Directly Representative Democracy:
Constituent Consultation for a 21st Century Republic

Michael A. Neblo   Ohio State University
Kevin M. Esterling University of California – Riverside
David M. J. Lazer   Northeastern University & Harvard University

July, 2014

Directly Representative Democracy is based on a series of ground breaking experiments which studied an alternative conception of democracy in a realistic, yet scientifically rigorous, way. Members of Congress agreed to be randomly assigned to samples of their constituents, participating in online town-hall meetings about some of the most important and controversial issues of the day – immigration policy and detainee policy. The results from these experiments reveal a model of how our democracy could work, where Members consult with and inform constituents in substantive discussions, and where otherwise marginalized citizens participate and are empowered. This research has yielded a series of papers in top journals, including the winner of the Heinz Eulau award for best paper in the American Political Science Review. In this book we lay out a broader vision of what this research reveals about what our democracy could look like in the 21st century. Our objective is to synthesize the study findings into a seamless argument about the potential for a technology-enabled "directly representative democracy."

1. OVERVIEW

We demonstrate that legislators and citizens alike have a preference for a more directly representative democracy and that the alternative we describe can make democracy more constructive. We are able to glimpse this alternative form of democracy by literally creating it in an online laboratory – not with sophomore undergrads and confederates in a fabricated setting but with sitting members of the U.S. Congress engaging their own constituents in real time. New interactive technology enables directly representative democracy. Using both a randomized experimental design as well as qualitative methods we demonstrate that both citizens and legislators have a preference for this alternative discursive form of democracy, and that they find the alternative both constructive and beneficial.

Key contributions: Directly Representative Democracy goes beyond a merely theoretical and aspirational statement of its vision of democracy by focusing on the results of the first ever large scale field experiments involving Members of Congress and their constituents in direct consultation. We begin by recovering the history of directly representative practices, and their eventual decline as the size and complexity of districts and policy exploded. We then analyze the ways that new information and communication technologies have opened up the possibility of mitigating the problem of scale, creating an opening for a revival of directly representative practices. The core of the book then presents a detailed analysis of a series of e-townhall meetings pairing Members of Congress and with a representative sample of their constituents discussing two important public policy issues: immigration reform and detainee policy. By drawing contrasts with an experimental control group that did not participate in the e-townhall, we show that a very broad array of citizens are highly motivated to participate in such directly representative opportunities and that they learn about politics, policy, and their elected representatives in doing so. The participating Members of Congress also were highly enthusiastic about such events, where they were effective in persuading their constituents on both matters of substantive policy and their merits as a representative. We also show that such consultative opportunities can scale up effectively, and have multiplier effects via the participants' political discussion networks. We conclude with an assessment of the viability of directly representative reform in the context of the wider political system.

Background: Citizens, scholars, and political professionals alike are worried about the state of representative democracy in the United States. Approval of Congress has sunk to an all-time low

(9%; Gallup, 2013). Even the Members themselves express frustration and disgust (often in their retirement speeches). Consider the titles of just a few recent books: *It's Even Worse than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (Mann and Ornstein, 2012), *Broken: American Political Dysfunction and What to Do About It* (Garfinkle, 2013), *Republic Lost: How Money Corrupts Congress – and a Plan to Stop It* (Lessig, 2011), *Off-Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy* (Hacker and Pierson, 2005), *Congress as Public Enemy* (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995), *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Bartels, 2010).

Unsurprisingly such jeremiads against so called "pluralist" politics often come with calls for reform. Most reform proposals take their inspiration from two historical reform movements: populism and progressivism. The new populist reformers argue for more direct democracy – e.g., legislative and constitutional referenda, recalls, and the like. The new progressive reformers argue for more insulation of policy from politics – e.g., independent commissions, weakening parties, governance by policy experts and the like. Both approaches have their merits, but also significant limitations. Recent experiences in California and other so called hybrid states suggest that directly democratic legislation may be even more subject to the influence of money, cooptation, and special interests than normal legislative politics. And attempts to insulate policy from politics can lead to democratic deficits and problems with legitimation. Dissatisfaction with the perceived excesses of populist and progressive reform have even led to a backlash, with some calling for a return to *more* pluralist politics, e.g., strengthening parties and interest groups (Cain, 2014). While populist, progressive, and even pluralist reform initiatives have their place, we argue that another avenue of reform has been overlooked: *directly representative democracy*.

