

**TESTIMONY TO SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE MODERNIZATION OF
CONGRESS**

June 24, 2021

WILLIAM J. DOHERTY, PHD.

bdohety@umn.edu

University of Minnesota and Braver Angels

I am honored to speak with you. I wear two hats today: one as a University of Minnesota professor who teaches and practices marriage and family therapy, and one as co-founder of the nonprofit “[Braver Angels](#),” which has done over a thousand workshops around the country since 2016 to help depolarize reds and blues, conservatives and liberals and others. I’ve been asked to focus on what we’ve learned that could be helpful to Congress.

We’ve learned that carefully designed structures for group process and one-to-one conversations can lower rancor and produce more understanding across partisan differences. For example, in our red/blue workshop we use what’s called a “fishbowl” activity where people on one side, reds or blues, sit in a middle circle, with the other group sitting in an outside circle. Those in the outer circle just listen and observe, with no interaction. Those in the middle answer two questions: Why are your side’s values and policies good for the country, and what are your reservations or concerns about your own side. Then the two groups shift positions and the other group answers the same questions. This is followed by 1:1 and whole group conversation around these questions: What did you learn about how the other side sees themselves, and did you find anything in common?

Activities such as this, which require structured sharing and encourage careful listening—including showing humility about one’s own side—do yield measurable changes in attitudes and behaviors, according to an outside academic research study that followed participants for six months. We’ve extended the group process to structured one-to-one conversations between reds and blues, White people and People of Color, rural and urban people, and young and old.

What are some implications for Congress? Fortunately, we’ve gained some experience with elected officials in Minnesota, Maryland, and New Jersey. In terms of Congress, we did a red/blue workshop with the Minnesota staff members of Rep. Dean Phillips and Rep. Pete Stauber. And we are piloting new ways to do Congressional Town Halls and other conversations with constituents.

Based on this work, I have three recommendations to the Select Committee for how Congress can foster depolarization.

- 1) Promote Braver Angels red/blue workshops for Congressional staffs and for Committee staffs. I suggest beginning with the staffs of members of this Select Committee.

- 2) Invite Members of Congress to do Braver Angels 1:1 red/blue conversations, These are private, structured, one-hour, self-facilitated conversations where people talk about things such as what life experiences influenced their attitudes and beliefs about public policy and the public good. Perhaps members of this Committee could go first with these 1:1 conversations.
- 3) Encourage Members of Congress to adopt Braver Angels methods for Town Halls and other conversations with groups of constituents, in order to model depolarization back in their districts. Rep. Phillips will be piloting one of these constituent conversations in August with cross sections of conservative and liberal constituents, with the goal of finding common ground on local concerns they would like Congress to know about. If I may be blunt, current Congressional town halls and similar events are using 19th century designs. It's time for modernization.

For all of these action steps, Braver Angels has trained, committed volunteers all over the country to help make them possible. When we did our first Braver Angels skills workshop with members of the Minnesota legislature, I asked them why they decided to participate. The main reason was what they were hearing from constituents: please stop fighting all the time and get things done. As a citizen participant in one of our red/blue workshops said in his final comments, "Neither side is going to finally vanquish the others. So we'd better figure out how to get along and run the country together."

I'll end with my marriage therapy hat on. Like a couple who remain responsible for their children no matter what happens to their own relationship, reds and blues cannot simply walk away from each other. Neither side can "divorce" and move to a different country. To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, it's our Republic, if we can keep it.