

**Written Testimony before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
United States House of Representatives**

**“Improving Constituent Engagement through Technology”
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Chairman Kilmer, Vice-Chairman Graves, and Members of the Select Committee: thank you for this opportunity to testify. My name is Michael Neblo and I am a professor of political science, philosophy, and public policy at The Ohio State University, where I also direct the Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability (IDEA).¹

The Problems Deliberative Online Town Halls Were Designed to Solve

My research focuses on deliberative democracy – that is, the quality of the discussions by which majorities come to be majorities. Trust and approval of Congress on this front remain near their all-time lows. Nor are individual members immune to this trend: trust and approval at the individual level are also falling.² Much of this discontent comes from constituents’ sense of being disconnected from the work of their representatives, and their beliefs that politics is responsive to organized interests, rather than to the concerns of average voters. The only way most citizens feel they can be heard is to work through interest groups or parties. Many people, though, are turned off by partisan and interest group politics, and want ways to have their voices heard just as constituents.

¹ The views expressed here are my own and do not represent The Ohio State University. They do, however, reflect the work and support of my colleagues Claire Abernathy, Kevin Esterling, Ryan Kennedy, David Lazer, Amy Lee, and William Minozzi, as well as my students Jon Green, Emily Ann Israelson, Abby Kielty, and Jon Kingzette.

² <https://news.gallup.com/poll/162362/americans-down-congress-own-representative.aspx>

Unsurprisingly, then, accumulating research suggests that Congressional offices have a surprisingly poor sense of what their broader constituency thinks – even about major issues.³ Offices know what interest groups and activists think because that is who contacts them. As a result, policy tends to be much more responsive to people with the money, time, and know-how to press their interests, than to the broader public.⁴ Responding to these problems, however, presents a major challenge for elected officials. It is too expensive to run district level polls on a large number of issues, to say nothing of the fact that many respondents will not have thought enough about many issues to offer meaningful opinions. So representatives face a dilemma: they can focus on the most informed, engaged, and organized constituents. Those people, however, also tend to be the most polarized, directly invested, and privileged. Or representatives can expend lots of resources trying to figure out what the less informed and less engaged think about various issues. But heretofore this has been a difficult, expensive, and uncertain undertaking.

Apart from resources, addressing dwindling trust and uneven representation is also challenging because traditional methods for citizens to communicate to their Member (such as mail, email, and phone) often exacerbate rather than mitigate these problems. Incoming messages are often wildly unrepresentative of district opinion (if they are even from the district), with many contacts coming from activists or through mass-mailings organized by interest groups. Activists and interest groups should have their voices heard, of course. But those messages should not drown out what the rest of the district might have to say.

The kinds of shouting matches one sees at many town halls today are similarly problematic. Angry protest has a place in a healthy democracy: people have a right to petition government for the redress of grievances. But organized groups have begun to crash town halls with the express intention of turning them into spectacles designed to embarrass elected officials and pre-empt deliberation. Unsurprisingly, this trend has led to over a 50% reduction in members conducting town halls (and rendered the remaining half less constructive).⁵ Elected officials occasionally have to stand-in and take the heat of angry protest. But they should also have regular opportunities for genuinely interactive deliberation with their constituents.

Finally, most offices are simply overwhelmed by the increasing volume of incoming communication, and have diminishing capacity to discern and effectively use what little information there is among the noise. As a result, for many offices, managing incoming communication has become merely a form of constituent service, rather than a real opportunity

³ Hertel-Fernandez, Alexander, Matto Mildemberger, and Leah C. Stokes. “Legislative staff and representation in congress.” *American Political Science Review* 113.1 (2019): 1-18.

⁴ Gilens, Martin. *Affluence and influence: Economic inequality and political power in America*. Princeton University Press, 2012.

⁵ <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/08/21/congress-town-halls-gotcha-public-meetings-789430>

to learn much of use for policy-making. But none of this is meant as a counsel of despair. It is only to say that we urgently need to find better ways to reconnect average citizens to elected officials – to revitalize Congress’s role in *representative* democracy.

The Architecture of Deliberative Engagement

I am part of a multi-campus research collaboration called ‘Connecting to Congress’ (C2C) that is investigating new ways to use technology for constituent engagement.⁶ The C2C team has developed deliberative online town halls to test whether carefully designed channels of communication could solve this problem. We have identified a new model of how members can learn from and engage with constituents. We offer a set of proven principles and evidence-based methods that can foster what we term “directly representative democracy.” The model empowers ordinary citizens through direct and substantive engagement with their representatives, rather than relying exclusively on interest groups and parties. Leveraging online technology to implement deliberative design principles, this initiative seeks to make directly representative interactions a routine feature of Congress and of U.S. democracy more generally.

