

A photograph of a person wearing a white helmet and a red backpack, standing next to a yellow bicycle on a city sidewalk. In the background, there are trees, parked cars, and a building with large glass windows reflecting the street scene.

# How Is Public Engagement Changing? *Moving forward into the 'next normal'*



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CEO  
*PublicInput.com*



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*PublicInput.com*





Every single thing we thought  
we knew about **engaging  
with residents is suddenly  
upside down and sideways.**

- *Communications Director,  
New Jersey*

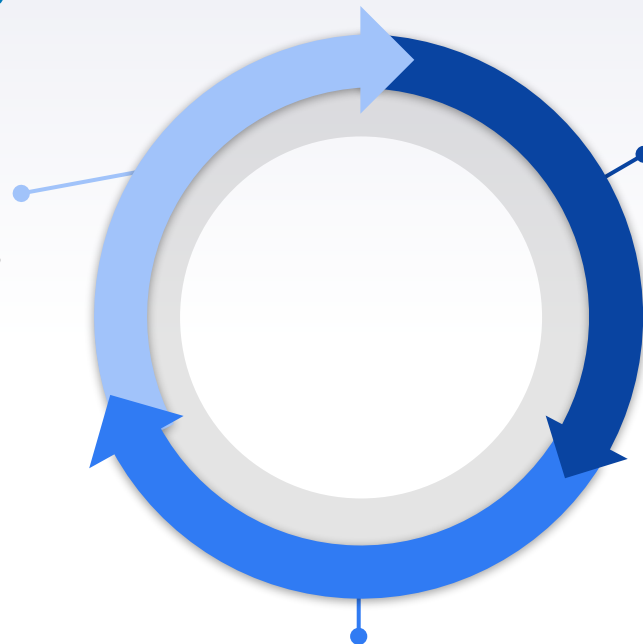


# We embarked on a nationwide listening effort



# The Stressor Cycle

Multiple different tactics and disconnected tools **don't deliver consistent, quality engagement**, thus restarting the cycle.



**External stressors**, like COVID-19 and police reform, **amplify the need to engage**.

**Governments can't use traditional, in-person methods to connect.** So they search for ways to go digital.



# Survey Overview - Major Themes

1. **Delayed or paused** projects
2. Ensuring **equity and due process** with virtual meetings
3. The effectiveness of **common outreach tactics**
4. The future of **public meetings and virtual tactics**
5. Moving forward into the '**next normal**'





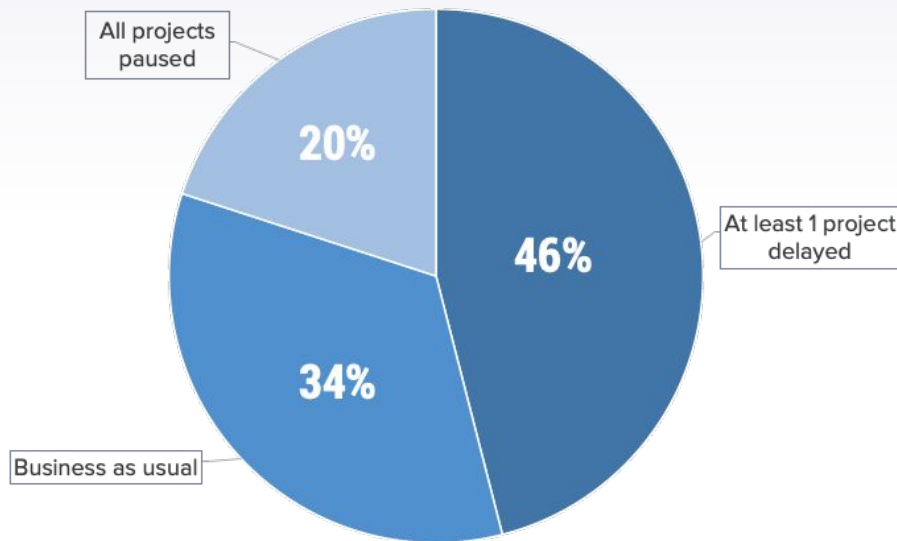


## Survey Question:

*Have you been able to engage the public on your projects since COVID-19?*



## 2 out of 3 local governments have paused or delayed projects



### Reasons why:

1. Reliance on in-person public meetings
2. Adopting new technology can create new virtual hurdles
3. Uncertainty about compliance with meeting and record laws

