

# Connecting to Congress

By Michael Neblo



**T**he broad network of organizations interested in supporting and encouraging deliberative democracy has made huge advances in the relatively short time since its inception. In fact, the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums Institute have a history of research on almost 40 years of in-person deliberative forums, from the issue guides used in such forums to a network of moderators to the development of Common Ground for Action (an online platform for convening deliberative forums), among other efforts. However, this network has struggled hardest to prove the value of a deliberative citizenry to formal governmental institutions. This inability to connect the vibrant deliberative ecosystem with the institutional demands of Congress has been to

the detriment of both. Still, it is only because of this foundational support that we may, perhaps, be on the brink of bridging our network and the beleaguered citadel that is Congress.

Many members of Congress and their staff make enormous efforts to represent their constituents authentically. But even the most idealistic public servants face immense and increasing challenges to doing so: a hyperpolarized political climate, an ever-rising flood of communication-demanding partisan agenda items, and, perhaps most worrying, a citizenry that feels disconnected, with historically low levels of trust in Congress. Much of this discontent stems from the absence of avenues for citizens to participate in meaningful dialogue with their members of Congress.



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Even members who are deeply committed to hearing from their constituents face the difficulties of geography, time, and limited staff resources. Over time, this disconnect can have dire consequences not only for the member, but also for democracy. That's the problem our research team, which consists of staff at the Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability at The Ohio State University, as well as other collaborating scholars at the University of Houston, Stockton University, and the University of California-Riverside, has been working on for more than a decade.

### **EARLY EFFORTS**

In 2006, our research team launched a plan to integrate deliberative principles and design features into a format elected officials know very well, the town hall. The five key deliberative innovations will no doubt be very familiar to those familiar with National Issues Forums (NIF):

- a representative group of constituents;
- a single issue to ensure focus, depth, and substance;
- nonpartisan background information on the issue in advance;
- neutral, third-party moderator; and
- real-time candid participation by an elected official.

It is important to note that in our experiment, which was conducted via a grant from the National Science Foundation and intended to produce academic research, the first criterion goes a bit beyond the broadly inclusive efforts made by most NIF convenors. For these town halls, we recruited a scientifically random sample of constituents from each congressional district with whom we are working and split them into treatment and control groups (in order to be able to establish causality in our later analysis). This was important for two reasons of concern even for nonacademic deliberative

practitioners: one conceptual and one practical. It removed the conceptual objection that many elected officials have about relying on self-selecting groups, but the broad ideological and experiential diversity that such recruitment created also contributed to the deliberative quality of the events.

The last criterion is obviously determined by the format we chose for the event, the town hall, which almost necessarily involves participation by an elected official. Because of this, our first round of experiments can prove their effects on only vertical deliberations like this in which constituents are elevated to direct

conversation with their lawmaker. But we don't see a compelling reason they could not be extended to more horizontal (citizen-to-citizen) deliberations like NIF forums if the same expectations of attention, candor, and accountability can be in other ways assured.

In 2006-2007, we conducted 21 hour-long deliberative online town halls for 13 sitting members of Congress, a balanced mix of Republicans and Democrats, with significant diversity in geography, tenure in office, and committee assignments. Back in 2006, before the explosion of business and consumer webinar software available now, options were



DOMINICK REUTER/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

*US Representative Tom MacArthur (R-NJ) speaks to constituents during a town hall meeting in Willingboro, New Jersey, in May of 2017.*

much more limited, but our team was able to allow citizen participants to submit their questions via typing and then listen to the answers from their member of Congress over audio. (Live transcription was also included for hearing-impaired participants.) The questions were relayed to the member by the research team acting as moderators; the questions were filtered to remove only those that had already been answered, that were incoherent, or that were deemed vulgar, abusive, or inciting.

Winston Churchill is credited with saying that “the best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.” Perhaps surprisingly, we agree with Churchill’s observation. But we also believe, one of the best arguments *for* democracy is a 50-minute conversation among average voters. The deliberative context makes all the difference, as our results below show:



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- These deliberative sessions attracted every kind of citizen—the citizens who voluntarily participated in these deliberations were more representative of the country than the electorate.
- The deliberative events offered lawmakers a chance to reach beyond “the usual suspects”; in fact, they particularly attracted citizens who thus far had tended not to follow politics or who had become disenchanted with the system. Furthermore, after participating, these citizens became more likely to vote and take part in political discussions.
- The nonpartisan materials and impartial facilitators helped participants move past talking points and simplistic arguments. The questions and the resulting conversations could be tough but remained productive and positive. In fact, of more than 1,400 questions submitted in all the town halls—remember, online town halls, with anonymous participants—there were exactly zero comments that had to be removed for being vulgar, inciting, or abusive.
- Participating in these deliberative sessions significantly increased citizens’ trust in their member and in their sense of agency within the political system.

