

## Reforming the Town Hall

Around the country members of Congress are holding "town halls" to hear from their constituents. It is proving to be a hot summer. While openness is laudable, the design of these meetings does not permit feedback to a Congressperson about what the constituents in a district really think. "Town halls" are an open invitation to mobilized groups to capture the public dialogue and appear to speak for the rest of the district. While expression of these views is a legitimate part of the public dialogue, it can easily be mistaken for public opinion about the issue. Advocates then mobilize to offer exactly that interpretation.

A Congressional "town hall" is not a New England town meeting. In the New England case, many of the towns have only a few hundred citizens. One of the classic studies (Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*) focused on a town in Vermont with only 500 citizens. But a congressional district with 650,000 cannot be represented by a few hundred of the self selected. However, scientific sampling could, in fact, represent them with a relatively small number, even a few hundred.

When George Gallup launched the public opinion poll in the 1936 US presidential election, he did it with the aspiration of adapting the democracy of the New England town meeting to the large scale nation state. The idea was that radio and newspapers would send out the views of different leaders and experts and the public would talk them over and then send back their views in the poll. It would be "as if the whole country is one great room" just like a "town meeting." The difficulty is that the room was so big that no one in particular was paying a lot of attention. Most individual citizens are subject to what social scientists call "rational ignorance." If I have one vote in many thousands or millions, there is little reason for me to pay attention and become informed because my individual vote or opinion will not make much difference. Those with special agendas, such as activists, may have a different calculation.

Members of Congress can use polls to assess the views of their constituents, but those views will mostly be 'top of the head' impressions of sound bites and headlines, partly because of rational ignorance. Members naturally would like something more interactive and informative. There is a way, Deliberative Polling, to combine the representativeness of scientific sampling with the interaction and informative character of a town meeting. It is "a poll with a human face." The Deliberative Poll (or DP) asks survey questions both before and after a scientific sample is actually gathered together to discuss the issues under good conditions. With modern social science it brings to life a form of democracy that goes all the way back to Ancient Athens where deliberative microcosms chosen by lot made important public decisions. What is a lottery, fundamentally, but a random sample?

The DP could easily be adapted to provide members with good information about what their constituents really think. It is not dominated by loud and angry voices, who can only be present in their real proportions in the population. You cannot volunteer yourself to be in a random sample. And with confidential questionnaires one gets the whole distribution of opinion in the room, not just those who speak up. Gallup's vision of adapting the democracy of the town meeting to larger populations is entirely possible. And it would be a big improvement over the "town halls" that are currently giving members an earful. For more on Deliberative Polling as it has been conducted around the world, see the work of the [Center for Deliberative Democracy](#). Or see *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford, 2009).