

**Reforming Congress Project**  
**Sunwater Institute**  
**Interview with Professor Michael Neblo**

**CHERVENAK:** Professor Neblo, thank you so much for joining us.

**NEBLO:** Thank you, I'm really delighted to be here.

**CHERVENAK:** Why don't we start with your background, you know where did you start off, sort of the arc of your career, and what you're doing today?

**NEBLO:** Well, I actually kind of come by what I study, honestly, it has surprisingly strong biographical roots, I guess. One of my grandfathers was an illiterate immigrant from Italy, fled authoritarian Italy and came to this country to seek a better life, and you know the old American story, really. And he was illiterate in both Italian and English, signed his name with an X till the day he died, and yet you know he talked politics with the other men. Admittedly, back then it was talking politics with men in the neighborhood. He interacted with the local aldermen in the city and thought that he had things that other people should hear about politics and in turn he had things to learn as well.

And then I went to graduate school and learned that the prevailing opinion among political scientists is that the average American was wildly ignorant and apathetic about politics and that maybe was a good thing because they had a questionable commitment to democratic and constitutional principles, and that politics was really the purview of elites in their, you know, the electorate could show up every two, four, or six years, if they bothered to show up and vote, and that's fine, but much more than that wasn't necessarily a good thing.

And of course the evidence for that isn't, is real in certain respects, though I have a very different interpretation of it now, and so it induced this massive cognitive dissonance in me that in all seriousness kind of launched my career and my inquiries. And then there's sort of a second sort of a formative experience that that's become more relevant recently.

My first political memory is the 1980 election between then President Carter and then governor Reagan. I was a boy, but I was old enough to more or less know what was going on, and my mom supported Reagan and my dad supported Carter. He was a teamster, a truck driver, and one thing that people don't realize is or remember is Carter at the time was considered a moderate in the Democratic party, and he actually deregulated the trucking industry. And the teamsters, the national teamsters, endorsed Reagan. They abandoned Carter.

And the first political conversation I can over, remember overhearing other than dinner talk was my dad in this teamster bar, he used to take me to the tavern, and his fellow teamsters were debating whether their local, Local 705 in Chicago, was going to go with the national union and endorse Reagan or stick with Carter or remain neutral. And it set off this interest in my head about mass politics, the link between local and national politics, things along those

lines, and the part that's become more relevant to me now is that my mom and dad disagreed about, you know, a presidential election and talked about it over dinner, and then when dinner was over, we cleaned up, kissed each other good night, and went to bed. And the next morning everything was fine. And so I've increasingly become very interested in affective polarization and just the poisonousness of our public discourse and the inability of even family to have civil constructive dialogue across difference in a way that's again inducing this cognitive dissonance with my experiences from childhood that we should be able to do this, you know.

And so that's become a second line of research and practical interventions that I've had, but so I'm from the southwest side of Chicago. I attended Northwestern University as an undergraduate on a on a full scholarship and evidence scholarship for it's a means-tested scholarship for less affluent students, caddies, actually, golf caddies, it's quirky, and did my PhD at the University of Chicago. I spent a year as a visiting professor at Yale, then did a two-year post-doc in public health at the University of Michigan and have spent the rest of my career at Ohio State.

**CHERVENAK:** Great, well I think you've already kind of covered my next question, but maybe we could just talk broadly speaking, what, you know, the broad area of your research. You know, clearly it's in somehow related to this concept of dialogue or discourse, but you know are there any core themes that your work has been focused on since you started down this path?

**NEBLO:** Yeah, so the term of art that I say my expertise is in is what's known as deliberative democracy. Some people know that term, but for those who don't, the key idea behind deliberative democracy is that politics is and should be about more than power votes and money, that the way we talk about politics matters, and that if I'm going to use my little bit of political power to tell you who you can love and count as a member of your family, or to send you or your sons and daughters off to war, or to take your property in the form of taxes and reallocate it to some other social purpose, then I owe you an explanation that goes beyond saying, that's what I want, right. It has to be something that would be recognizable as a good reason, given our common cultural norms and resources. We, that doesn't mean we're always going to agree on everything, but it has to be recognizable as a reason that goes beyond, shut up, leave me alone.

You know, this isn't what brand of toothpaste I buy. If somebody says, why do you use Colgate?, I can say shut up, leave me alone. I use Colgate. If somebody tells me why I'm supporting sending their children off to war, I can't say shut up, leave me alone, that's what I want, and really think that I've discharged my duty as a citizen even, much less if I'm an elected official. And so I study that both in theory and practice. What does that mean theoretically? How are we doing right now, and what can we do? What sort of plausible reforms are we capable of to bring, is and should be closer together.

**CHERVENAK:** And I recall you mentioned I think, looking through your background information, you know you also have a kind of a grounding in the philosophy side of things. Can you talk about that for a second?

**NEBLO:** Sure, so my undergraduate degrees were in philosophy and I say statistics, it was actually a program called Mathematical Methods in the Social Sciences, so it's kind of like applied math, and actually I applied mostly to philosophy PhD programs. I thought I was going to be a philosopher. It turns out that back then, since then, experimental philosophy has sort of exploded and philosophy departments do engage with the applied sciences, but back then that was really just the natural sciences. In the social sciences, there was almost no empirical engagement. And so political science is this odd bird in the social sciences in that they haven't kicked their philosophers out, at least yet.

You know, the psychology used [to] and econ used to have philosophers in their departments too, but you really don't find them anymore. But political science still has a subfield called political theory, and so I slotted into a political science department a little more naturally, and in my graduate program I had co-chairs to my dissertation. One was a straight philosopher, one was a hard-edged empirical social scientist, and really my career has been trying to build that bridge between the two wings of the discipline and build an empirical research agenda that's tailored to answer the deep, important philosophical questions, rather than sort of doing a drunkard search around what we can easily measure and then hoping that that has something to do with the big philosophical questions that we care about the most.

**CHERVENAK:** Great, let's jump into you know some of your work. So I know that you've been involved in this kind of, the discussion or the communication between constituents on the one hand and then the representative, the member, Senator what have you on the other hand, and that you've done a lot of work in this area. So when you came into this side of things, what were the questions you were asking, and what kind of did you do to try to answer those questions, and what have you found so far?

