

Roll Call

Opinion

Representing Is Hard. Online Town Halls Can Help

We invited citizens to connect with their lawmakers. Our findings were both startling and heartening

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OPINION — At the end of the movie “The Candidate,” Robert Redford’s character wins a Senate seat, and then immediately pulls aside his most trusted adviser and asks, “What do we now?” After the divisive election of 2018, we imagine that many newly elected members of Congress are pondering the same question.

Our suggestion, based on over a decade of research: Go beyond business as usual. Make special efforts to connect with your constituents, not just interest groups and your most vocal supporters. These interactions can’t simply be infomercials, but must offer genuine, two-way engagement.

Doing so will be well worth it. James Madison emphasized the importance of members of Congress truly understanding a broad swath of their constituents. Of course, that’s harder today than it was in the early Republic, when members could be elected with less than 1,000 votes. Districts are much larger now, and policy is more complex.

Nowadays members rarely consult with representative groups of their constituents while they are actually governing. Unsurprisingly, then, the public feels disconnected from their lawmakers and the political system more generally. Members of Congress, in turn, find it difficult to keep their fingers on the pulse of their districts, and systematically misperceive the opinions of their constituents.

All of that endangers the health of our democracy. The heat of a campaign is not conducive to substantive deliberation; nor does it usually provide mandates for specific policies. Our research highlights the potentially transformative role of digital technology in strengthening the connection between elected politicians and citizens in the space between elections, outside of the campaign cycle.

The increased scale of districts is a challenge. But it is a challenge that can be met. Today’s powerful digital communication tools, many of them already in use in the business and civic sectors, can bring people together across almost any divide. The technology is there; all that’s needed now is a design for using it well, and incentives to do so.

We have focused our research on exactly those things. Our bet was that creating a space for members of Congress to talk with a broad cross section of their constituents in a structured environment could make a big difference. To test this idea, we conducted a series of deliberative online town hall experiments. Members connected digitally with a representative group of constituents for an hour of substantive deliberation about a hot issue of the day. The events were moderated with a very light hand by a neutral party.

We randomly assigned some constituents to participate in the town hall, and some not to participate (a “randomized control trial” — the gold standard in social science research) to determine the difference that quality consultation makes.

Our findings were both startling and heartening.

The events were informative, high-quality exchanges between citizens and their representatives. There was disagreement, but conflicts were civil, substantive and respectful. The citizens who showed up were diverse — indeed, they were more representative of eligible voters than actual voters are.

Strikingly, those most frustrated by politics were the most likely to accept the invitation. Participants increased their knowledge about the issue, and loved the event — 95 percent said it was “very valuable for democracy,” and 97 percent said they would be interested in doing another.

Participating members were also enthusiastic. And no wonder: They saw bumps of ten or more points on ratings of their trustworthiness, empathy, competence — and most remarkably, in the votes they received from participating constituents four months later.

Combine these two findings — that such engagement efforts reach an unusually broad swath of citizens, and that it gives participants a much more positive view of both their representative and the political process — and you can see the potential of this method. And because these digital town halls leverage technology to make logistics easier, it’s actually feasible that members of Congress could do them routinely. Our analysis suggests doing one such town hall a week would ultimately reach a sizable fraction of constituents over a few years.

So: What do we do now? Newly elected members of Congress should use these types of strategies to stay connected to the people they represent and engage them in thoughtful discourse. We have shown that with modest efforts it can happen — and move us closer to the Founders’ vision of a deliberative republic.

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