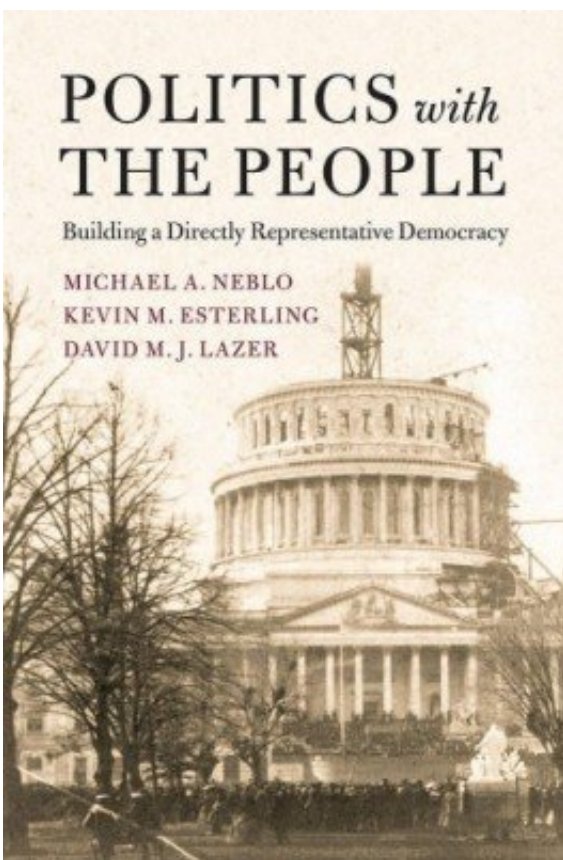


An evidence-based way to help fix our broken politics

November 15 2018, by Jeff Grabmeier



Credit: The Ohio State University

It is an idea for repairing our broken political system that is so promising that new members of Congress will learn about it before taking office in January.

It is an idea tested with actual representatives and their constituents, with intriguing and positive results.

Now the question is: Will more members of Congress adopt it?

The idea is "deliberative town halls," which are conducted online between representatives and randomly selected constituents. They are designed to discuss a single issue in depth, avoiding scripted talking points and rancorous outbursts.

The idea and the research supporting it is detailed in the new book [Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy \(Cambridge University Press\)](#), written by three political scientists.

"People feel like politics is not going well in the United States, particularly political dialogue," said co-author Michael Neblo, associate professor of political science at The Ohio State University.

In the book, the authors point to low approval of Congress, as well as recent retirement speeches by politicians like Charlie Dent and John Boehner that mention our broken political system as contributing to their decisions.

"We believe we have a way to help us dig out of this mess," Neblo said.

Neblo wrote *Politics with the People* with Kevin Esterling of the University of California, Riverside, and David Lazer of Northeastern University.

Their idea of town halls is nothing like the typical ones that you see on YouTube, which are generally either informercials or free-for-alls that attract mostly strong supporters and people with specific grievances.

In their studies, the researchers recruited randomly chosen constituents that ended up being more representative of eligible voters in their districts than were actual voters. They drew people into the process, rather than just having self-selected political enthusiasts attend.

For one study, the researchers set up 19 online town halls with 12 members of the U.S. House of Representatives (seven Democrats and five Republicans) and groups of about 30 of their constituents. They also conducted a similar study with then-Sen. Carl Levin, a Democrat from Michigan, and about 175 of his constituents. There have also been more recent events.

These town halls, organized by a neutral moderator, tackled hot-button issues like immigration and terrorism policy.

"They created a direct connection between elected officials and their constituents," Neblo said.

"There is no middle man, there isn't a script, and there is no shouting. Just people talking about the issues, passionately but civilly and substantively."

Analysis showed that citizen participants increased their knowledge about the issue under discussion. In addition, 97 percent were interested in participating in another session and 95 percent thought the town halls were "very valuable for democracy."

Representatives reaped benefits, too. Members of Congress saw their ratings on trustworthiness, empathy, competence, and other attributes go up 10 percent or more among people who participated in the town halls.

Most remarkably, the researchers found a 10 percent increase in the likelihood that constituents who took part actually voted for their

representative in the next election four months later.

"Representatives can do well for themselves by doing right," Neblo said.

But can these town halls have a real impact when they have these relatively small groups of constituents?

Neblo said they can.

"With the evidence we have right now from the session with Sen. Levin, if every member of Congress spent two hours a week doing directly representative outreach, they could engage up to a quarter of the eligible electorate every six years—the term of one senator," he said.

Two hours a week may seem like a lot of time to members of Congress, Neblo said, but they spend even more time on traditional town halls and other forms of engagement. The potential that directly representative practices have to help fix our democracy makes it worth it, he said.

The authors will have the opportunity to make their case for deliberative town halls directly to members of Congress. They have been invited to present their ideas and give a copy of the book to all new members of Congress at their orientation in December.

Neblo is hopeful that this [idea](#) can make a difference.

"I'm not saying this is going to completely transform American politics. But it is a very real reform possibility," he said.

"It is like changing the course of a supertanker by a few inches. It doesn't seem like a lot at the time, but when you travel far enough, that couple of inches puts you on a different path."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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