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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Town Halls by Invitation

By JAMES FISHKIN

“CONGRESS on Your Corner” has turned into “Your Congressperson Cornered.” Around the country, lawmakers are finding their town hall meetings disrupted by hecklers, many echoing anti-health-care-reform messages from talk radio and cable television. Supporters of reform will surely countermobilize, leading to more outbursts and demonstrations. Forget, for a moment, that these impassioned voters have turned these meetings into political sideshows. Are town halls actually the best way for lawmakers to connect with their constituents?

The term “town hall” conjures up images of townsfolk gathering in some New England hamlet. But studies of New England town meetings have shown that such gatherings cease to be effective for large populations. They may work in communities of a few hundred, but when the population reaches the many thousands, attendance drops and the connection to citizens atrophies.

The Congressional town-hall-style meeting, which developed as a cost-effective way for time-pressed members to hear from constituents, also rests on an illusion: that a district of 650,000 potential voters can be represented by the unscientifically self-selected who decide to show up. Instead, these amorphous, unpredictable meetings have become open invitations for interest groups and grass roots campaigns to capture the public dialogue.

But there is a way of organizing town halls that would offer lawmakers representative and informed feedback about their constituents’ major concerns: a deliberative poll. Whereas ordinary polls represent the public’s surface impression of sound bites and headlines, deliberative polls bring together a scientifically selected microcosm of a lawmaker’s constituents under conditions conducive to thinking about issues. In effect, an entire Congressional district really can be put in one room.

These deliberative polls may, on the surface, look a lot like the current town halls — a lawmaker and constituents sharing their positions and asking each other questions. But a lot of hard work goes on behind the scenes. First, a survey identifies the range of attitudes and demographics in the district, before inviting a randomly selected, representative sample of constituents to attend. A random sample cannot be captured by people with intense interests volunteering themselves. Second, to facilitate discussion, participants are sent balanced briefing materials about the issues to be discussed ahead of time.

When they first arrive at the deliberative poll, attendees answer a confidential questionnaire assessing their positions, before being divided up for small-group discussions. This is key: in the current town hall format, shrill voices can easily silence the rest. But during a deliberative poll, trained moderators make sure that every voice is heard and that the group carefully and thoughtfully narrows in on its most pertinent and

pressing policy questions. When all the participants finally assemble with the lawmaker, the result is a serious and productive conversation well beyond what we've seen in town halls lately.

At the end of the day, participants are polled again. Our research at the Center for Deliberative Democracy shows that participants always become better informed and that, about two-thirds of the time, they change their opinions significantly. Plus, the confidential questionnaires show what the real majorities in the room are — instead of assuming that the angriest and most theatrical speakers represent anyone other than themselves.

At the center, we have collaborated on more than 50 deliberative polls around the world. The process has certainly been shown to help overcome sharp divisions. In a 2007 deliberative poll in Northern Ireland on education reform, the percentage willing to agree that “most Catholics” or “most Protestants” were “open to reason” rose 16 points. Those agreeing that most Protestants or Catholics were “trustworthy” also increased considerably.

One we held in Bulgaria, about policies toward the Roma, or Gypsies, produced strongly reconciliatory policies at a time when loud fringe groups wanted to build walls around the Roma communities. And in a deliberative poll in Brussels just before the recent European Union elections, people from 27 countries, partaking in discussions in 21 languages, moved to support more tolerant policies toward immigrants.

If deliberative polls can produce mutual understanding in such cases of sharp ethnic and political conflict and across such linguistic divisions, surely this process can help members of Congress have civil, constructive conversations with their own constituents about health care.

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