Building these directly representative channels will improve the capacity of Congress, and of individual offices, by enabling members to better understand and advocate for the interests of a broad cross-section of their constituents. Mutual learning cultivates deeper relationships with the district, helps get the members’ messages out, and informs legislative decision-making as well as constituent service operations. The design relies on five key features:

1. **Recruiting a cross section of constituents that authentically represents the district.** This design element ensures that the participants are not confined to echo chambers that reinforce their existing views. Moreover, it helps overcome the self-selection problem to give members exposure to what a cross-section of their whole district thinks – not just the usual suspects.
2. **Focusing the session on a single topic.** Discussing a single topic for an extended period of time ensures that both elected officials and constituents move beyond talking points to more substantive and nuanced discussion, engaging the full complexity of the issue.
3. **Providing balanced, factual background material on the topic prior to the event.** Providing such information ensures that all constituents can feel empowered to participate effectively, and can offer warranted reasons based on a common basis of factual evidence.
4. **Having a neutral third party host and moderate the event.** Third party moderators ensure that elected official move beyond softball questions and scripted responses to

⁶ <https://connectingtocongress.org/>

address topics that are challenging and important. We found that constituents value such authenticity *very* highly, and reward members for it well beyond any advantages of tightly controlling the script.

5. **Having the elected official participate live in the session, through streaming video and audio.** When the elected official participates in this direct way, constituents can see that the official herself is engaged, rather than a staffer. This confirms that the member is engaged and that the constituents have a direct connection to elected officials and a voice in the representative process.

Evidence-Based Best Practices

We evaluated these design principles in collaboration with a bipartisan group of thirteen sitting Members of Congress, conducting more than twenty deliberative online town halls as part of our study. The events were on challenging topics: immigration and terrorist detainee policy. We designed the randomized controlled trial as a field experiment by recruiting a representative sample of constituents from each district or state, and then randomly choosing whether constituents received an invitation to participate in a town hall or just to take surveys. Under this design, we were able to compare the responses of constituents who participated in the town hall with those who did not in a scientifically rigorous way. In conducting the field experiment with elected officials, we were able to observe how our town halls work in the actual practice of democracy, rather than how laboratory subjects behave in a hypothetical simulation of democracy.

We found that constituents are not so much angry or apathetic, but rather 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. Indeed, our participants were *more* representative of *eligible* voters than are *actual* voters.⁷ Moreover we found that people seem ill-informed not because they do not care, but because they believe that it is not worth it to stay informed; no one will listen anyway. But when they think that their member really will listen, we found that they are willing and able to become informed.⁸ We observed reasoned and respectful discussion throughout all of our sessions. And each member who participated fully engaged constituents regardless of party or ideology. The overwhelming majority of constituents said that the sessions

⁷ Neblo, Michael A., Kevin M. Esterling, Ryan P. Kennedy, David MJ Lazer, and Anand E. Sokhey. “Who wants to deliberate—and why?” *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 566-583.

⁸ Esterling, Kevin M., Michael A. Neblo, and David MJ Lazer. “Means, motive, and opportunity in becoming informed about politics: A deliberative field experiment with members of Congress and their constituents.” *Public opinion quarterly* 75.3 (2011): 483-503.

were “very valuable for democracy” (95%) and that they would want to participate in another (97%).

Thus, our work demonstrates that it is indeed possible for representatives to learn about the informed opinions of a broad cross-section of their constituents. Moreover, representatives who did engage their constituents according to our best practices were richly rewarded for doing so. They saw a 37% increase in participants expressing trust in them “all or most of the time,” a 35% increase in job approval, and a remarkable 290% increase (from 20%-pre to 58%-post) in approval of how they were handling the issue under discussion. Participants in these sessions were 9% more likely to vote in the next election, and *four months later* they were 10% more likely to vote for the members who consulted with them in this way, regardless of party affiliation. Our recommendations, then, do not amount to finger wagging or hectoring to “eat your vegetables.” Quite the opposite: our message is that elected officials can do well by doing right.

Recommendations for Reform

In conjunction with the Congressional Management Foundation, we are currently working with members to incorporate principles of directly representative democracy into their office operations. We focus especially on using innovative technology and best practices to foster meaningful relationships with constituents. In our current project, we are setting out to develop new designs for online deliberative forums and to evaluate them further over the next two years.

The platforms we are studying include updated online town halls, *Common Ground for Action* forums (developed by the Kettering Foundation), *Facebook Live*, and Reddit “Ask Me Anythings.” Forums on these different platforms should also be structured by the five design principles above. We hope to identify best practices for members to gain access to new and effective channels for communication that will foster trust with their constituents, deepen their engagement in the political process, and enable their offices to better understand and react to the considered opinions and priorities of their broader constituency.

It is our hope that the committee will create guidelines for best practices in light of our recommendations for the mindful use of technology for citizen engagement. We believe the prospects for reform are strong. In the recent words of Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy:

“This [Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress] cuts to the core of what the House of Representatives strives for every day: a direct conversation with the American people in an effort to solve problems and make our country and communities better. Technology has unquestionably improved House productivity, but we must aspire to do better when it comes to connecting with and serving the American people.”

Congress has a collective interest in learning how to use technology in a way that enhances Americans' trust and esteem of the institution itself. And, given our findings that constituents increase their trust in, approval of, and voting for members who engage in these best practices, members have individual interests in pursuing these reforms as well: a win for Congress and for the American people.

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Professional Summary

CURRENT POSITION

Professor of Political Science, Philosophy, and Public Policy, The Ohio State University
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EDUCATION

Ph.D., Political Science, University of Chicago, 2000.

B.A., Philosophy and Mathematical Methods in the Social Sciences, Northwestern University, 1991.

BOOKS

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