The basic idea behind directly representative democracy is simple and intuitive: the primary representative relationship in republican democracy is between a constituent and her elected representative. Parties and interest groups, though important, are secondary and derivative. Political parties help to distill the complexities of politics for mass publics but mostly only enable citizens to cast votes on Election Day. Interest groups lobby on specific issues but play a mediating role between citizens and representatives. Indeed, our vision of directly deliberative democracy is closer to the civics textbook presentation of democracy than is interest group liberalism. Rather than relying solely on electoral outcomes and interest group lobbying, directly representative democracy

seeks to strengthen institutions, practices, and frames of thought that emphasize this primary representative relationship via *ongoing republican consultation* and *ongoing discursive accountability*.

2. CHAPTER SYNOPSES

<u>Chapter Titles</u>

1. Introduction: Beyond Pluralists, Planners, & Plebiscites
2. New Technologies, New Opportunities
3. Building A New Home Style
4. Who Wants Direct Representation?
5. Rational Ignorance & Reasonable Learning
6. Persuasive Representations: Logos, Ethos, Pathos
7. Consultation through the Grapevine
8. Conclusion: Republican Redux

<u>Chapter Descriptions</u>

Chapter 1.   Introduction: Beyond Pluralists, Planners, & Plebiscites

In this introductory chapter we describe the dissatisfaction with status quo pluralist politics, as well as the limitation of the standard neo-populist and neo-progressive responses. We then sketch the basics of a directly representative conception of democracy. Elected officials have a general duty (and a strong incentive) to enact policies that will be popular among their constituents. However, they typically have better information with which to make policy judgments than most citizens do, so they do not simply vote for whatever an uninformed public thinks that it wants at the moment. Elected officials generally do not and should not assume either the role of a paternalistic "trustee" or a rubber-stamp "delegate" (Pitkin 1967). An alternative model envisions a cycle of deliberation that allows citizens to formulate and communicate their general interests, legislators to debate and craft policies to advance those interests and persuade their constituents of the (sometimes nonobvious) connection between the two, after which the process repeats itself in a cycle of feedback. This picture portrays a more directly representative picture of democracy. This feedback cycle is implicit in many models of the public-policy process.

Chapter 2.   New Technologies, New Opportunities

Directly representative democratic practices are and always have been commonplace. Members of Congress meet with their constituents in their Washington and district offices, reply to constituent mail, attend town-hall meetings and the like. Effective opportunities for directly representative democracy, however, have come under increasing strain as our country has grown from a few million to a few hundred million, as congressional districts have swelled by a factor of twenty (from about thirty-five thousand to almost seven hundred thousand), as the number of matters that the state is involved in has multiplied, and as policy problems have grown more complex. Researchers have not fully considered, however, the ways that the Internet might transform the existing scale and informational limits that previous elements of direct representation have encountered. The Internet offers tools that might help to arrest this trend, *to rewire the informational flows undergirding our democracy*, and thus to increase the participation of citizens in the consultative process with their representatives. The widespread adoption and use of Web-based technologies among citizens creates the potential for greater citizen participation in and knowledge and trust of their government. Web technologies allow citizens a kind of access to the government irrespective of their geographic proximity to the seat of government and increasingly irrespective of their wealth and educational level. In this chapter we analyze the evolution of online communication strategies among Congressional office with a special focus on their websites. Implementing innovations and making effective use of them require new knowledge and new operating procedures among officeholders. As a consequence, adoption of Web technologies is neither automatic nor effortless. Would-be democratic reformers need to understand incentives and resistance to new technology in order to propose effective and adaptable solutions.