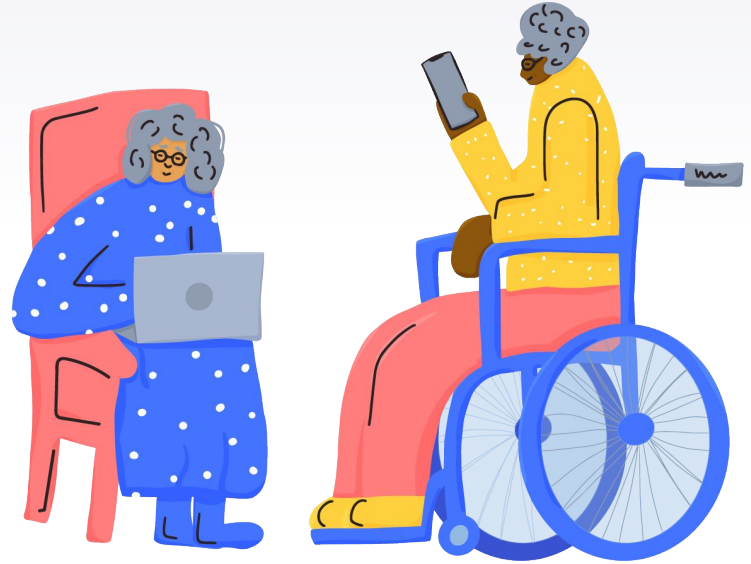


Government organizations have been forced to choose between **security** and **accessibility**.



Security

OR



Accessibility





“

**Utilize technology to replicate and improve administrative processes...and**  
embrace a cultural change in managing public engagement (meetings) and public information (records) that meet public expectations.

