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Browning, Robert X.

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Each year the U.S. Congress recesses in August, leaving political journalists to search elsewhere for a compelling story. But in 2009, Washington reporters had only to drive three hours north to Lebanon, Pennsylvania, to see Senator Arlen Specter (D-PA) shoved, shouted down, and threatened with God’s eternal wrath by citizens angry about health care proposals (Rucker, 2009). Similar scenes played out during in-district meetings across the country that month. The crowds that swelled high school gymnasiums, fire halls,
and church sanctuaries took almost everyone by surprise (Urbina, 2009),
and the vitriol expressed at these meetings concerned many. Joe Klein (2009,
p. 24), for example, wrote that the imbroglio revealed a “public malignancy”
that “threatens the democratic fabric of our nation.”

Undoubtedly, the health care town halls made good television. C-SPAN
carried many of these meetings, but the network began airing and archiving
such forums long before the high drama of the Affordable Care Act. In 1993,
for instance, Senator Russ Feingold (D-WI) earnestly answered questions at
one of his Wisconsin listening sessions; Trent Lott (R-MS; 1993) joked with
high school students in Southaven, Mississippi; and a casual and confident
Bill Bradley (D-NJ; 1993) spoke with constituents on the Jersey shore. As with
most congressional town halls in the C-SPAN collection, these examples barely
resemble the more recent health care forums: fewer than 50 people attend, no
one yells or carries placards, and the tenor of the dialogue is civil if not friendly.

While town hall meetings seldom become spectacles, the genre does en-
compas the possibilities, failings, and contradictions of representative gover-
nance. The term town hall harkens the New England town meeting, the sine
qua non of democracy according to American mythology. As political histo-
rarian Frank Bryan (2003, p. x) wrote, the town hall meeting is thought to be
“real democracy—where people make decisions that matter, on the spot, in
face-to-face assemblies that have the force of law.” Town hall meetings there-
fore convey a “vision of participatory democracy” (Ryfe, 2001, p. 182) but give
citizens only an indirect voice in political decision making. Although these
events are sometimes referred to as listening sessions, politicians in fact do
most of the talking (Kay, 2012). For these reasons, pundits might worry over
the incendiary health care town halls, but scholars would be equally justified
in studying the acquiescence usually displayed at such gatherings.

Whether dramatic or mundane, hostile or reverential, congressional
town halls have value. There, citizens come face-to-face with politics, politi-
cians, and other citizens—an increasingly precious experience in the media
age (Hart, 1999). In addition, elected leaders can establish their legitimacy
before an engaged slice of the citizenry because of the close quarters within
the town hall format (Shamir, 2013). As ceremonies of American political
culture, congressional town halls also serve as venues in which the cultural
mythos can be performed and reaffirmed (Rothenbuhler, 1998; Ryfe, 2001).
Thanks to the C-SPAN Video Library (http://www.c-span.org), scholars have access to audio and video of many of these events, usually in their entirety.

Aware of the unique opportunity provided by the C-SPAN Archives and the peculiarities of town hall meetings, I analyzed 55 in-district public forums held by U.S. senators and representatives between 1993 and 2012. My sample included meetings held in 28 different states around the country. Republicans and Democrats sponsored these gatherings in equal number. Collectively, they bear an uncertain resemblance to the direct democracy from which they took their name, but they live up to their reputations as sites of ritualistic interaction between leaders and citizens.

I found that in town hall meetings, legislators use a language of deference to establish and reinforce social cohesion between themselves and their constituents. Despite the conventional wisdom that politicians will simply say anything to stay in their constituents’ good graces, deferential rhetoric is a serious and complicated business. Drawing on the cultural rules of polite interaction, as well as the unique truths of American culture, political leaders achieve the proper demeanor when interfacing with citizens only through rhetorical finesse, balancing the words of esteem for others with those of personal integrity and independence. The most adroit and disciplined politicians use this delicate linguistic balance to evoke relations of mutual respect between themselves and citizens. In their weaker moments, legislative leaders accept the risks of a more radical version of the language, honoring citizens by dishonoring themselves.

DEMOCRATIC DEFERENCE, AMERICAN STYLE

Deference permeates human society, as social actors of high and low status ritualistically honor one another through displays of appreciation (Goffman, 1956, 1959). Conversationalists use deference to mitigate face threats (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Team members rely on one another’s specialized capabilities when solving problems (Houser & Lovaglia, 2002). Low-knowledge citizens defer to scientific experts when forming their opinions on controversial issues (Brossard & Nisbet, 2007). Deference surrounds us, and social science and humanistic inquiry have frequently mined it for insights.
Conventional wisdom, on the other hand, presumes that political deference is a straightforward matter. As the following critics imply, politics and acquiescence supposedly go hand-in-hand:

Those are my principles. If you don’t like them, I have others.
—Groucho Marx

If a politician found he had cannibals among his constituents, he would promise them missionaries for dinner.
—H. L. Menken

Politics is supposed to be the second oldest profession. I have come to realize that it bears a very close resemblance to the first.
—Ronald Reagan

But contrary to the common presumption, deferential political leadership requires a great deal of nuance. Because of its cultural history and unique political system, U.S. politics demands an artful balance between respect offered and respect retained.