Chapter 3.   Building a New Home Style

Forty years of empirical political science research casts serious doubt on claims that standard town hall meetings serve rational public deliberation. Since the publication of Fenno's path-breaking work *Home Style* a large body of research has confirmed Fenno's finding that American politicians do not go into town hall meetings to engage in discussion on the merits of issues and controversies. Rather, the highly selected population of constituents who attend these traditional in-person, face-to-face meetings lead representatives to use the platform primarily to rally their supporters and to deflect the attacks of their most vocal opponents. In this chapter we describe in detail the online field experiments at the center of the rest of the book. We show that communication technology

allows for directly representative encounters that draw a much more representative sample of constituents than standard interactions which, in turn, drives very different behavior on the part of the elected representatives. We contrast the civic and constructive discourse in our sessions with traditional town-hall meetings, held by many of the same members, at the same time, on the same issues, and this contrast helps reinforce how our test tube online democracy is very different from contemporary practices. Moreover, using this new online home style, we show that Members were able to persuade constituents to more favorable views of the Members themselves, as well as change their political behavior.

Chapter 4.   Who Wants Direct Representation?

Many critics argue that most Americans want nothing to do with a more directly representative democracy and that such reticence is reasonable. If so, cajoling citizens into more consultative participation would be paternalistic and even counterproductive. But if our central claim – that much non-participation is rooted in disaffection with status quo politics – is correct, then current patterns of engagement would not reflect how citizens would participate given more attractive opportunities. By analyzing participation in twenty-one consultative experiments involving twelve sitting members U.S. Representatives and one U.S. Senator, we demonstrate that the profile of those willing to participate in direct representation is markedly different from those who participate in standard partisan politics and interest group pluralism. This profile suggests that average citizens do not seem to regard such opportunities as filigree on "real" politics nor as an indulgence meant only for political activists and intellectuals. There is a widespread, if latent, desire for more directly representative opportunities for political participation.

Chapter 5.   Rational Ignorance & Reasonable Learning

Directly representative democrats claim that so called "rational ignorance" about politics is less a matter of free-riding than a perception that staying informed about politics is a fool's errand. If "real" politics is only a matter of interest group pluralism and partisan warfare, then there is little reason for average citizens to expend the effort on a rigged game. Citizens need a more persuasive set of motives and opportunities to stay informed. Directly representative democrats claim consultation provides both the motive and the opportunity. We assess this claim with data from our deliberative field experiments. We find that constituents demonstrate a strong capacity to become informed in response to these opportunities, and markedly increase their sense of external political

efficacy as well. The primary mechanism for knowledge gains is subjects' increased attention to policy outside the context of the experiment due to a perception that elected officials actually care about what they think. Moreover, this capacity for motivated learning seems to be spread widely throughout the population, in that it is unrelated to prior political knowledge.

Chapter 6.   Persuasive Representations: Logos, Ethos, Pathos

Are elected representatives able to persuade their constituents when they engage in republican consultation and discursive accountability? In this chapter we analyze persuasion on substantive issues, focusing on the two policy domains from our field experiments: immigration policy and detainee policy.   Following rhetorical theory we also examine the potential mechanisms of persuasion: logos (persuasion on reasons for and against a policy), ethos (trust in the expertise and good will of the representative), and pathos (mobilizing affective responses to a policy question). Contrary to the long-standing "minimal effects" literature, which posits meager prospects for persuasion, we find significant persuasion from participation on the main issues under discussion, and no such effects on issues that were not discussed extensively in the sessions. We also describe a complicated pattern of activation via the mechanisms undergirding logos, ethos, and pathos.

Chapter 7.   Consultation through the Grapevine

Do formal consultative events influence larger patterns of political discussion and public opinion? Critics argue that only a tiny number of people can participate in any given gathering and that new opportunities for consultation may not remedy – and may in fact exacerbate – inequalities. We assess these criticisms by linking data on participants' social networks with their participation in the consultation experiments. We find that attending the deliberative session dramatically increased interpersonal political discussion on topics relating to the event. Importantly, after an extensive series of moderation checks, we find that no participant characteristics or network characteristics conditioned these effects; this provides reassurance that observed, positive spillovers are not limited to certain portions of the citizenry. The results suggest that even relatively small-scale encounters can have a broader multiplier effects in the mass public, and that these events are equal-opportunity multipliers.