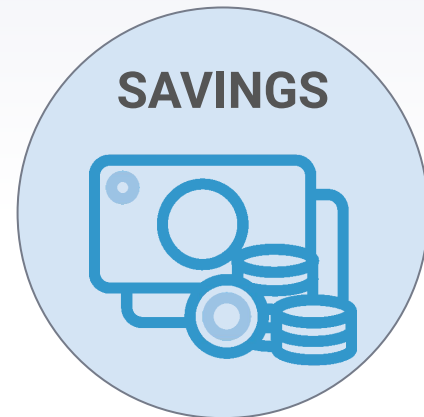


**Daniel Bevarly**

Executive Director,  
National Freedom of  
Information Coalition



## Virtual public engagement benefits:



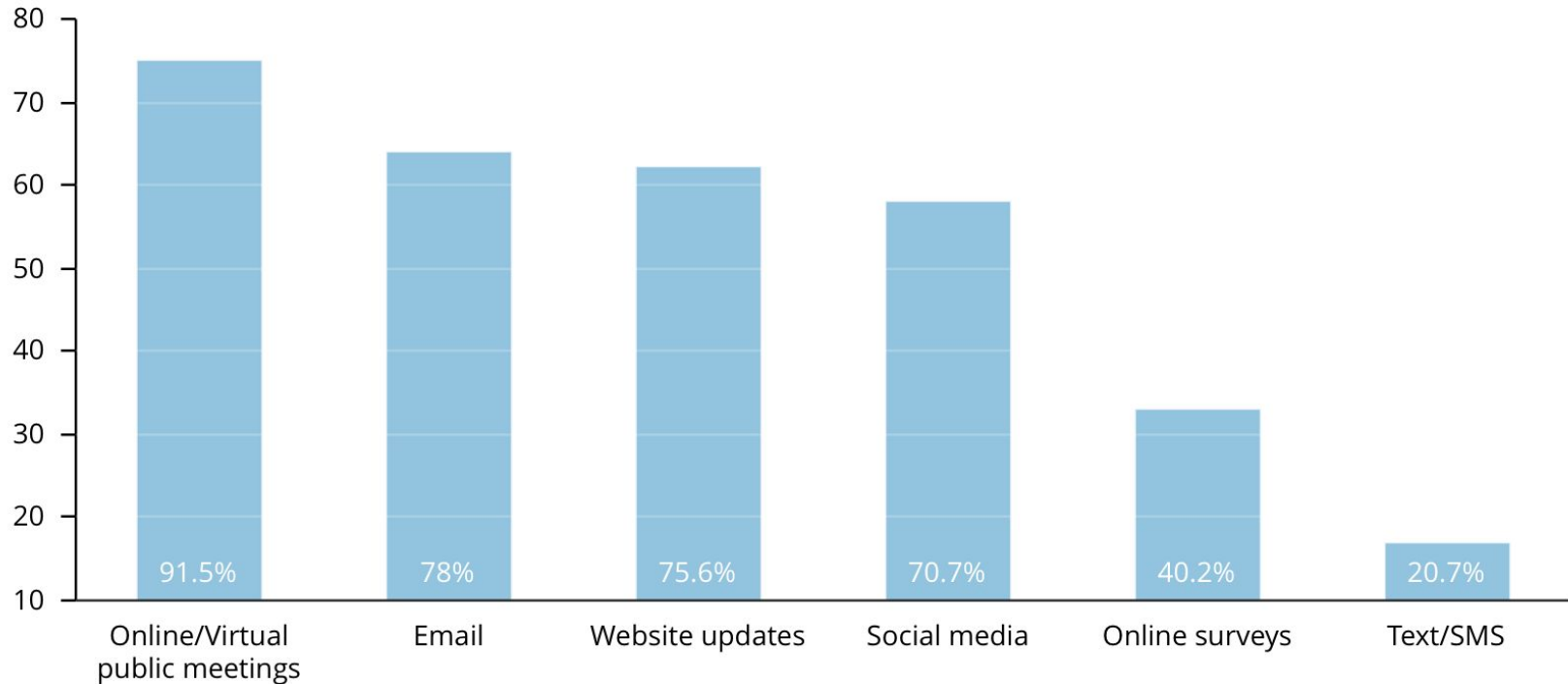


## Survey Question:

*What methods have you used to reach and engage the public?*

# Local government was challenged with “going completely virtual”

During this time, what methods have you been using to reach and engage the public?





## **Survey Question:**

*What concerns do you have for the future of public engagement?*



# Exploring the highest ranked concerns

Rank the following from the **most to least concerned** in regards to public engagement moving forward:

Position	Concern	Avg Rank
1.	Ensuring representative, equitable engagement	2.67
2.	Maintaining/building relationships with residents	2.98
3.	Complying with state & federal mandates (e.g. Sunshine Laws)	3.24
4.	Keeping my projects on track	3.37
5.	Capturing feedback and keeping it organized	3.48
6.	Funding for current and future projects	4.28
7.	Being the primary source of public health information	6.32

While more people selected 'keeping projects on track', **the highest ranking concern overall was 'equitable engagement'.**







We have a very rural county and a lot of residents do not have reliable access to the Internet, **which creates a challenge to ensure that everyone has access to public hearings [and] a chance to comment.**

- *Anonymous*



“

## Equity and digital divide are the major concerns.

*With so much moving online, how are we reaching those who don't have internet access, or who...are not following local government communications?*

- *Communications Director, Michigan*



# ► Accessibility and Equity go hand-in-hand.

Because of a lack of broadband internet access, many residents are excluded from the public process, leading to **less equitable public engagement results.**

Did you know?



