



ADVOCACY:

New nonprofit tries to blunt special-interest influence on Hill decisionmaking

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A new nonprofit organization is trying to diminish the influence of big money and special-interest groups on congressional policy debates.

Called Voice of the People, the group's goal is to restore citizens' voices to the political process -- and lower the partisan temperature on Capitol Hill in the bargain.

Voters often say they are closer to the ideological middle than their representatives in Congress. And when the political discourse is dominated by polar extremes, by organizations and advocacy groups that are funded by big-moneyed interests, it only fuels the voters' contempt for government.

So a senior research scholar at the University of Maryland and a seasoned political operative are trying to do something about it.

"This is an idea to have an impartial third party, a marker, to tell Congress where the people in their districts really are," said Richard Parsons, Voice of the People's executive director.

Yesterday, the group went public with its first in-depth survey of voter attitudes on Social Security reform, using Maryland -- and one congressional district within the state -- as a testing ground. But it is hoping to branch out across the country and to tackle an array of issues, including energy and environmental policy.

Its goal is nothing less than to help elected officials make more informed choices -- and to increase voter turnout. "People are not participating in the political process because they're smart, not because they're stupid," Parsons said in an interview. "They're perceiving that their voice has no impact."

Parsons, who has worked in politics and as a business consultant over the past quarter-century, is working with Steven Kull, a public opinion expert who is senior research scholar at the University of Maryland's Center for International and Security Studies, to launch the project. They are hoping to set up ideologically balanced "citizens' panels" around the country that will weigh in on the burning issues of the day, giving lawmakers unadorned opinions about where the public stands -- without the interference of pollsters, cable news, talk radio, advocacy groups and other professional provocateurs.

"Not Fox News facts, not MSNBC facts -- actual facts," Parsons explained.

Voice of the People is using three states for a pilot project -- Democratic-leaning Maryland, Republican-heavy

Oklahoma and a swing state, Virginia. Drilling down further, the group is using two congressional districts in its pilot -- Maryland's 7th, based in Baltimore and represented by Rep. Elijah Cummings (D), and Oklahoma's 4th, in the south-central part of the state, which is represented by Rep. Tom Cole (R).

Cummings and Cole were chosen not just because their districts are so diametrically opposed. Cummings is the top Democrat on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee and has spent his career trying to make the political process more inclusive.

Cole ran his own political consulting firm before being elected to Congress. He's an unabashed conservative and partisan -- he even served as chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee a few election cycles ago. But he has become increasingly critical of the forces within the House GOP that are hostile to government and have helped make Congress so dysfunctional.

Both congressional offices are cooperating with the project, Parsons said.

Poring through voter files, the organization plans to identify 120,000 people to participate in the project nationwide. To become a member of a "citizens' cabinet," voters will have to agree to take an online 20- or 25-minute survey on a burning issue perhaps once a month.

The organization will provide fact-based briefing papers that the cabinet members will read before taking the survey. The group will then provide the survey results to the members of Congress. The surveys -- called "policy-making simulations" -- seek to replicate the process that policymakers go through when taking a position on an issue. It's a far more rigorous process than merely answering polling questions.

"The hope is, the members who see these results over the next few months will talk to their colleagues about it," Parsons said.

For the Maryland pilot, Voice of the People surveyed 535 people statewide and 438 people in Cummings' district. Large majorities in the statewide cabinet recommended reducing Social Security benefits for the top quarter of earners (76 percent), raising the full retirement age to 68 years old (84 percent), raising the cap on income subject to the payroll tax (87 percent) and raising the payroll tax rate from 6.2 to 6.6 percent (76 percent). The numbers were similar for the 7th District.

The statewide survey had a 4.2-point margin of error, and the congressional district survey had a 4.7-point error margin.

Voice of the People believes taking these steps would eliminate two-thirds of the Social Security shortfall and notes that at least two in three Republicans and Democrats endorse these policy solutions.

"It's often said that Social Security is a 'third rail' in politics, but given the right tools, majorities from both parties agree on how to fix most of the shortfall," said Kull, who is VOP's president. "Marylanders are more united than divided."

Parsons and Kull and their colleagues have had about 65 meetings with member of Congress or their staffs, and have been met with widespread enthusiasm.

"In our meetings, we didn't have a single person tell us this was a crappy idea," Parsons said. It was as if the lawmakers and their aides were desperate for ways to extract themselves from the ideologically driven special interests that dominate their political parties -- and were looking for political cover to do the right thing by knowing more authoritatively where the people stand.

“You can take that or leave that as a representative,” Parsons said. “But they should at least know where the public is. ... The one thing that’s lacking as they make their decisions is the reasoning of the public.”

Voice of the People has a robust list of bipartisan former officeholders serving on its advisory board, including former North Dakota Sen. Byron Dorgan (D) and former Texas Rep. Martin Frost (D). Republicans include former Delaware Rep. Mike Castle and Carlos Gutierrez, who was secretary of Commerce under President George W. Bush.

“The citizen cabinet is a win-win for the American people and Congress,” Frost said.

Parsons said the pilot program will run for about half a year, and then the group’s organizers aim to take it national, with financial assistance from foundations and other do-gooders.

He said it’s likely that one round of surveys will deal with environmental matters because “there are a lot of energy and climate questions that are going to be debated in this Congress.”