Chapter 8.   Conclusion: Republican Redux

In the concluding chapter we argue for the plausibility of a revival of republican democracy through augmenting directly representative institutions and practices. We discuss the ways that such institutions and practices can plug in to the larger, existing political system rather than attempting to bypass it, and connect such proposals to larger themes in democratic theory. Finally, we discuss several more proposals for directly democratic reform that await the combination of real political and scientific experimentation that we proved viable throughout the book.

3. READERSHIP

Because <u>Directly Representative Democracy</u> integrates normative democratic theory, social scientific research, and example of real political reform, it will appeal to readers in many fields, extending beyond academia.

- *Political theorists, philosophers, and social theorists:* democratic theory, especially in its deliberative variety, is one of the most active fields of research among this group of scholars. <u>Directly Representative Democracy</u> develops a novel variant of such a theory, and empirically analyzes real examples applied to high political office. Many theorists have found it difficult to engage companion empirical literatures on their own terms. The authors' mix of expertise, however, puts us in a strong position to contribute to and translate across disciplinary boundaries.

- *Scholars of political behavior and political institutions:* many of the same attractions above apply here as well. Though political scientists often include a few obligatory cites to normative democratic theory, most admit that the scale and complexity of this literature make it impossible for them to engage it systematically. Having a reliable guide to the ways that normative theory maps onto their concerns will be very attractive. More importantly, though, <u>Directly Representative Democracy</u> makes novel contributions to the empirical study of political leadership, persuasion, and communication.

- *Government officials, civic organizers, and interested and concerned citizens:* in addition to a proven interest among legislators (as participation in our study demonstrates), many government agencies are interested in using consultative techniques to meet their requirement for "maximal public input." Moreover, a large number of foundations and community groups sponsor various deliberative forums, and are eager to connect them to mainstream representative democracy. And many citizens are rightly concerned about the failing health of our democracy, and will be interested to read a more hopeful account for constructive engagement.

- *Students:* because we are writing Directly Representative Democracy, in part, to facilitate discussion across disciplinary divides, we have taken special pains to avoid jargon, and to presume that readers are not familiar with the details of debates in the various fields that we address. As a consequence, it will be attractive as a text for graduate or upper division undergraduate courses.

4. THE AUTHORS

Michael Neblo is Associate Professor of Political Science and Philosophy at Ohio State University. His research focuses on democratic theory, political psychology, and political sociology. His work has appeared in a wide range of academic journals, including *The American Political Science Review, Public Opinion Quarterly, Political Analysis, The Journal of Political Philosophy, Political Behavior, Political Research Quarterly, Perspectives on Politics, Political Communication, The Journal of Medicine & Law,* and *Social Science & Medicine*. His book, Common Voices: Between the Theory & Practice of Deliberative Democracy is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press. He holds a PhD in political science from the University of Chicago and a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and Mathematical Methods in the Social Sciences from Northwestern University.

Kevin Esterling is Professor of Political Science and Associate Dean of the Graduate Division at the University of California, Riverside. His research focuses on deliberative democracy in American national politics. His current work identifies the conditions that lead citizens to engage constructively in public discourse. He is the author of The Political Economy of Expertise: Information and Efficiency in American National Politics (University of Michigan Press, 2004). He

has published in a number of journals, including *The American Political Science Review, Political Analysis, The Journal of Politics, Rationality and Society, Political Communication, and the Journal of Theoretical Politics*. His work has been funded by the National Science Foundation and by the MacArthur Foundation. Esterling was previously a Robert Wood Johnson Scholar in Health Policy Research at the University of California, Berkeley and a postdoctoral research fellow at the A. Alfred Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions at Brown University. He received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago in 1999.

David Lazer is Distinguished University Professor of Political Science and Computer and Information Science at Northeastern University. He was previously associate professor of public policy at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government and director of its Program on Networked Governance. He holds a PhD in political science from the University of Michigan. His research focuses on the nexus of social networks, computational social science, and collaborative intelligence. He is a reviewing editor for *Science*, and his research has been published in *Science*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, the *American Political Science Review*, and the *Administrative Science Quarterly*, and has been widely covered in the news media.

