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978-1-107-11726-6 — Politics with the People
Michael A. Neblo , Kevin M. Esterling , David M. J. Lazer
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Politics *with* the People

Many citizens in the United States and abroad fear that democratic institutions have become weak, and continue to weaken. *Politics with the People* develops the principles and practice of “directly representative democracy” – a new way of connecting citizens and elected officials to improve representative government. Sitting members of Congress agreed to meet with groups of their constituents via online, deliberative town hall meetings to discuss some of the most important and controversial issues of the day. The results from these experiments reveal a model of how our democracy could work, where politicians consult with and inform citizens in substantive discussions, and where otherwise marginalized citizens participate and are empowered. Moving beyond our broken system of interest-group politics and partisan blood sport, directly representative reforms will help restore citizens’ faith in the institutions of democratic self-government, precisely at a time when those institutions themselves feel dysfunctional and endangered.

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Politics *with* the People

Building a Directly Representative Democracy

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*MN: For Eileen, Anna, and Kate – the people I’m building
a life with.*

*KE: To my wonderful wife Emily, who is always there for me
when I need constructive, two-way communication, and to my
two kids, Zachary and Cadence, who excel in direct and delibera-
tive engagement (sometimes with their parents).*

*DL: I dedicate this volume to the memories and legacies of my
grandmother, Lina Dinerstein, and of my mother, Estelle James,
both of whom died during work on this book. My grandmother,
born in Austria-Hungary, fled from Cossacks when she was a
child, was a refugee during World War I, and immigrated to New
York shortly after the war ended. My mother was an economist –
one of the first women to receive her PhD in economics from
MIT – and whose work on pension reform has benefited millions
of people around the world. It was in her house in Washington
that we conceived much of the early work on this project. They
had the power of imagination and force of will to create a better
world for the next generation.*

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*Designs are brought to nothing where there is no counsel:
But in the multitude of counselors they succeed.*
– Proverbs 15:22

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Acknowledgments

This book is about people coming together in dialogue to build something new and worthwhile. We want to begin, then, by thanking those who entered into dialogue with us to build the book itself. Anything worthwhile in what we have written is due, in large part, to them.

The dialogue began with a phone call from Brad Fitch of the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF). Brad proposed joint research on how to help Congressional offices use new communications technology to serve their constituents better – that is, to improve the way that representative democracy works. In some ways, this whole project was CMF’s idea. We have been extraordinarily fortunate to have them adopt us into their organizational family. We thank the entire CMF team, especially its three successive executive directors during this project: Rick Shapiro, Beverly Bell, and Brad Fitch. CMF’s remarkable research staff – Kathy Goldschmidt, Nicole Folk Cooper, Collin Burden, and Tim Hysom – taught us more about Congress than any of our courses in graduate school. That we owe CMF a tremendous debt of gratitude goes without saying. What most people do not realize, however, is that the whole nation, really, owes a similar debt of gratitude for the daily, unheralded work CMF does to help Congress serve our country better.

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It is not customary for public opinion researchers to thank their sample of respondents. But the over 2,000 people who participated in our study were not merely "subjects" in our experiments. They are, and were acting as, our fellow citizens. Those who talked to their representatives took the time to engage in a form of real (if unusual) politics. They made their voices heard in the democratic process in a way that goes beyond voting, donating, or shouting. For this, we are deeply grateful.

Three colleagues stand out for special thanks because of their crucial contributions to this project. In addition to coauthoring the articles on which Chapters 3 and 7 are based, Anand Sokhey provided detailed and helpful feedback on the entire manuscript at a crucial juncture. Ryan Kennedy, also a coauthor on those papers, currently leads the team conducting our second wave of research on consultation with Congress. (Thus, any remaining questions you have upon finishing this book should be directed to Ryan.) William Minozzi was the lead author on a paper with results crucial to Chapters 5 and 6. In addition to his extensive and insightful comments on the manuscript, William devoted a session of his graduate course to discussing a draft. We thank both him and the participants in the seminar for their helpful feedback. William is also a key member of the second wave research team.

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Strange as it may sound, the three of us would like publicly to thank each other. Our growth as colleagues and friends through this project has been among the most rewarding experiences of our careers.

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