



Effort seeks to give voice to everyday Oklahomans

Our Views Citizen Cabinet exercise getting started

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CITIZENS often complain that their voices are ignored by the people who represent them in Washington. How can the average homemaker compete with a K Street lobbyist?

A group called "Voice Of the People" wants to do just what its name suggests — provide a voice to everyday Americans regarding important issues such as entitlement reform, defense spending or transportation.

Oklahoma is on the ground floor of this effort. It's one of three states whose residents will be asked to become members of a "Citizen Cabinet" that will study key issues and provide recommendations to members of Congress. Oklahoma will provide a red-state perspective; the other two states are Maryland (a blue state) and Virginia (purple).

Participants will take part in a policymaking simulation in which they'll be briefed on issues, weigh the various arguments pro and con, and then make recommendations. Information about each issue will have been reviewed by experts and congressional staffers from both parties. Participants will learn about policy options that are actually on the table and have to weigh those.

"This is really the Madisonian idea, to engage the reason of the people," says Steven Kull, president of Voice Of the People.

So instead of simply answering yes or no to a poll that asks whether more money should be spent on a certain issue, the VOP exercises will provide participants the consequences of removing funds from one area and directing them to another, or will explain to them why one side believes additional funding is needed and the other side doesn't. The intention is to put participants in the shoes of members of Congress.

The studying and simulated policymaking will be conducted online. Using scientific methodology, VOP plans to identify about 850 households across Oklahoma to take part; the sample will mirror the population demographically. Internet access will be provided to those who don't already have it. About once a month, Citizen Cabinet members will be asked for their input on a major issue. The project will last roughly a year.

Recommendations from the Citizen Cabinets will be provided to members of Congress, the administration and the media. Findings will be broken down by district and state, so members can see how their constituents feel. The same policymaking simulation subsequently will be posted online, to allow others to go through the exercise if they choose.

Kull believes the Citizen Cabinet recommendations will provide a counter to the sway of special interest groups, and could give D.C. lawmakers some cover when it's time to vote on an issue. He says response from the Oklahoma congressional delegation has been positive. Overall, creation of this program has been well received on both sides of the aisle; VOP's advisory board includes more than 35 former members of Congress.

This is an interesting, serious idea with the potential to do some good. If you're among the Oklahomans chosen to take part and get an envelope in the coming weeks with a Citizen Cabinet logo affixed, we encourage you to open it, review the enclosed materials and give serious consideration to participating.