**NEBLO:** Great, great. Well I mean, at this the super practical level, it goes back to what I was talking about with my grandfather, right, is squaring the circle experientially feeling, growing up in an environment where average people did care about politics. They might not have known a huge amount, but they knew what they needed to know, that their areas of concern and competence and engaged when they had opportunities to do so constructively, and really trying to think through how to square that with the massive evidence of the relative ignorance of the American public about politics and what looks like the apathy.

In a more social scientific mode, what I'm examining is an alternate explanation for the dysfunction or disconnection in modern representative democracy across the world but especially in the United States, and in particular there are two components to that. One, this notion that the mass public, people in the mass public are ignorant and they're ignorant because they're apathetic, and that the elected officials are not responsive to them, and they're not responsive to them because they're captured by the need to raise money from big donors and to motivate their base. And so they're much more ideological, and they just don't, they're not, they don't care.

On the constituent side, we have really very well-developed evidence, my kind of breakout paper showed that what people think is apathy is really sort of an amalgam of frustration and disgust, that they're disgusted with what they see as blood sport politics that has nothing to do with good public policy. And the reason that they don't engage a lot and learn about politics is they think it's a mugs game, that it's rigged, nobody's listening, and even if they did listen it's just to manipulate them, and that the powerful and moneyed interests are going to get what they want every time, and so why bother?

And what we showed is if elected officials can credibly convey to their average constituents that they're, no, they really do want to hear what they have to say and are going to, not promising that they're going to vote exactly along those lines, but genuinely incorporate it into their decision-making process, they line up. We get much higher rates of participation. People train up. They do extra work in the shadow of knowing that they're going to be talking to an empowered decision maker, and it's new people. It's not the usual suspects. It's less affluent, less ideological, younger, women, people of color, who are selectively brought back into the political process because they felt the most like it was a mugs game, like they were excluded and nobody was listening.

The case for the alternative explanation on the side of the elected officials is that at least part of the explanation is they simply don't know what their average constituents think, and they've got no way of knowing because the only people who reach out to them are the usual suspects. It's the party activists and the people nursing specific grievances and organized interests, and they don't have the money to run polls, and they don't care about national polls. They want to know what their constituents think, and here our evidence is more tentative, but we're building it up that when they do find out, when we can credibly convey to them what their average constituents think, they're responsive to it to a large degree, at least on the issues that they're not pre-committed to it and or that the whip's office isn't already calling, that hasn't become so partisan and crystallized that they've got no room to maneuver anymore.

**CHERVENAK:** So this brings up a very important question I'm always concerned about when it comes to representatives, you know, in terms of their information collection, if you will, from the constituency, their knowledge of what the constituency's beliefs are on the one hand, where their interests are on the other. And there's this notion that, and when we talk to representatives they always say that talking their constituents face to face is so important, but I'm always concerned that you know the maximum number of people that they could physically shake hands with in a year would be definitely in the error range of any survey, and so that that could be in fact very distortive. Any physical engagement with their constituents can be very distortive because it couldn't be representative, right. They'll get 700,000 people in the district, you talk to a thousand at best, right, and probably much less. So what is your thought on that? Like how do you, in your work, have you addressed this issue of how do you get a truly representative kind of information stream to the member instead of this distortive one that they're getting now where basically they're only hearing from people with megaphones?

**NEBLO:** That's great, that's at the core of perhaps the biggest stream of research I have going right now. We've got you know dead to right evidence that you're correct in your intuition, and it goes beyond merely, you know, sampling error and not having enough people that you could possibly shake hands with and talk to in person, but it's who shows up in person to have their hands shaken that is just wildly unrepresentative of, it's difficult to overstate this and I'll give you an anecdote to explain it.

But a quick caveat to the side, it's not at all to say that the people who do show up, I say usual suspects, and that sounds dismissive. I'm in no way impugning these people as citizens. They are doing their duty, they're showing up, they're participating maybe even at higher rates and better than some of their fellow citizens, so I'm not saying they're bad. They're unrepresentative. They're much more extreme and ideological, and they're also unrepresentative in various demographic and descriptive categories as well.

They also tend to be much angrier and unwilling to listen, and you know they are calling to give their member of Congress a piece of their ear, and if they are willing to listen it's to take marching orders. They're partisan, they're strong partisans who are just waiting to be told what to think about this particular issue that they haven't filled the dots in on yet, whereas regular constituents tend to be much more open-minded, much less ideological. They don't have dogs in the fight about a lot of issues, and they really just want to hear what their member of Congress has to say and if they have reactions or pre-given views on it, to share those with their elected officials and their fellow citizens.

So getting that representative or as possible as good of a cross-section of the state or district is just crucial, and to give you a sense of just how different it can be, in our first round of the what we call our deliberative town halls, we did research on them, and the university IRB, Internal Review Board, the ethics board, required that if a question or comment was vulgar, abusive, or inciting, that we had to filter it out, and in the first round of doing this we had over 1,400 anonymous, more or less on, you know, more or less anonymous online questions and comments submitted, and you might know the answer, I don't know how much background you did, but take a guess at the percentage that we had to invoke the filter out criterion on. Any thoughts on this?

**CHERVENAK:** I would guess ten percent or less.

**NEBLO:** Ten percent, that's pretty good and if you watch YouTube you'd think it's more, right, because YouTube is selectively showing you the spectacular fights, right. It was the number zero, as in not once did we have to do that. That to me, I have to admit, I knew it was going to be lower than YouTube, but that even blew my mind. And I think it speaks to two things. One, the power of random sampling, that actually the people who want to get up there and treat their member of Congress like the pinata are actually pretty far and few. It's just they're really motivated to drive to the in-person town halls and to grandstand at the microphone.

And two, when you randomly sample you're going to catch a few of them, but they look around and they see the other ninety-five percent of people behaving civilly and constructively, and they're less likely to be abusive and aggressive and try to grandstand. In the combination punch of being much more aggressive, aggressive about representativeness and the norms that that creates in terms of being civil and substantive across difference, is, it's difficult to overstate how powerful that is in making the discussion different. So did that answer your question. I can't, I'm not sure if I started to get off topic.

