This suggests that exposure is key — once citizens try the telephone format, many appreciate it and become more engaged. From the official's perspective, these calls can humanize the representative to thousands at once. Hearing constituents' concerns in their own voices and responding in real-time creates a sense of connection that, when handled well, increases perceived accessibility of government and satisfaction with the opportunity to be heard.

Cost, staffing, and return on investment

Running a single telephone town hall is generally cheaper than organizing a multi-city roadshow of in-person meetings. There are no venue rentals, travel expenses, or large security and logistics teams needed. Service providers charge for the telephony and platform usage — often based on the number of calls or connected minutes — and provide producers and moderators to manage the event.

The B.C. government paid about \$37,800 per telephone town hall event in 2023 to a vendor that handled the dialing and platform. For that price, each event reached roughly 30,000 people, equating to just \$1.26 per participant. By contrast, an in-person session that might gather 100 people could easily cost a few thousand dollars in facility, equipment, and staff time — easily \$20–\$50 per participant, not counting the opportunity cost of those who cannot attend. Organizations that need to consult widely can host one tele-town hall reaching 5,000 people rather than 50 separate community meetings of 100 each — a huge saving in senior staff time alone.

Beyond direct cost, telephone town halls generate rich data — records of who participated, how they responded to poll questions, what questions were asked — which can be leveraged for follow-ups and informed decision-making. As one Member of Congress quipped about a 38-point approval jump after a tele-town hall: "How much would you charge a client for a 38-point bump in approval?"

CHANNEL COMPARISON

Telephone town halls vs. webinar vs. in-person.

Different channels solve for different goals. The table below contrasts telephone town halls against large-scale webinars and traditional in-person town halls across the metrics that matter most when planning a public engagement.

Metric / Factor	Telephone Town Hall	Webinar / Video Forum	In-Person Town Hall
Typical scale (participants)	Thousands (often 5,000–20,000+ on a single call).	Hundreds to a thousand (~1,000 platform limit without streaming). Can stream to more on YouTube/Facebook.	Dozens, maybe a few hundred in a local venue. Rarely more due to physical limits.
Outreach mode	Push: organizers dial out to invite participants directly. Little effort needed from public.	Pull: people must find link and log in. Requires prior awareness, internet, and often registration.	Pull: people must hear about the meeting and travel to a fixed time and place. High effort.
Geographic reach	Entire jurisdiction at once. No travel needed; works wherever phone service exists. Good for rural inclusion.	Wide (anywhere with internet), but excludes those without broadband. Urban skew likely.	Localized — draws those near the meeting location. Distant or mobility-limited residents often can't attend.
Demographic inclusion	Reaches older, less tech-savvy groups. Multi-language sessions feasible. SMS supplement for mobile users.	Reaches more tech-comfortable, often younger or professional demographics. Digital divide can exclude seniors.	Skews older, whiter, higher-income, homeowners. Often excludes working parents and those with logistical barriers.
Interactivity & format	Audio Q&A, moderated. Press keys to ask questions or vote in polls. No visuals — feels like a big conference call.	Audio + video. Slides and visuals possible. Q&A via chat or audio. Risk of "Zoom fatigue" and tech issues.	Face-to-face dialogue. Richest communication but few people get the mic; can become contentious.
Moderation & control	High control: host can mute lines and choose which caller to put through. Questions screened by staff.	High control: host can mute and filter chat. Risk of disruptive behavior if open mic enabled.	Low control: open floor mics let strong personalities dominate. Hard to cut off hecklers without confrontation.
Participation duration	~1 hour. Drop-in/out friendly. Long monologues lose listeners — go to Q&A within 2 minutes.	1–2 hours. Attendees may multitask or drop off if not engaged. Tech issues amplify drop-off.	1–2 hours. Most who came stay through. Quiet attendees may simply not speak rather than leave.
Cost factors	Vendor + dialing fees scale with audience size, but per-participant cost drops sharply at scale (~\$1.26 in BC).	Platform license is cheap. Major cost is promotion to drive sign-ups, plus staff time for Q&A.	Venue, A/V, security, staff overtime add up per event. Reaching many people requires many meetings.

