

# Persuasive power: Members of Congress can sway the public

March 16 2015, by Jeff Grabmeier

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Unofficial seal of the United States Congress

Members of the U.S. Congress really do have the power to persuade their constituents in several different ways, according to a first-of-its-kind national study.

Researchers found that citizens who participated in an online town hall with their U.S. representative or senator were more likely to agree with the legislator on an important policy issue.

These constituents also left the town halls with higher levels of trust and approval of their respective elected official and a 9.8 percent greater likelihood of voting for him or her in the next election.

Even constituents from the opposing party were more likely, after the town hall, to agree with their congressperson when compared to those who didn't attend.

"Members of Congress can be very persuasive, even with people who may not be inclined to agree with them," said Michael Neblo, co-author of the study and professor of political science at The Ohio State University.

"It may not seem surprising, but until now there has been virtually no evidence that elected officials - or even leaders more generally - are able to directly persuade the people they lead."

In fact, he said, a popular view is that in these polarized times, political leaders can mobilize supporters, but don't have much power to actually change minds.

The research appears in the early online edition of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

For one study, done in 2006, the researchers set up 19 online town halls

with the cooperation of 12 members of the U.S. House of Representatives (seven Democrat and five Republican) and groups of about 20 of their constituents. They also conducted a similar study in 2008 with Sen. Carl Levin, a Democrat from Michigan, and about 175 of his constituents.

Neblo noted that this wasn't the typical town hall organized by members of Congress, which generally attract strong supporters and people with specific grievances.

All of the constituents in this study were randomly chosen and were compensated to participate. That doesn't mean these citizens weren't like typical people from their district. On the contrary, analysis showed that these participants were actually more representative of eligible voters in their district than were actual voters, Neblo said.

"This wasn't a group of political junkies who can't get enough of talking to their political leaders. This group was more like average Americans than those who actually show up to vote," he said.

"So we had real politicians talking to real constituents about real issues."

In the study with the 12 representatives, the researcher focused on one hot-button issue, which remains so today: immigration policy.

In each session, about 20 constituents were given background information to read about the issue before the online town hall. A control group read the same background information, but did not participate in the town hall.

The actual town hall was about an hour long. Participants logged on to the live session on their computers and heard their congressperson talking. A live transcription also scrolled on their screen. Questions from

constituents also appeared on the screen. There was no live video.

Each representative in the study either strongly agreed or strongly disagreed about whether to create a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants and they clearly stated their views during the online session.

Results showed that constituents' views on the subject clearly moved toward that of their representative after participating in the town hall, Neblo said. The views of those who simply read the background materials did not change.

But the persuasion was not limited to the topic of immigration. People also rated their representatives as more trustworthy and were more likely to approve of his or her performance after attending the town hall.

In addition, the town halls changed the behavior of participants. Attendance increased constituents' intent to vote for their representative by 13.8 percent after the town hall. Participants were surveyed again after the November election and the researchers found a 9.8 percent increase in the likelihood of these constituents actually voting for the representative in that election.

Neblo noted that the election occurred up to four months after the town hall, suggesting that the session had a relatively long-lasting effect.

The study with Sen. Levin involved a different issue - responses to terrorism - but yielded similar results, Neblo said. Just as with the town halls with representatives, participants moved toward Levin's views on fighting terrorism.

In addition, those who attended the town hall had a 10.5 percent increase in intent to vote for the senator and an even larger 13.1 percent increase

in actually voting for him in the next election.

But the group that attended Levin's [town hall](#) was much larger than those with the representatives - 175 compared to 20 - showing that persuasion can also work with larger groups.

This study shows what can happen when [political leaders](#) have the opportunity to talk to their real constituents, and not just groups of supporters.

"The citizens who took part loved it and 94 percent said they would do it again," Neblo said. Although they were paid a small sum to do this study, citizens said they would do it again even if they weren't paid.

"It is the less partisan people who participated in our study and they enjoyed hearing about the issues without the red-meat partisanship that they are used to hearing in the media," he said.

"The members of Congress told us they like it, too. They got to talk about substantive issues with people who were really listening."

**More information:** Field experiment evidence of substantive, attributional, and behavioral persuasion by members of Congress in online town halls, *PNAS*,

[www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1418188112](http://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1418188112)

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: Persuasive power: Members of Congress can sway the public (2015, March 16) retrieved 17 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2015-03-persuasive-power-members-congress-sway.html>

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