**CHERVENAK:** Well I think you reinforced what I suspected, which is that what the information flow that a typical member gets right now is distortive of the reality of their district. So I guess the question I have is how could we design a better information flow to the member? Now you've done this concept of the virtual town hall, where you've tried I think to get a more representative sample of the district to voice, to get involved in the discussion with the member, right?

**NEBLO:** Yeah.

**CHERVENAK:** That's one way it, sounds like. Another way is just to use statistics, right, or surveys. You know I guess in your work, if you were to design a system to collect the information from the district, what would it look like, and how would it counter those kind of biases?

**NEBLO:** Well certainly doing surveys at the state and district level on down-list issues outside of the context of elections, which is the only way it happens now at that level, of course there's national polls all the time, but again they don't care about national polls. They say this over and over and over. They want to know what their constituents think. So that would be a step in the right direction. It would help. However, I still think there's the problem with that, which is as soon as you move off of the most headline issues, a lot of survey responses are what public opinion researchers call non-attitudes, and it's not that people are stupid, it's not that they can't form thoughtful opinions that would track their considered views about an issue, it's just if you call them up over dinner and interrupt their dinner, they haven't given enough thought to the particular issue that you're asking them about to give you a reliable report of what they would think if they had time to just, you know, even just an hour to read some things, think about it, talk to a few people, hear what the options are, and then give the response.

That's why we think that our deliberative town halls really adds something to standard polls, is that this is a, what we tell the members, there's this technical concept in political science that it doesn't need to be technical. It's called latent public opinion, but it's really simple idea, is what will a public opinion look like after the elected officials have acted and people have to walk around in the shoes that get made by that policy, right. And it turns out calling them up and interrupting dinner isn't necessarily a great leading indicator of that. We have reason to believe and some evidence that deliberative town halls are a much better indicator of that because people take the time to think about it, they get basic information, they stay focused on one issue at a time, and I'll tell you, I've been in meetings with members of Congress, and when you

tell them that they can get a pretty good read on what their constituents are going to think about an issue after they voted, one of them literally leaned forward and his eyes went wide and he said, tell me more, right, and several of them have expressed serious interest.

And we now have one in a debrief after one of our deliberative town halls who said straight out, I changed the version of the bill that I'm supporting on this based on the feedback, not just the numbers, but the reasons I got from my constituents in this deliberative town hall, and it was because she thought that's what they're going to think after we voted.

**CHERVENAK:** So one thing I think is interesting about your approach is that it's structured, right, it's not a freewheeling, everybody get up at the mic, you know, freedom of idea, a free market of ideas, right, it's a structured environment you've created. You've structured the dialogue with certain types of people with a very narrow set of constraints on the subject matter, and that seems to have been a much better, resulted in a more constructive dialogue, I would call it, right, between the community and the member. So what is that, I mean, and I'm very interested in this concept of how you structure the conversation, put rules on it such that you get a better outcome, right. Now is this a format that you think you can tweak and scale?

**NEBLO:** Yes, we are. So we've now gone up to as many as 7,000 constituents in a given forum, which is pretty big. That is no longer—

**CHERVENAK:** One percent.

**NEBLO:** Retail. Exactly. That is one percent in one shot, right, that are hearing from their member of Congress. Just a quick thing on this it's not a free market, the free marketplace of ideas. That's true, but with a caveat in that in a certain sense I am committed to the free marketplace of ideas, it's just that there are known market failures in the free market of ideas in the same way that there are known market failures in insurance markets or various other sorts of markets, that people can use market power, monopoly and monopsonies and variations on those, people can use fraud, people can use all kinds of techniques to distort the power of free markets in the economy.

And similarly, they can do the same thing with the power of the free exchange of ideas in the marketplace of ideas. So it is not that I think I know better than the marketplace of ideas. It is emphatically not that. It's that as a social scientist, we know the very the main ways that the free marketplace of ideas gets distorted, and the only restrictions, the only structures that we try to put on the discourse is to respond directly to a documented distortion or market failure in the free market of ideas. So really the goal is actually to restore the better functioning of the marketplace of ideas, not to abandon it.

That's really important for me to say, and I know you probably knew that, but this isn't like I'm sitting in my professor's office and I've decided what good public discourse looks like unilaterally. It is evidence-based, and it's responding to known empirically documented distortions in the free marketplace of ideas and trying to correct those in the same way that

you can't commit fraud, you know, on the stock market, you can't do price manipulation, you can't have insider trading. There are all kinds of restrictions on the free trade of property, but it's in the service of making those markets work better, and that's what we're trying to do in our deliberative town halls, is to make the free exchange of ideas work more like our 8th grade civics textbook version of them says they're supposed to work. Does that make sense?

**CHERVENAK:** Oh yeah, it makes a lot of sense. I think it's great that you've leveraged this empirical data, this empirical knowledge that we've gained in how to structure communication to max, basically to maximize, you can't have total freedom without some constraints, right. In that case it becomes, you know, you can have bullies, you can have all kinds of failures like you said, and if you've identified, you know, some of the key problems, and you've in and put some boundaries around those, some structure to those, I totally agree that you can have more freedom than if it were unbounded in terms of ruling.

**NEBLO:** That's really the goal.

**CHERVENAK:** Right, so if we go to the, just one more question on this communication structure because the other end of this is, the other end of the important communication between the member or at least between Congress and the and the constituent is the way that a constituent judges the performance of their member, right, and this is another question that I'm, you know I'm very interested in, and maybe you haven't touched it yet in your work, but how does, in what you've experienced, how do the constituents judge the performance of their member in Congress and act on that or not when it comes to reelection?

**NEBLO:** Right, well, so there's two questions. One, how do they do it now, and there's not a univocal answer to that in that there are different, different people judge them and hold them to account in different ways, though there's a limited number of ways, and I'll speak to that in a second. The other is how can we improve that, too, right? How can we help and subsidize the monitoring costs that your average citizen has to make decisions about holding their elected officials to account that would look like what they would decide if they could quit their day jobs and really follow them closely, right. And in a sense that's vaguely our target, is not to tell people, not to tell people what their values should be, but to help them make the decisions they would make if they had the time and resources and quality information to make those decisions. And you know the title, the subtitle, so the title of the book that reports on the research that we've been talking about lately is *Politics with the People*, and the subtitle is *Building a Directly Representative Democracy*.