**95%**

of Americans own a cell phone



**20%**

of Americans rely on  
mobile phone data for Internet

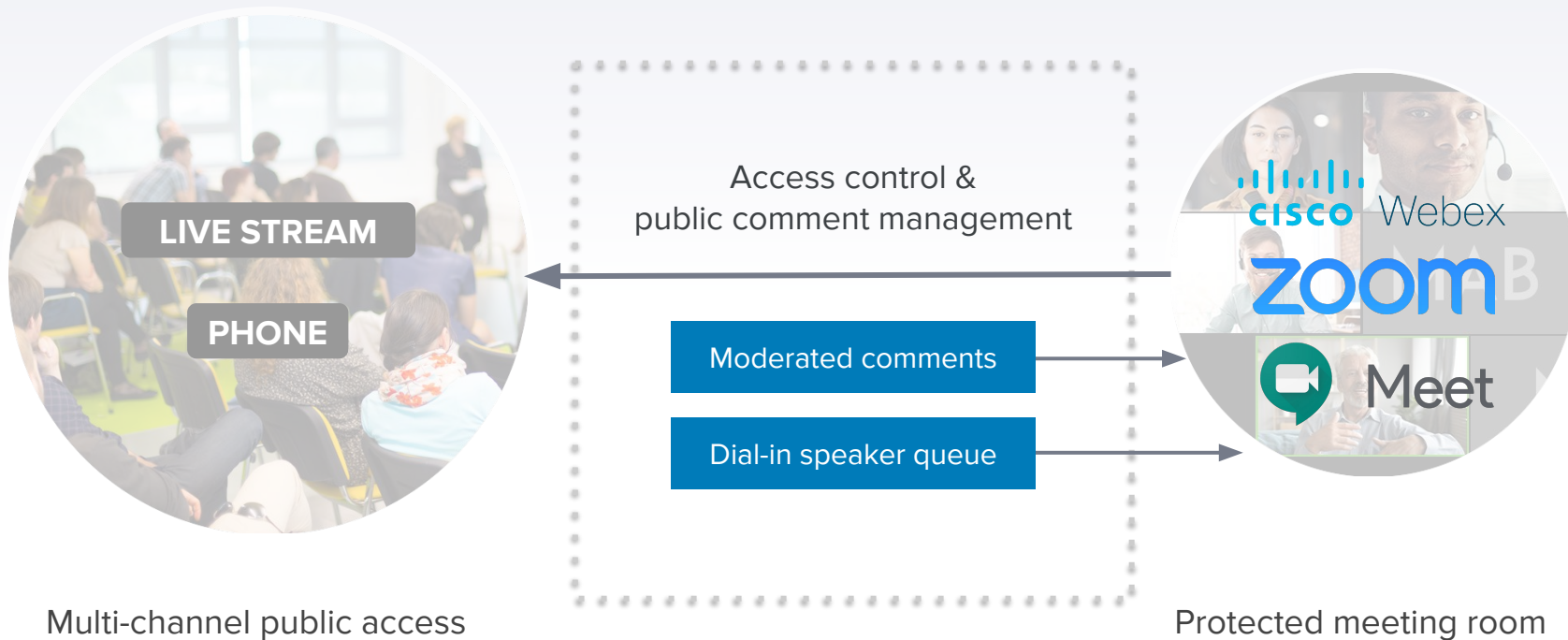


**90%**

of text messages are read within the  
first 3 minutes

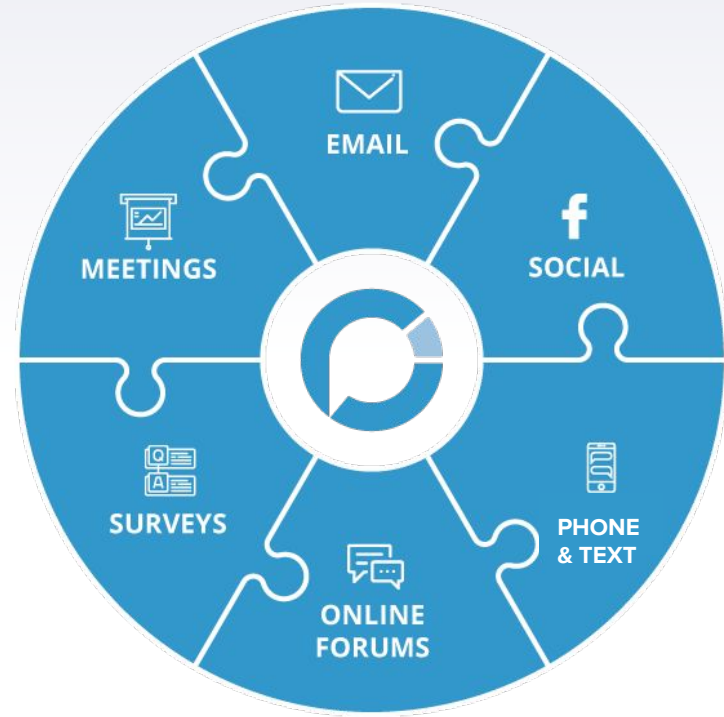


# “Separate rooms” to maintain access + security



# Mixed-Mode Engagement

1. Optimizes data collection and reduces survey error [1]