Metric / Factor	Telephone Town Hall	Webinar / Video Forum	In-Person Town Hall
Data & feedback	Logs participant counts, listen time, poll results, questions asked — quantitative + qualitative data ready for follow-up.	Attendee count, region, in-platform polls, chat logs. Less personal info unless registration is detailed.	Sign-in sheets and headcounts only. Feedback is mostly qualitative comments. Hard to aggregate or quantify.
Notable strengths	Scalability and accessibility — phone-only barrier. Rapid setup. Great for emergencies. Civil moderated environment.	Visual communication; can show data and slides. Easy recording and sharing. Lower technology cost.	Direct human connection. Officials read the room's mood. Place-specific discussions and networking.
Notable limitations	No visuals — complex info needs verbal explanation. Hearing-impaired need TTY/captioning. Younger users may ignore calls.	Digital divide. Capacity limits without external streaming. Tech failures possible. Hard to verify attention.	Low attendance. Bias toward vocal activists. Excludes time-constrained groups. Can devolve into "gripe sessions."

When phone wins, when video wins, when the room wins.

In comparing telephone town halls to other mass engagement channels, several themes emerge across reach, barriers, quality of input, participant experience, and cost.

Broader reach vs. depth of engagement

Telephone town halls and large webinars enable breadth of participation at the expense of some depth. They let thousands listen and interact in limited ways, whereas in-person meetings engage far fewer people but those who attend can typically interact more — face-to-face dialogue, follow-up questions. For gauging overall public sentiment or broadcasting information widely, telephone town halls excel. For collaborative problem-solving or detailed deliberation, smaller in-person or video-based workshops may be needed. But the sheer scale advantage of telephone town halls is undeniable for officials who need a pulse of a large constituency. Reaching 10,000+ people in one evening via phone is simply not feasible by any other interactive method.

Barriers to participation

Traditional in-person meetings pose numerous barriers — location, time, transportation, childcare — which disproportionately affect certain groups. Public meetings often occur "without day care options, and sometimes in locations not favorable to those who rely on transit," inherently excluding many people. An Ipsos survey found inconvenient timing was a common barrier (39% said meetings "run at times that are inconvenient"), and lack of notification was an even bigger one (62% didn't hear about the meeting in time). Telephone town halls eliminate travel and can be held after work hours, and they actively call residents so awareness becomes less of an issue.

Quality of input and discussion

In-person meetings allow face-to-face dialogue, often yielding rich, nuanced input from those who participate — but the input may be skewed to a vocal subset. Some studies suggest traditional meetings often fail to generate thoughtful discussion anyway, sometimes devolving into "gripe sessions" dominated by "a few well-organized groups rather than the full community." A well-facilitated telephone town hall with a broad audience and structured format may actually produce more balanced input than an open-mic meeting where only the loudest get airtime. Polling thousands on a call gives a rough but useful quantification of opinions across a large sample, strengthening the input's representativeness.

Participant experience and satisfaction

Each format offers a different experience. Some citizens enjoy the direct contact of a live meeting; others feel intimidated speaking in a public forum (38% of Canadians say they are "shy about expressing my opinions in a public forum"). Telephone town halls let those people participate without fear of public ridicule, asking questions one-on-one with a screener and never facing a crowd. This anonymity can empower more honest questions. Surveys indicate telephone town halls often win people over: 82% of participants described their legislator as "fair" afterwards, versus 54% in a control group that did not participate.

Cost and resource trade-offs

Telephone town halls involve specialized vendors and telephony costs that grow with audience size, whereas webinars use standard internet infrastructure at low fixed cost. For organizations with tight budgets and a smaller target audience, a webinar or social-media live-stream may suffice. But if equitable reach into offline populations is the goal, telephone investment is warranted. A single telephone town hall can replace a dozen in-person sessions, saving staff travel time and money. Toronto's 2019 single-use plastics consultation reached 40,000+ people through telephone town halls, online surveys, and outreach — a scale previous consultations rarely achieved.

In summary: telephone town halls vs. webinars vs. in-person is not a zero-sum choice — they complement each other. But if the aim is mass, real-time public engagement that lowers participation hurdles, telephone town halls are often the superior tool. They particularly shine in emergency communications, budget consultations, or any case where officials need to hear from as many people as possible across geography and demographics.

CASE STUDIES

Five engagements that show the format at work.

These engagements span emergency response, public health policy, and demographic outreach. All leverage the telephone town hall format. Common threads: high participation numbers, the ability to target or include specific populations (by region or language), and the use of input gathered to inform decisions.