And this concept of a directly representative democracy has two components, what I call ongoing republican consultation, and republican here doesn't mean the Republican party, it means a republic in the Federalist Papers sense in that it's representative government. The elected officials are making the decisions, but they're doing so with an obligation for serious consultation ex-ante with their constituents, right. The flip side of that is what I call ongoing deliberative accountability, and the idea there is, elected officials have an obligation to intermittently and really frequently give an account for why they've acted the way that they did

in a way that is discursive, that isn't just, oh, I posted my floor votes. And moreover, it's ongoing, it's not always in the context of a campaign, where the heat is to distort things and to make invidious comparisons to your opponents, but to just level with your constituents and try to persuade them. There's nothing wrong with trying to persuade your constituents, as long as you do it above board, right? And that's the ongoing deliberative accountability.

And so I think your question now about what criteria do citizens use and how can we support that process is really about ongoing deliberative accountability, and that has to do with giving the elected officials incentives to do aboveboard, ongoing deliberative accountability exercises, and for constituents to pay attention to it and weigh it in the re-election deliberations. And we have preliminary evidence that A, it's worth it for members to do this, they're rewarded for looking like the eighth-grade version of representative democracy, and B, they're rewarded precisely because the constituents who interact with them like this weigh that interaction more heavily than just party cues.

I mean, parties are still important, but that those interactions are deviations off of just following, you know, a party cue, or you made me angry about this particular vote so I'm abandoning you, forgetting the 99 other things that you did, right. And so we're trying to build an evidence base that can show that this is an improvement, and then the last part of your question is to say to improve our improvements, right, to say nothing's perfect the first time you try it. What sort of methodological and institutional and practical innovations can we make that can move this forward even more. And we try to be cautious about and slow about that, though, because what we do is real politics. These are real elected officials talking to their actual constituents about pending legislation, and so we don't use the scientific, or the full scientific spirit of just experiment with anything, see what happens, right. We have to have a theoretical reason to think this is a good bet, and then we try that see whether it's a good bet, and if it is we move in that direction.

**CHERVENAK:** I think that kind of experimentation is critical, and I don't think, I think more experimentation's better than less, so I would encourage you to be bolder with experiments. You know, there's always going to be short-term cost to experimentation. It's the long-term benefit that's the key. The more you do now, you know, the higher the return can be if you find something that works.

**NEBLO:** Thirty-second reply to that. So the way we handle that problem because I, in one sense of course I agree with you. So we use a Pincer move. On the actual applied experimentation, we're fairly cautious and conservative. We do hypothetical experiments that are much more further afield and use that to prioritize and inform the practical experiments. So we just let a thousand flowers bloom when we're dealing with college undergraduates, or it's a hypothetical sort of survey experiment, things along those lines. We just go for it, right, and on the basis of that, that's one of the prioritization inputs to the practical experimentation, which means that we can be a little bit bolder and take less risk because we've at least got some reason from the hypothetical side, or the low stakes side of real politics, to think, this is a good bet. Anyway, and maybe we should be even bolder than that, as you say, but that's the plan anyway.

**CHERVENAK:** In pharmaceuticals, you test the animals first and then—

**NEBLO:** Exactly, or do theo[retical] computer models. Now these days they do computer models, and that's the equivalent of the hypothetical experimentation, right and the low stakes dealing with some organization that's governance, not government, where nobody with guns shows up to enforce the rules, you know, but is real, is the equivalent of, not sure they would like to be analogized to animal experimentation, but you get the idea, and there's something apt to the idea if there's lower stakes if things go wrong.

**CHERVENAK:** Yeah, and I think the similar thing needs to be thought more in terms of Congress itself, in terms of experimentation with different kinds of procedures and structures in Congress. Why don't we move on to the actual Congress, now, and once they're in there, right? So on the one side you've got your communication between members and the constituents, and the other side you have member to member communication, Senator to Senator, etc. So you know similarly there, right, you can have a free-for-all. You can have them interact five minutes a day, or you can have them locked in a room for 40 hours a week with a very tight kind of set of structures around their communication. You know, how do you approach, or have you approached this kind of internal debate, discussion, you know dialogue, within Congress itself?

**NEBLO:** A great question. I promise I'm going to answer it, but initially I'm going to give an answer that might sound like a bit of a dodge, but I think it's important, which is to say I don't think these questions can be as separated as cleanly as it might seem at first because one of the pathologies about how Congress talks, how members of Congress talk to each other is induced by audience effects, right. So they're, in a lot of cases, not talking to their colleagues, they're talking to their base. They're looking for YouTube clips and Twitter retweets and invitations to appear on MSNBC or Fox News, right, and so attending to the demand side, meaning what constituents want and expect out of their elected officials in terms of substance and decorum, is part of getting them to actually structure their internal debates into more substantive and civil formats.

That said, I think there are things they can do right now that that are more unilateral, but I do think it's important to say that these are cyclic, these are reciprocally related, and I would add it's also true of getting citizens to pay attention. If it's just ridiculous blood sport on the floor of Congress, only the people who are there to see, you know, world wrestling matches are the ones who are going to watch, and so they're going to play to that audience, and it reinforces itself, right. If you have civil and substantive discussion, you're going to pull into people who want civil and substantive discussion, and more of them.

So but what they can do right now. I am all for sunshine and transparency but actually right now I think we've actually gone too far in certain respects, and there should be more room for what used to be called, you know, back room dealing, as strange as that sounds, giving elected officials the opportunity to try ideas out without getting savaged by their base, especially ideas

for compromise or something that departs from party-based orthodoxies, and this goes for both parties.

I think is really important, creating space to cut deals that everybody consolidates behind before they go public and they get attacked for it, to be able to appeal to a broad swath of average citizens who really like, compromised partisans often don't like compromise, and those are the people who donate and show up and vote or yell at them at town halls, regular town halls. And so creating a little bit of space of privacy I actually think is really helpful.

I think enforcing some of the decorum rules, more, would be helpful, although I think that needs to be experimented with. It could be poison. There could be unforeseen backfire effects on that. You become a cause celebre and end up raising more money by, you know, and nevertheless she persisted, right, or the guy who, you know, told Obama that he was lying during the State of the Union and made a mint of campaign cash off of it, right, to take an example from each side.