2. Increase participation among rural residents [2]
3. Better engage populations over the age of 50 [3]







## Survey Question:

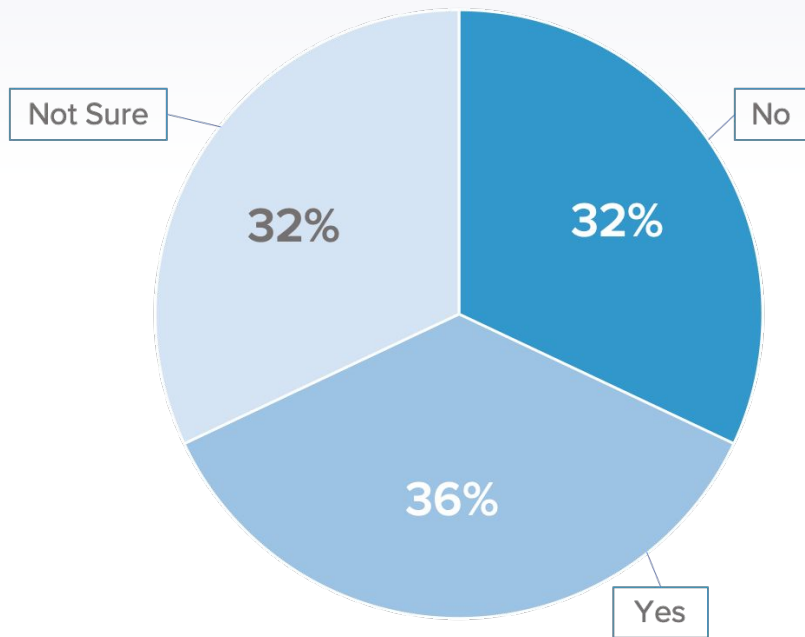
*Are you considering any in-person meetings (i.e. town halls) in the next two months?*





# There is uncertainty about the future of participation in face-to-face meetings

Are you considering any in-person meetings (i.e. townhalls) in the next two months?