Fort McMurray Wildfire Emergency · May 2016

Coordinating disaster response and recovery

During the 2016 wildfire evacuation in Fort McMurray, Alberta's Emergency Management Agency engaged Converso to run 17 back-to-back tele-town halls (each 90 minutes) featuring officials from Wildfire Services, RCMP, Red Cross, and insurance representatives. Across these calls, 161,233 participants tuned in (averaging 9,484 per session), submitting 8,044 questions — of which 522 were answered live — and spent 31 minutes on average listening and interacting with officials.

Impact: Real-time answers reduced misinformation about evacuation routes, shelter locations, and insurance claims. 78% of attendees rated the calls "very helpful," and many non-participants reported learning critical updates via word-of-mouth from call listeners.

Provincial COVID-19 Consultation · April 2020

Informing early pandemic policy

A provincial health authority convened Converso to host five dedicated telephone town halls to gather frontline insights for COVID-19 response planning. These 60- to 75-minute sessions collectively attracted 4,720 participants, who submitted 1,150 questions (150 answered live) on topics ranging from health measures to economic relief. Integrated keypad polls captured real-time sentiment on mask mandates, business closures, and mental-health supports — with 65% favoring phased reopening and 72% expressing anxiety over job security.

Impact: Question themes and poll results were distilled into an official "What We Heard" report that directly influenced adjustments to testing site locations and the design of small-business grant programs.

National COVID-19 Engagement · March 2021

Sustaining public dialogue one year in

One year into the pandemic, federal and provincial agencies ran ten large-scale tele-town halls via Converso, combining dial-outs with simultaneous webcasts. These 75-minute events reached 22,350 unique participants, generating 3,200 poll responses on vaccine rollout priorities and 500+ live questions, achieving 45 minutes of average attendance per session.

Impact: Insights on preferred vaccination sites and the need for mobile clinics in underserved areas were incorporated into rollout plans. Participant feedback also highlighted communications gaps, prompting a multi-lingual public-information push in subsequent weeks.

Fort McMurray Flood Emergency · April 2020

Real-time community support

Following severe spring flooding in Fort McMurray, local utilities and emergency services partnered with Converso for five tele-town halls (60–100 minutes each). 29,445 residents joined, with 983 questions submitted (58 answered live) and 30 minutes average connection time.

Impact: Call-in data informed prioritized road-clearing and pump-station repairs. Attendee satisfaction was high: 84% reported feeling "more informed" about safety zones and utility restoration timelines.

Coconino County & City of Flagstaff · Census 2020

Boosting enumeration in remote and multilingual communities

Coconino County and the City of Flagstaff partnered with Converso to hold a Virtual & Telephone Town Hall aimed at increasing 2020 Census response rates among rural and tribal populations. Over a 60-minute session, Converso dialed 12,514 landlines, of which 2,322 connected, and 800+ residents participated live via phone and Facebook Live. Questions were screened in English, Spanish, and Navajo, ensuring culturally appropriate dialogue.

Impact: Post-event surveys showed a 15-percentage-point increase in self-reported intent to complete the Census among attendees, compared to control areas with no outreach.

U.S. Congress · 2007–Present

Nationwide constituency outreach

In the U.S., telephone town halls have become a staple for members of Congress to communicate with constituents. By the 2010s, some lawmakers were holding them almost weekly, dialing tens of thousands of constituents each time. The Congressional Management Foundation's 2019 field experiment with four Members of Congress found constituents who participated came away with significantly improved opinions of their representative — feeling the Member was listening and caring about their views.

Impact: Many U.S. legislators now view telephone town halls as "one of the most significant technological advances" for constituent communication in decades, and some events dial 100,000+ people across a district.

A 20% participation ceiling - and the appetite to break it.

Robust public opinion data on specific formats is somewhat limited, but several polls and surveys in the past 5–10 years shed light on Canadians' attitudes toward public engagement channels and their willingness to participate in various ways.

Low participation in the status quo

A 2017 Ipsos poll (1,000 Canadians) found that only 20% of Canadians have ever participated in a municipal public consultation, and just 12% had done so in the last two years. Four in five Canadians had never engaged with their city's consultation processes. The survey noted a slight skew: older Canadians and those with higher education were marginally more likely to have participated, but engagement never exceeded 25% even among those groups.

Preferred methods - passive vs. active

Ipsos found that the most common ways to participate were via surveys - 73% online, 46% by telephone, 34% by mail. Only 45% of recent participants attended an in-person open house or town hall. People gravitate toward methods requiring the least effort. Nearly half of engaged citizens took a telephone survey — suggesting comfort with phone interaction. To increase participation, offering convenient formats is key. Telephone town halls fit that bill: easy to join, lower hurdle than in-person.