So it's really to, so that's not super satisfying, but maybe this is a more satisfying way of saying it, is we want to think about incentives. Almost everything I do is about making good politics compatible with good public policy because most politicians are not going to fall on their swords. We hope that when the republic is at stake they'll do it, and the next Jack Kennedy will put a chapter in his book on profiles and courage about them when they do, but the truth of the matter is most of them aren't going to. And it's not because they're cowards, it's because they think that the person who's going to replace them is going to be worse.

And so we have to think about ways of creating incentives for them to do the right thing, for good public debate to be compatible with good politics and reverse engineer institutional moves to do that. And so the ideas that I've talked about so far, providing them air cover through deliberative town halls, look my constituents are telling me this is what they want and here's why, or providing opportunities to pull together coalitions that don't get strangled in the cradle by activist bases that are the ones that are paying the most attention and will jump on you before you've worked out a deal. There's another. And we could imagine more.

**CHERVENAK:** So, I mean, this kind of back room meeting thing is one that's not, you know, just privacy. We'll call it privacy. Have some private meetings, private deliberations might be one kind of antidote to this over transparency and then that turning the communication from each other to the to the constituency or to at least a subgroup of that constituency. Any other of your cognitive biases you've identified that we might be able to throw in there from the empirical world to improve the dialogue in Congress?

**NEBLO:** Yeah, so there are two. One is helping or just making voters aware of the flip side, if you will, of flip-flopping is being open to persuasion. You know, that members of Congress changing their minds shouldn't automatically be considered a betrayal or being wishy-washy or having a weak backbone. If there's going to be room in Congress for dialogue deliberation and deliberation, there has to be room for persuasion, otherwise we're just, it's hot air for the most

part, right. And so members of Congress changing their positions isn't necessarily a bad thing. Now there are bad forms of it, but if we're paying attention most of us can kind of tell the difference between craven flip-flops and, you know, look there's new information and people made good arguments and I heard from my constituents and I changed my mind. Is that always a bad thing? And basically helping to provide cover because I think that there is a cognitive bias there, and it, but it's in some sense a normative bias, that the rhetoric of flip-flopping has solidified so badly that we don't pause to consider that flip-flopping could just be being open to persuasion, which almost everybody would agree would be a good thing, right.

The other little piece of data is just to speak to something else that I said. There's this thing called the Discourse Quality Index that looks at the quality of discourse. Interesting factoid. The discourse quality of our deliberative town halls is higher, on average, than the members' floor speeches. They do a better job talking to their constituents in these structured environments than they do talking to their colleagues. To me, that is such a sad and telling diagnosis of the decline, if there was a golden age, I don't know if there was, in the world's greatest deliberative body, you know the honorific for the Senate, right. That they're playing to the audience, not to each other. There's, this is not about persuasion anymore, if it ever was. I am of the view that it was at least more than it is now and that we need to think about institutional fixes to change the incentives to move it back.

**CHERVENAK:** What about the different kinds of discussions that are happening, like you know in the different kinds of decisions that need to be made in Congress, some of those decisions are quantitative, so you know you want to spend a billion, I want to spend 750 million, you know, that's one kind of debate or discussion that needs to happen. The other side, there's the values where, you know, there's really no compromise position, right. Both sides may lose in a compromise of values, whereas both sides may win in a compromise when it comes to quantities. Like in a market. Have you thought about that? Because I'm struck by when you talked about the town halls you kept it to a subject right, you made a germaneness requirement, and you know, is that another way to keep things more positive?

**NEBLO:** Oh yeah, yeah. Well in substantive, right and defeating poison pills of creating, there are complicated mathematical findings in political science that shows that as the dimensions of an issue that you're talking about go up, right, that there are all kinds of facets to a problem, the easier it is to manipulate the agenda and to get way off of where, as a matter of fact in the limit, you can be arbitrarily far away from the positions that have the most support among the people voting if you've got agenda power. And of course leadership is stronger now than it used to be, and you can, the majority leadership can just push things any anywhere they want.

Germaneness requirements can really quite substantially limit that and push it back towards the considered views of the floor median. So I think that that's important. Also, it makes it more cognitively tractable for citizens who are following the debate to understand what's going on, otherwise you have to quit your day job. These things are just way too complicated. Even, I got a PhD in political science and it is my day job, and I can't follow, because they deliberately, that's part of the strategy is to make it so complicated that it can't be, you can't be held into

account, and to create, make it so high dimensional that you can push it to wherever you want it to go. And so I completely agree. I think that's an important way to go. There's a little caveat in that some issues are properly what are called non-separable, right. Take an example, when we did our deliberative town halls on immigration, lots of people, I would say the majority of both Democrats and Republicans were open to fairly robust immigration conditional on genuinely sealing the southern border, right. Fine, we're a nation of immigrants, let's leave, let's bring people in, that's how we renew ourselves, but it's got to be orderly. So if you can secure the undocumented flow of immigrants, then fine, I'll up the number of legal immigrants. That's, that was bordering on the majority opinion, but it's two things, right, and those have to go together, otherwise people start flipping around and changing their views, right.

So that's the caveat on germaneness, is that if something is properly linked, two issues are properly linked, are non-separable, well then then agenda power lies in separating them. Then you can manipulate things by not letting people link them.

**CHERVENAK:** Yeah, that's a fascinating area to be thinking more about and how, what naturally goes together and what doesn't.

**NEBLO:** Yeah.

**CHERVENAK:** I think that—

**NEBLO:** It's a hard question. There's no magic bullet formula for figuring that out.

**CHERVENAK:** The same thing applies to even to committee jurisdictions, right, which should be—

**NEBLO:** Sure.

**CHERVENAK:** Committee versus not, what's logically connected or has externalities on other committees.

**NEBLO:** Yeah.

**CHERVENAK:** So great. Well let's move on to just a general topic for a minute, which is the concept of information and misinformation in all these discussions and dialogues, right. So my background is science, where at least the general opinion, and probably true of most, is most scientists they have a goal, which is to discover truth, right, and they're doing work and they're having debates with the ultimate, they have a common goal. This common goal is truth. Whereas in politics, people have different goals. They define good government in different ways, and that leads people to that, at least logically that would tell me that information, whatever I create is just a means to achieve my goal rather than just to achieve some common goal, right. And that means that misinformation should be just as useful as real information to try to get what I want. Now there are counter, there are forces against everybody using

misinformation. In the past that might have been reputation. These days I'm not so sure, so maybe can you talk, with that kind of a context, I guess, could you talk a little bit about what you've seen in, with this concept of misinformation, false facts etc., getting into the debate, and how do you handle that, how do you re-establish some kind of some kind of a quality control on the information you use, at least the facts used in discussion?