## Reasons why:

1. Fear of virus
2. Prefer the convenience of engaging virtually
3. "This could last a while"



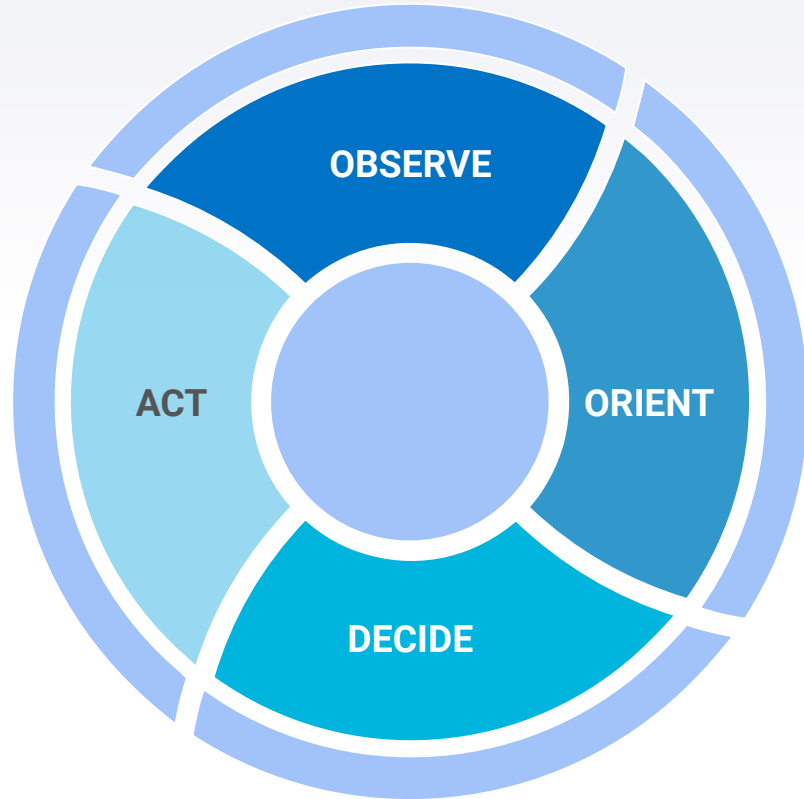
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Until we know when the public is allowed to enter the Town Hall and we know how many people will be allowed, **we will continue to hold virtual meetings.**

- *Town Planner, Massachusetts*



# OODA Loop: Adapting to Changing Environments



“

**Some bells can't be unrung.** Out of necessity, government organizations are adopting more virtual tactics and are getting the opportunity to strategize with them.

Now that these options are available to community members, **they're going to expect them in the future** — to meet them where they are. There is likely no going back.



**Kirsten Wyatt**

Executive Director,  
Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL)



## Revised Schedule

- June 23: Adoption of Interim Budget through July 31.
- July 28: Adoption of Annual Budget with only 3 month of funding allocated to departments and programs.
- July-September: City Manager Community Engagement and Input.
- September 22: Public Comment & Amendment of Annual Budget to allocate funds to departments for fiscal year.



## CASE EXAMPLE:

## City of Asheville, NC



Hi, my name is Montana And I live in Asheville North Carolina. And I have an open public

☐ comment. I support the removal of the Vance Memorial and Robert E. Lee monuments to be replaced by Monument honor the many black Ash Williams of built this city. Additionally, I think city council needs to adjust the budget. So it begins divesting from the police and investing in Black communities 50% of the total budget should be invested in long-term safety strategies including supporting Black start up some businesses eliminating the racial opportunity Gap and Asheville City schools and funding and all civilian oversight committee with the power cord the APD and individual officers accountable. Thank you want an Agora.

6/23/2020 4:31 PM



## In-Person

Average attendance:

39

Sample: 217 meetings with attendance data, pre-COVID

## Virtual

Average attendance:

125

↑240%

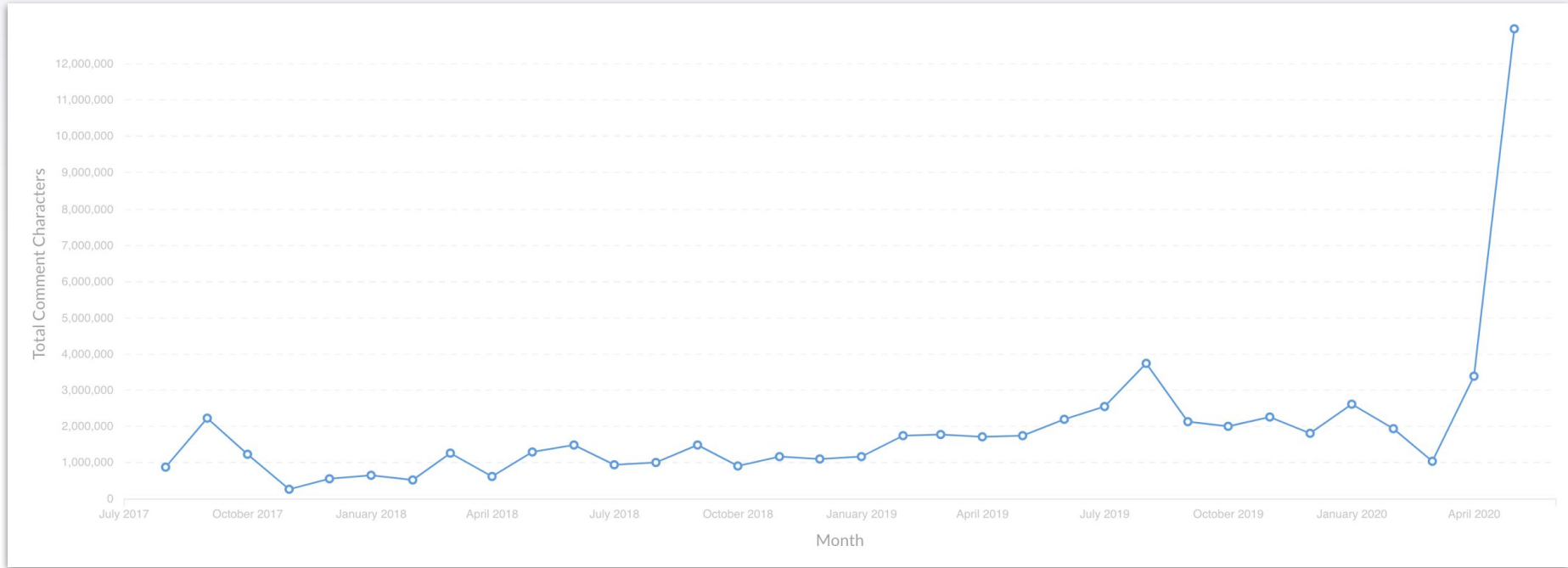
Sample: 95 Virtual Public Meetings April-May 2020



# What does the “next normal” look like?

- **In-person will return**, albeit as a supplement to virtual
- A focus on **mixed-mode outreach** to achieve greater equity
- More **quantified, process-oriented** engagement
- Digital **relationship management**

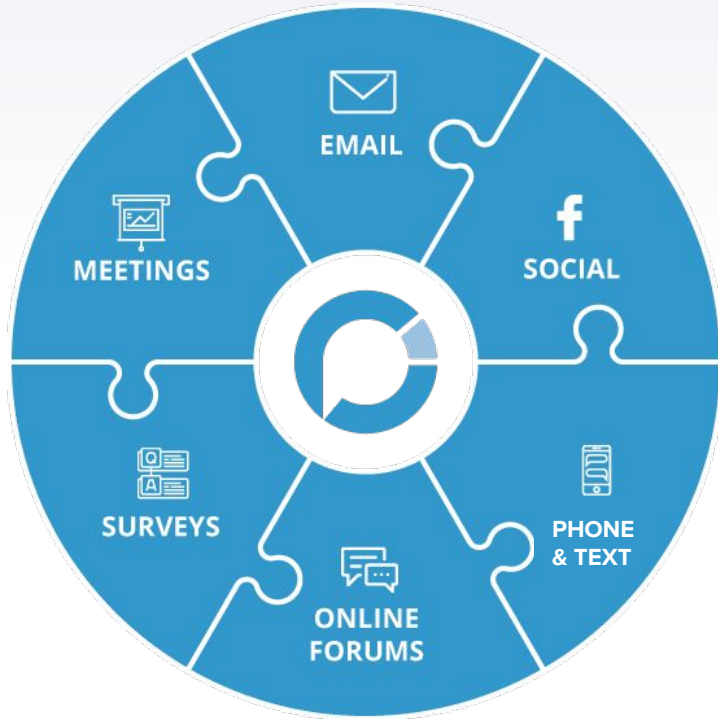
# An unprecedented desire to be heard



*Comment volume by month*



# Moving forward, together



BOOK AN INTRO CALL