- Participants surveyed four months after the deliberative event were 10 percent more likely to vote for the representative who engaged with them in this way.

As we documented in our 2018 book, *Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy*, our data supported a radically different reading of the citizenry from what the conventional wisdom derived from looking at contradictory poll results or tests of voter knowledge. We learned that constituents are not so much angry or apathetic as they are frustrated. Frustration can lead to disengagement, but under the right circumstances, it can also provide energy for change. Many more—and different kinds—of people wanted to participate in our sessions than anyone expected. We found that people seem ill-informed not because they don't care, but because they believe it is not worth it to stay informed; no one will listen anyway. But when they think that their member will really listen, we found that they are willing and able to become informed. Meanwhile, members were similarly positive about the town halls.

We began to see the outlines of one final problem even as we were conducting the research, and we now believe it to be the biggest obstacle to the adoption of deliberative engagement by elected officials and other



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policymakers: capacity. All congressional offices have cut total staffing positions since the 1990s, while at the same time the number of constituent communications—emails, both individual and advocacy group-organized, phone calls, letters—have increased tenfold. Among all the offices we talked with, the answer, in response to our question about whether they would be holding town halls on their own using these deliberative practices, was a regretful, “No. We just don't have the resources.”

### **SO, WHAT NOW?**

That lack of capacity to engage deliberatively with the public is the

starting point for our current research initiative, Connecting to Congress. Our aim is to bring the resources of our institutions, our civil society partners, and our networks to finally build that bridge from the deliberative democracy network into institutional decision-making, thus helping to forge public policy that has truly broad and deep support and improving public faith in Congress and our democratic institutions.

Connecting to Congress has three main objectives:

- identifying the most effective technologies and practices to enable a network of deliberative practitioners to conduct deliberative events for any member of Congress who wants to;
- learning which kinds of information gleaned from various forms of deliberative engagement are most useful to congressional offices; and finally, crucially,
- tracking how the information from these deliberative events is integrated into the office's decision-making and representational activity.

Practically, this means that our team is focusing on a number of things. We are recruiting a cohort of congressional offices who would like to try this kind of engagement. We will convene and facilitate one or more deliberative engagement events

(deliberative town halls, Common Ground for Action forum series, or other experimental adaptations).

We will also provide analysis of the events back to staff (both on constituents' perception of the member and the event as well as their judgment on the issue). Finally, we will track and document how the experience and the information is integrated into the office's relational and representational activities.

Our early efforts have met with more success than we had even hoped. Certainly, none of these "quick" successes would be happening without the previous decade of painstaking academic research and publishing, but there also seems to be less skepticism that this could help to shift the broader political environment toward sounder decision-making, and higher than anticipated willingness to experiment. In our meetings with congressional offices (more than 30 in the first 6 months since our launch), we've heard several different motivations for this willingness: desire for civility and "better disagreements," as a staff member for Congressman Steve Stivers, cofounder of the Civility and Respect caucus, put it; desire to find more useful, convenient ways of staying in touch with constituents while in DC; and the desire to modernize, to communicate and engage with constituents more authentically and with current

## THREE MAIN OBJECTIVES OF CONNECTING TO CONGRESS



**2. LEARNING** which kinds of information from the deliberative engagement are most useful to congressional offices

**3. TRACKING** how this information is integrated into the office's decision-making and representational activity

**1. IDENTIFYING** the most effective technologies and practices to conduct deliberative events for a member of Congress

technology. In fact, improving constituent engagement is one of the major charges of the Select Committee for the Modernization of Congress, before which I was honored to be invited to testify in June about our research. The Select Committee has also requested a recommendations report from the American Political Science Association Modernization Task Force, of which two of our team members are a part, and which we hope will contain some guidance for all members of Congress interested in engaging more usefully with their constituents.

As of July 2019, our Connecting to Congress team has confirmed three House offices as participants in

our deliberative engagement experiments: Representative Mark Takano (D-CA), Representative Steve Stivers (R-OH), and Representative Mary Gay Scanlon (D-PA). Several more House and Senate offices have expressed sustained interest in potentially joining as well. We hope to have at least 7 offices participating by the end of 2019, and we think with 12-15 more on top of that, we should be in a good position to begin analyzing what we've learned and figuring out what comes next. ■

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