**NEBLO:** Yeah. Before I do that I hope it's okay if I make a theoretical comment because your opening setup relates to, I think one of the most important philosophical commitments, contributions I've made in my written work, and it's a tweak or a variation on what you said. The way people often frame this is that either value questions are cognitive, meaning they're like science, right, there's a right answer, right, or they're not. Anything goes, right. And I have a position on this that I think is somewhat distinctive but I think is important because I don't think anything goes, and I know you didn't quite say that, but my view is we are seeking something when we have political deliberation, if it's genuine political deliberation, and that is to rule out policy choices that don't have public justifications given the resources of our norms and traditions in culture and populous.

Now that, and I call this the One Right Set thesis. The view that values are fully cognitive is called the One Right Answer Thesis, right, is that we're trying to get the right answer, right. My view is that that's right, that's correct, but that it's like the answer to  $X^2 = 1$ . What's the answer to  $X^2 = 1$ ? Well, it's the set one and negative one, and if you say it's just one, you're wrong. Both are justifiable and satisfy those criteria.

Now in politics I think typically there are, we're not going to have one element to the set. There are going to be multiple things that we could justifiably do with political power, and past that we have to find some other way of picking among them, but that the front end deliberative end of the political process is ruling out the stuff that's a bridge to nowhere, that is, that just is a sop to, you know, there's the famous bridge to nowhere allocation appropriation in Alaska, which was in, I'm, you know maybe you disagree, but I have inter-coder rater reliability, just everybody agrees that that was a misuse of public reason. It looked like an argument, but it was a disingenuous argument, and what deliberation is designed to do is rule those things out.

And then we have to shift to negotiation, to power, to counting votes, to log roles, to all the other things that we're familiar with in politics, power politics, to choose among the things that are left in the set. And to me that's an important caveat because it puts limits on what you can permissively do in terms of manipulating information, right. It's not purely strategic, you're damaging that process.

Now I realize, you know, maybe that's barely a speed bump to the most cynical of political actors, but it's, but without that we don't have an explanation as to why misinformation is bad, right, if it's really just, it's all a power game, I mean there's no better and worse arguments to be had, then what's wrong with muddying the waters, right? So that that's the front end, and to me that's an important caveat and explains what might seem like academic fussiness over deliberation.

Okay, now what do we do about factual misinformation? The first thing to say is one of my colleagues, a fellow named Tom Wood, a political psychologist, public opinion specialist in Ohio State's political science department, is really good, done some amazing work, and the big upshot of it is that the, that misinformation is less damaging to decision making than is commonly thought, and the reason is that far and away the people who are consuming misinformation, propagating misinformation, and making decisions on the basis of misinformation would have made the same decisions anyway. They're using the misinformation to justify things that they were committed to ex-ante, and so the misinformation is not changing as many people's minds as is commonly thought, one.

And two, it's more correctable than commonly thought. There were some early results showing what was called the backfire effect, that corrections actually backfired and people dug in. It turns out that happens in like three or four percent of the cases. The vast majority of circumstances, it works like it's supposed to work. People move back to, in the face of good information, and so part of it is to say the problem isn't quite as acute as it's sometimes presented, and the solutions I think are actually more straightforward. Get the fact checks out there, people do respond to them.

So I hope that doesn't sound glib. I think it is a serious problem, but the echo chamber versions aren't where the big issues are because those people were going to stick on those positions anyway, for the most part, not in every case, but for the most part.

**CHERVENAK:** Excellent. So some optimism there which is—

**NEBLO:** Yeah, yeah. I'm accused of being an inveterate optimist, but I like to think that it's just a little bit of relief from the grinding pessimism that is partly warranted, but I don't think fully warranted by recent events.

**CHERVENAK:** Right. Well let's move on to the common questions I ask all of our guests so I can later compare the answers, if you're ready for that round.

**NEBLO:** Sure, absolutely.

**CHERVENAK:** The first one is, and I know you've talked to the subject before, but what do you think congressional representation should mean?

**NEBLO:** Good. So I talked a little bit about this, so I'll try to be quick to save time for other questions, but I developed this, or my co-authors and I developed this idea of directly representative democracy, and it's representative in the sense that we're not talking about direct democracy. It's a, you know, a republic, although sometimes I think that little phrase is misused, but as Madison talked about it, we are a republic, not a direct democracy, and I think in most cases that's a good thing.

That said, I think that the individual citizens shouldn't have to work through parties or interest groups to have a meaningful say in the policy process, which is more or less the situation we have right now. That's the directly representative part, right, they shouldn't have to go through parties and interest groups, both for moral reasons, but also because parties and interest groups almost always have their minds made up when they go in, and that defeats deliberative democracy. A lot of individual citizens just want to get the answer right by their own values, so, and that goes back to the ongoing republican consultation and ongoing deliberative accountability.

Those are the two big chunks of directly representative democracy. And the idea is that representatives do make the decisions that they in most cases not develop directly to the citizens, but that those representatives have obligations and obligations that trigger bad consequences if they don't meet those obligations, to do broad-based consultation before making their decisions and to incorporate that into their decision-making process in a serious way. And if they're not going to be responsive, to explain why in the deliberative accountability phase, and get punished if their justification isn't good or if they lie about it.

**CHERVENAK:** So since you're a philosopher, I'm going to ask you a couple of follow-ups. So it sounds like you think that the representative has to make their own judgments but obviously getting as much information as they can from the, decision-supporting information, I should say, from their constituents. And I'm assuming that you mean all the constituents, not just the primary voters or the majority.