5. LENGTH

The manuscript will be approximately 80,000 words in length. There are currently 19 tables and graphical figures.

6. SCHEDULE

Approximately sixty percent of the manuscript exists in draft form. It will be complete and available for full review in December 2015.

References

Bartels, L. M. (2008). Unequal democracy. *New York: Russell Sage Foundation*.

Burden, C., Hysom, T., Esterling, K. M., Lazer, D., & Neblo, M. (2007). *2007 Gold Mouse Report: Lessons from the Best Web Sites on Capitol Hill*. Congressional Management Foundation.

Cain, Bruce. (Forthcoming). Regulating Politics? The Democratic Imperative and American Political Reform. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Esterling, Kevin, Michael Neblo, and David Lazer. (2005). "Home (Page) Style." *International Journal of E-government Research*. 2(1): 48-62.

Esterling, K. M., Lazer, D. M., & Neblo, M. A. (2011). Representative communication: web site interactivity and distributional path dependence in the US Congress. *Political Communication*, *28*(4), 409-439.

Esterling, Kevin, Michael Neblo, and David Lazer. (2011). "Means, Motive, and Opportunity in Becoming Informed about Politics: A Deliberative Field Experiment Involving Members of Congress and their Constituents." *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Vol. 75, No. 3, pp. 483-503.

Esterling, Kevin, Michael Neblo, and David Lazer. (2011). "Estimating Treatment Effects in the Presence of Selection on Unobservables: The Generalized Endogenous Treatment Model," *Political Analysis*. 19(2):205-226.

Esterling, K. M., Lazer, D. M., & Neblo, M. A. (2012). Connecting to Constituents: The Diffusion of Representation Practices among Congressional Websites. *Political Research Quarterly*.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1998. *Between Facts and Norms:* Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Hacker, J. S., & Pierson, P. (2005). *Off center: The Republican revolution and the erosion of American democracy*. Yale University Press.

Hibbing, J. R., & Theiss-Morse, E. (1995). *Congress as public enemy: Public attitudes toward American political institutions*. Cambridge University Press.

Hibbing, J. R. and E. Theiss-Morse. (2002). Stealth Democracy. Cambridge: CUP.

Lazer, D., Neblo, M., & Esterling, K. (2011). The Internet and the Madisonian Cycle: Possibilities and Prospects for Consultative Representation. *Connecting Democracy: Online Consultation and the Flow of Political Communication*, 265-285.

Lazer, D., Sokhey, A. E., Neblo, M. A., & Esterling, K. M. (2010). Expanding the Conversation: The Network Effects of Political Events. *Social Science Research Network, August*, *10*.

Lazer, D., Mergel, I., Ziniel, C., Esterling, K. M., & Neblo, M. A. (2011). The multiple institutional logics of innovation. *International Public Management Journal*, *14*(3), 311-340.

Lazer, D., Neblo, M., Esterling, K., & Goldschmidt, K. (2009). Online Town Hall Meetings– Exploring Democracy in the 21st C. *Congressional Management Foundation, Washington, DC*.

Lessig, L. (2011). *Republic Lost: How Money Corrupts Congress*. Hachette Digital, Inc.

Mann, T. E., & Ornstein, N. J. (2013). *It's even worse than it looks: How the American constitutional system collided with the new politics of extremism*. Basic Books.

Neblo, M. A. (2011). Deliberation's legitimation crisis: Reply to Gleason. *Critical Review*, *23*(3), 405-419.

Neblo, M. (2005). Thinking through democracy: Between the theory and practice of deliberative politics. *Acta politica*, *40*(2), 169-181.

Neblo, M. A. (2007). Family disputes: diversity in defining and measuring deliberation. *Swiss Political Science Review*, *13*(4), 527-557.

Neblo, Michael, Kevin Esterling, Ryan Kennedy, David Lazer, and Anand Sokhey. (2010). "Who Wants to Deliberate – and Why?" *American Political Science Review*. 104(3):566-583.