Barriers and frustrations

The Ipsos poll's top barriers: not hearing about it (62%), feeling that "a few strong voices always dominate" (55%), belief that "my contributions won't impact the decision" (44%), disliking group discussions (40%), inconvenient timing (39%). Telephone town halls directly address several of these: they push notifications via calls so people do hear about them, they use moderation to prevent domination, and they allow quiet participants to just listen.

“Telephone town halls provide a great return on investment for attendees because they actually get their questions answered, as opposed to being drowned out by the loudest voice in the room — all

parts of our district can participate from the comfort of their own home.”

— Congressman Mike Kelly’s office, in industry research

The 2023–2024 trust deficit

More recent data deepens the picture. The OECD’s 2023 Trust Survey found that just under half of Canadian respondents expressed trust in the federal government, with trust in local government slightly higher at 54%. Critically, the survey identified a "sense of political agency" — the feeling that one has a say in decisions — as the single leading driver of trust in government, outpacing partisanship, income, education, age, and gender.

Separately, SFU’s Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue (surveying 3,524 Canadians) found that 68% of Canadians believe elected officials "don’t care what people like them think," and that 44% want more opportunities to participate in democracy. These findings frame telephone town halls not merely as a logistical convenience, but as a potential antidote to democratic disengagement — provided organizers follow through on the feedback received.

Ten practices that separate a great call from a so-so one.

Successfully executing a telephone town hall at scale requires careful planning, the right technology platform, and adherence to best practices learned over the past decade. The following ten practices, distilled from research, case studies, and operator experience, consistently distinguish the best engagements.

- 1. Advance outreach and invitations.** Don't rely on the cold-call alone. Publicize the event in advance and personally invite target participants — a pre-recorded call or text the day before, a message in the official's voice. People are more likely to participate when they've been invited, and the personal touch lifts attendance materially.
- 2. Choose optimal timing.** Schedule for convenient times. Evening weekdays (7 p.m.) work well for the general public. Avoid major holidays and event conflicts. Consider time zones for wide regions. Keep call length to 60–90 minutes; participation drops sharply if the intro segment runs long.
- 3. Plan content and focus the topic.** Single-issue town halls led to greater constituent learning and trust gains in CMF's experiments. Provide an agenda at the start. Prepare poll questions aligned with the topic. Send a neutral backgrounder ahead of time when possible.
- 4. Choose the right platform and vendor.** Look for: capacity to dial tens of thousands of numbers per hour; web-based interface for live management; inbound dial-in option; SMS invites; live streaming integration; reliable polling. Confirm full-service support — producers, screeners, technical operators.
- 5. Rehearse and prepare speakers.** Treat it like a live broadcast. Allow at least 15 minutes pre-call for the principal to relax, focus, and review remarks. Anticipate top 10 questions. Decide hand-off cues for multi-speaker events. Keep opening remarks under 2 minutes — go to Q&A fast.
- 6. Moderate effectively and screen questions.** Live Q&A is the heart of a town hall. Screen for relevance and tone — not to shield the official, but to filter duplicates and offensive content. Take one question per person to involve more voices. Mix in pre-collected questions from email or social to broaden representation.
- 7. Keep participants engaged throughout.** Use periodic polls and remind listeners every 10–15 minutes how to ask a question. Vary the format — invite a guest expert, change voices.

Acknowledge participation aloud ("we have over 2,000 people on the line tonight"). Treat participants as active contributors, not a passive audience.

8. **Deliver inclusively and accessibly.** Plan accommodations: TTY numbers, sign-language interpreters for any webcast, multilingual sessions. Provide a callback/email for unanswered questions. Speak slowly and clearly; avoid jargon since there are no visual cues.
9. **Capture and analyze the data.** Modern platforms log dial counts, connection rates, peak listeners, poll results, question submissions, and listen times. After every event, gather these metrics and review the question list — including questions you couldn't get to. This is the input that improves the next engagement.
10. **Close the loop with public follow-up.** Share a summary publicly: who joined, top concerns, recording or transcript link, and a FAQ addressing top questions. This transparency demonstrates that input was valued and counters the perception that consultations are "just for show." Re-contact participants who provided contact info with answers to questions that didn't get airtime.

"Telephone town hall meetings are as much about listening as communicating."