**NEBLO:** Oh, absolutely. No, that's critical. I think they should positively try to re-correct away from the ones that, the usual suspects.

**CHERVENAK:** Okay, now what about future generations? So far you've been talking, you know, even earlier when we talked, it was as if all the constituents were currently alive and voting. What about, you know, the next generation down, about three generations from now? Does the current representative represent them, or just the current constituents that are in the district and voting or will soon to be voting?

**NEBLO:** That's a doozy. That's a super, as you well know, that's a deep and difficult question. I can only sketch a few considerations and principles. It's way too deep and complex to give a fully satisfying answer to, but here's how I think about it. First of all, being able to represent those future generations, we don't have directly represented, we don't have the opportunity for ongoing republican consultation, so the decision support procedures coming in create much more uncertainty about what their informed views and rationales on the matter would be, which I think actually gives us some moral permission to put extra weight on the current generation. Not to discount the future entirely, but to give them extra weight.

It also means that we have to, in a sense, imaginatively project ourselves, meaning the elected officials, but I actually think the current generation of constituents have an obligation to do this, to think through how their great-grandchildren are going, are likely to think about the issue as

best as they can. And you know, the climate change debate is the obvious place where, and potentially debt. That one I think is more complicated, but where it's just, they're going to think different than people who are going to die in the next 120 years. You know, reliably, they're going to be dead in 120 years, so those are the two big pieces of the puzzle is that I am not an equal weight person. I am in the abstract, but I think the reliability of being able to assess that means that in practice, we can put more weight on the current generation, but that in compensation, that devolves extra responsibilities under both elected officials and current voters to do their darndest and to be honest with themselves when it means that it might lead to sacrifice in their generation about the likely informed views and needs of future generations. I hope that's satisfying enough. I realize that's pretty thirty thousand foot.

**CHERVENAK:** That's a tough one so, but it sounds like you think they are, they should be, a member should be representing everyone in the future but that this deliberative piece forces them to listen more carefully to the current constituents, is that right?

**NEBLO:** Yeah, I would put it somewhat differently, is that representatives have degrees of obligation, you know, so for example I think they have obligations to their non-citizen residents in their districts. Not the same obligations that they have to citizens, in that they have further obligations to voting eligible citizens, voting age citizens, and for that matter I think they have obligations to people living in Haiti. It's just that they're much weaker obligations to the people voting in Haiti, but if they can do, if they can do much better by the people in Haiti by trivial compromises with the well-being of their constituents, I think that needs to be weighed. Similarly, they have those obligations to future generations, but they're not as strong as the people that they have the most direct, institutionally-stipulated obligations to, which are their voting constituents.

**CHERVENAK:** So you'd put a discount rate on the future. What, do you have a percentage?

**NEBLO:** No, that would be a fool's errand, man. Again, in principle, it's zero, or one, you know it, that you don't discount. But the uncertainty of being able to consult them ex-ante, and the uncertainty of the trade-offs that they are going to face, does create a discount rate. I guess the default would be something like the median discount rate intra-personally for a person, I don't know, I would need, that's off the top of my head, but that's where I would start and then think about theoretical reasons to adjust up or down.

**CHERVENAK:** How would your ideal congress allocate its time, and by this I mean in DC versus in the district, you know, that's—

**NEBLO:** Right, right, right. Okay again I'm going to fudge a little bit here and say I'm not, depending on what you but mean by ideal, I don't think that's the right question, in that in politics the best is very often the enemy of the good, and if what you mean is the ideal Congress or ideal allocation, given imaginable nearby worlds, given imaginable reforms, given imaginable voter, you know, responsiveness, things along those lines, that's what I'm going to try to answer.

So not just, you know, taking the status quo is entirely given, but not just, you know, making voters and elected representatives not need to sleep and have day jobs and you know, and be purely altruistic, either, because I think that sort of thinking often leads us to make bad decisions in politics.

It's the best reforms we can come up with in reasonably nearby worlds, plausible reforms. And there I think one calculation that I've made is that if every member of Congress spent just two hours a week doing ongoing republican consultation, like deliberative town halls, but you can imagine other versions of it, instead of fundraising, with, and who do you fundraise to? Party activists and organized interests, right, but so doing broader republican consultation that in the space, so if they just spent two hours a week doing that, in the term of a Senator, every six years they could reach a quarter of the electorate. I can show you the math. And that's just at two hundred people per session, not seven thousand.

That to me would be huge, and I don't think it's crazy. It's not like I think it's going to happen in the short run, but we've shown that the returns on approval and even voting offset what they probably, the benefits they get from those two hours of extra fundraising, so that's a big one. The second one—

**CHERVENAK:** So, two hours a week of constituent service.

**NEBLO:** Of constituent consultation.

**CHERVENAK:** Sorry, yes. Of course. Engagement, we'll call it.

**NEBLO:** Yeah, and broad-based, special outreach, ongoing republican consultation as in the terminology that I've set up. So that would be my number one change. Number two, refund and unleash the Congressional Research Service. My goodness, like that's some of the best money that the Congress used to spend and Office of Technology, Science and Technology, revive it and spend some time reading reports and bills, empowering the back benchers to crowdsource good judgment in legislation. The leadership—

**CHERVENAK:** So does that mean, so I'm trying to get you quantitative here, so how many hours, you know, how many days, is it 40 hours a week, is it two—

**NEBLO:** No, that's probably too much, but maybe, I'm pulling this out of the air, but I guess an hour a day, so let's call it six hours a week. I'm going to give them this, you know Friday or Sunday or Saturday off, depending on their religion or secular need for rest, so I'll just again ballpark it at six hours a week, but they should be spending an hour a day informing them in a way that warrants thinking that the Condorcet Jury Theorem, that crowdsourcing the information of these different deliberators will actually add up to wisdom and better judgments.

Right now the conditions for that happening do not obtain, the leadership sidelines the minority completely and even sidelines their own backbenchers on the vast majority of decision-making in a way that completely subverts the logic of crowdsourcing wisdom and good decision making power. That seems to me to be crazy, and right now members are so, there's no incentive because they're not listened to, and they're so overworked on other things that it doesn't make sense. So giving them the incentives and carving out the opportunity cost time to actually think seriously about legislation and provide crowdsourced input to making good legislation I think would be my number two reform.

The third one would be opportunities for serious dialogue and deliberation, horizontal, within the Congress, of the sort that we talked about. Some of it would be behind closed doors, some of it would be broadcast on C-SPAN, but hopefully within the context of altered incentives that rewarded substantive discussion and inch back towards being a great deliberative body. So those are my top three. I could probably go on, but there are probably other questions that you want to ask, too, so.

**CHERVENAK:** Those are your top three suggestions on time allocation, is that right?

**NEBLO:** Yeah.

**CHERVENAK:** So what about, like my next question is really about the fundamental institutional improvement, you know, within a 50-year time frame. So you know this is, this one gets a little bit deeper, although you're already making sort of fundamental suggestions.

**NEBLO:** Yeah so, the big one you I think you've already picked up on, right, which is to re-empower back benchers. Now, and that can be done in limited sorts of ways, but right now we've just completely dissipated the, and I am of the view, I mean there are some bad members of Congress, bad both in, you know, moral senses and some in that they're not very impressive, but I actually think that is decidedly the exception rather than the rule. I, in working with the members, and maybe it's the ones I work with, these are by and large very impressive people, most of whom want to serve the republic.

They don't always behave that way, but I think that's often an incentive problem, but these are by and large not yahoos that, and I think there's a public perception that they are. There is a ton of talent in the Congress, and right now we are grotesquely under-utilizing it. And reforms oriented towards giving people incentives to become policy specialists again, so reinforcing, in limited and slightly altered ways, I'm not just saying completely turn back the clock, but re-empowering committees, re-empowering backbenchers all the way back to freshmen, and finding ways to intelligently and wisely crowdsource the expertise that would get developed if you change those incentives because right now, what are the incentives?

It's to go grandstand to raise money off of micro donations on YouTube or to just grossly pander to the mega donors, and that's what's distorting policy, in my mind. That's what's moved us away from a correlation with the informed judgments and rationales of the center of

their districts. And to my mind, that's the number one criterion is the informed reflective views of the modal constituent, not that they should be slavish, and to some extent there can be post hoc evaluation of that. You know, you defy what they think are their informed views, but if you get too out of line with what their informed views are after they've had a chance to walk around in the policy, even then there's some room to defy them, but not a lot. Then you're starting to stray against democracy in my view.

And so again, backwards engineering institutional reforms that change those incentives, and internally I think the big ones are devolving some of the power away from the leadership again into committees to incentivize expertise, and into amendment processes with coalition criteria to incentivize cooperation among backbenchers to come up with creative tweaks on policy that crowdsource wisdom and information.

**CHERVENAK:** Great, well next question is what book or article most shaped your thinking with respect to Congressional reform?

**NEBLO:** Great. It's the Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenerger, and Stokes APSR piece from 2018 on legislative staff and representation in Congress. It's just a brilliant and important paper, and it shows two really important things. One insiders kind of already knew, and the other they would privately admit to knowing.

The first is, massive amounts of decision making goes on through staff, that representation, that we have to start thinking of representation at the level of the office, that legislative directors and chiefs of staff are incredibly consequential and powerful people because the members don't have that much time and spend a lot of it fundraising, and if they trust their LDs and their chiefs of staff, they're often deferent to them, which means in practice they're making policy.

And so supporting them, retaining the best people, getting them professional development, directly channeling information to them, and incentivizing them in career growth in being substantive deliberators, I think and getting diversification and descriptive characteristics in staff, those five things I think are way more important. It flies completely under the radar but are really important.

And the second one is that they, the staff and the members, really have shockingly bad clue about what their modal constituents' informed opinion is even on big ticket issues, and privately some of the members and a lot of the staffers will admit that, but they can't say it in public because they have no way of knowing right now. There's really no good way to find out, and so they just muddle through, and I think a lot of them do their honest level best. But they've got terrible channels, positively misleading indicators, you know, when they tick off the calls and letters that they get in. Those positively mislead them. They distort judgment and in the directions that the paper that I just quoted.

**CHERVENAK:** The last question is really about your plans for the future. What do you have coming up, and you know with the town halls and with all your other work?

**NEBLO:** I'll just stick with one. Well, I'll go in a little bit of depth about one and just tick off the others. The one that I'm most excited about is, we just got a grant from the science wing of the Department of Education, the IES Institute for Educational Sciences, to bring our deliberative town hall model into high school civics classrooms. And so we're developing curriculum for high school civics teachers, for seniors primarily, to research an issue, understand deliberative politics a little bit better, and I was going to say culminating, but there's actually an important coda, but culminating for the time being, I'll say, with a deliberative town hall with their member of Congress, where it's just seniors in high school that have the undivided attention of their member of Congress for an hour and a half on a specific issue.

Afterwards, there's all kinds of follow-on. They prepare policy briefs for their member and staff, they get an opportunity to deliberate with students from another high school represented by a member from the opposite party to expose them to difference in case there's too much correlation within the district, there's lots of features to it, but the idea here. There's a Chinese proverb. The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The second-best time is today. If I've already quoted that, I apologize. This is planting the tree for 20 years from now when those people are running the country, and really the idea is to get newly enfranchised citizens the moment that they're launching their empowered civic lives a practical experience in a better form of politics in some, an alternative to the cesspool of our public discourse, and to see whether that makes a difference. And hopefully if it does, with cohort replacement, to move the supertanker a couple of degrees back towards civic hope over time. That's the most important one. We've got a collegiate level version of that, we're looking at other levels of government all the way down to school boards and other countries. The European Union, we've already done some with Australian members of Parliament, and trying, scientifically trying, to understand whether directly representative democracy generalizes into other political systems, like strong party parliamentary democracies, and what sort of adaptations it would have to make to do so profitably, and also to take federalism seriously in the context of the United States.

**CHERVENAK:** Fantastic. Well, best of luck with that. It's an amazing program, and, you know, Professor Neblo, thank you so much for joining us. It's been awesome.

**NEBLO:** Thank you so much for your time. This was a great discussion, and I think you do amazing work at the Institute. It's so substantive and different. Just keep it up and I'm grateful that you thought my input was worth your time.

**CHERVENAK:** Thank you very much.

**NEBLO:** Okay, take care.