— Congressional Management Foundation

The technology and format have proven flexible and powerful, but the human element of good facilitation and responsiveness is what truly makes these events successful. Prioritizing listening, and making it as easy as possible for thousands to speak and be heard, will ensure a positive experience for stakeholders and meaningful input for leaders.

Key sources, 2015–2025.

A summary of the peer-reviewed studies, industry reports, and municipal sources that underpin this synthesis. Each entry includes its significance and provenance.

Abernathy, Claire et al. (2019)

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

Legislative Studies Quarterly. Randomized field experiment with U.S. Members of Congress. Found that telephone town hall participation caused significant improvements in constituents' evaluations of their representative — increased perceptions of listening, higher trust and approval. Tested a single-issue format with prior briefings and found further improvements. Provides causal evidence of positive impact on citizen attitudes.

Fitch, Bradford / Congressional Management Foundation (2015)

Enhance Trust in Congress Through Improved Telephone Town Halls.

Summarizes research including a PNAS experiment (Neblo, Esterling, Lazer et al.). Trust in the Member rose from 38% to 52% after a single one-hour moderated, single-topic town hall. Approval on the discussed issue jumped from 20% to 58%. Format improvements credited: one-topic focus, neutral facilitation, factual materials sent ahead.

Congressional Institute (2007–08)

Tele-Town Hall Survey — Key Findings.

First major study of telephone town halls; surveyed 867 voters across districts. Found constituents who participated had higher approval of their Member and preferred telephone town halls to traditional town halls by nearly 2:1, while non-participants preferred traditional 3:1. Documents a "dose effect" — more calls, more favorable views. Provides 25 best practices.

Ipsos Public Affairs / Municipal World (2017)

Public engagement conundrum: Canadians' views on municipal public consultations.

Canadian polling on local engagement. Only 20% of Canadians ever participated; strong preference for low-effort methods like surveys (online or telephone) over meetings. Top barriers: lack of awareness (62%), domination by strong voices (55%), inconvenient logistics. Provides Canadian-specific data validating the case for telephone town halls.

Einstein, Palmer & Glick (2019)

Who Participates in Local Government? Evidence from Meeting Minutes.

Perspectives on Politics. Analyzed thousands of public meeting records in U.S. cities. Participants were overwhelmingly older, whiter, more affluent, male, and homeowners. Attending traditional meetings did not increase community attachment — those who attended felt less attached than those who didn't. Data-driven justification for innovative engagement tools.

Granicus (2020)

How Public Meetings Can Sustain Public Participation in the 21st Century.

Industry white paper compiling research on the limitations of in-person meetings. Cites the Knight Foundation's "Reinventing American Democracy" study showing only 1 in 10 Americans attended a public meeting in a year. Recommends new formats and technologies, including telephone and online town halls, to broaden participation.

Nabatchi & Leighninger (2015)

Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy.

Comprehensive academic look at evolving public engagement. Discusses how traditional public meetings are often insufficient for true participation. Situates telephone town halls within a broader movement to modernize participation, lending theoretical support to blending broad outreach with deliberation.

Salt Lake City, UT (2020)

Best Practices for Engagement in the Time of COVID.

Municipal guide produced during the pandemic. Lists telephone town halls as a best practice for reaching those without internet and maintaining engagement when in-person is impossible. Recommends simultaneous interpretation lines and combined telephone + online streaming for maximum audience.

OECD (2023, published 2024)

Building Trust in a Complex Policy Environment — Trust Survey.

Covers 30 countries including Canada. ~Half of Canadian respondents expressed trust in federal government; 54% in local government. Identifies "sense of political agency" as the leading driver of trust, outpacing partisanship, income, and demographics — directly relevant to telephone town halls as a participation channel.

SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue (2023–2024)

Strengthening Canadian Democracy research.

Survey of 3,524 Canadians. 68% believe elected officials don't care what people like them think; 44% want more opportunities to participate in democracy. Frames telephone town halls as a potential antidote to democratic disengagement.

Municipal surveys (various, 2019–2022)

City of Ottawa, City of Calgary, Government of Canada Consulting with Canadians.

Ottawa's 2019 engagement survey found residents wanted more online and phone options. Calgary's 2021 engagement report noted telephone town halls held during COVID had quadruple the typical attendance of in-person meetings. Together these confirm telephone town halls have entered the mainstream of Canadian engagement practice.

About Converso

Converso runs live, two-way conversations between Canada's institutions and the people they serve - telephone town halls, virtual meetings, voting, and advocacy campaigns. White-glove managed service. Canadian-owned and operated. We give you a voice.

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