The roots of American deference go back to the 19th century, when the citizens of the new society developed a preferred style of social discourse in keeping with their egalitarian sensibilities (Cmiel, 1990; Smith, 1999). Particularly in the United States, says Goffman (1956, p. 482), “differences in rank are seen as so great a threat to the equilibrium of the system that the ceremonial aspect of behavior functions not as a way of iconically expressing these differences but as a way of carefully counterbalancing them.” Consequently, Americans hold to “conventions of flexibility and conviviality,” writes Barbara Kellerman (1984, p. 30), conventions that mandate that “a successful interpersonal actor in this country is to undertake frequent pro-social or friendly communications, and it is to avoid unwarranted expressions of dominance. Quite simply, we are of a temper that is both democratic and friendly” (Kellerman, 1984, p. 30). U.S. leaders must therefore symbolically defer to citizens because social cohesion necessitates it and American culture expects it. For a politician to do any less would seem antisocial or even imperial by U.S. standards.
But at the same time, leadership requires something more than pure deference. As Jennifer Lees-Marshment (2012, p. 165) observes, not just in the United States, but “globally, in established democracies, there is a trend towards a public that wants to feel a sense of involvement in political decision-making but [that] also desires strong, principled leadership.” John Gastil (1994) argues that democratic leadership is conceptually distinct from authority, but lay audiences seem to conflate the two (Barker & Carman, 2012). As Tulis (1987) observed of the U.S. presidency, it was “intended to be representative of the people, but not merely responsive to popular will.” Rather, “the president was to be free enough from the daily shifts in public opinion so that he could refine it” (p. 39). An editorial board in Alaska summed up the dilemma as faced by those serving in Congress: “Sen. Lisa Murkowski late last month again behaved in a way that has drawn both admiration and anger from her constituents—she reserved judgment and listened to all sides before casting her vote” (“Sound Judgment,” 2013).

For these reasons, democratic leadership ultimately entails some deference—but not too much. As Barker and Carman (2012, p. 152) write, total defiance of public opinion “might not really count as leadership at all” because autocratic control makes social relations between leader and citizen unnecessary. According to Hanna Pitkin (1967), Edmund Burke argued that good governance demanded that representatives ignore the fickle and ill-informed public, instead relying only on their own superior judgments. While that may count as governance, says Pitkin (1967, p. 170), it cannot count as democratic representation. At the other extreme, absolute deference is “a ‘delegate’ democracy where . . . there is little need . . . for formal leadership, since the views of the electorate should be translated directly into public policy” (Geer, 1996, p. 17). In both scenarios, officials renounce leadership, which by definition requires some level of affection between authorities and the electorate. And as most long-time associates know, maintaining affection requires substantial effort.

Several historical examples illustrate the point. Hebert Hoover, for instance, erred on the side of arrogance. According to Alan Brinkley (2010), Hoover’s repeated missteps at the opening of the Great Depression communicated that he had no empathy for suffering citizens and was impervious to their concerns. Similarly, if U.S. politicians indicate that leadership
is theirs alone to execute, they risk charges of egotism or even autocracy. Al Haig was a case in point, having never lived down his statement, “I am in control here,” words uttered while President Reagan lay nearly mortally wounded at George Washington Hospital (Hohmann, 2010). Haig apparently thought the situation called for a decisive statement of power to calm the public, but his words had the opposite effect. Haig, the Army general, had not learned the cardinal rule of elected American leadership: never forget who is really in charge.

Conversely, politicians who seem too quick to appease citizens will be chided as weak willed and ineffectual. To wit, a leader such as Bill Clinton, even at the height of his popularity, made himself vulnerable to Republican claims that he governed by the polls—a sure sign of unprincipled leadership. Susan Milligan (2011) unwittingly testifies to the presumption that true leadership requires some measure of defiance when she opines: “Paul Ryan Ignores Polls, Shows Leadership in Budget Debate.”

The most effective leadership demeanor lies somewhere between these extremes of indifference and concern, between independence and subservience. Effective leaders therefore must use rhetoric to negotiate the horns of this dilemma, conveying respect for others to the extent that they do not sacrifice their own credibility. Ironically, “elected officials must be both leaders and followers” in a representative democracy (Geer, 1996, p. 16). This is not a straightforward problem but it is a common one; political leaders face it each time they speak to the citizenry.

To further complicate such matters, town hall meetings represent a potentially uncomfortable encounter between people of unequal status. For better or worse, elected leaders generally occupy an elevated position above the average citizen, both economically and socially. But at the same time, an American sensibility indicates that citizens hold superior political power, at least in myth if not in fact (Mercieca, 2010). Likewise, the elected official has greater expertise and more sources of political information, but in a body ruled by a democratic majority, the opinions and experiences of citizens ultimately trump the politician’s specialized knowledge. These paradoxes underlie all U.S. politics, but when leaders and citizens come face-to-face in a town hall meeting, where the people themselves live, the
contradictions cannot be escaped. Under such convoluted conditions of power and differential status, how can leaders and citizens maintain productive associations?

**THE LANGUAGE OF DEMOCRATIC DEFERENCE**

Legislators respond to these dilemmas by performing the linguistic rituals of democratic deference, thereby demonstrating their willingness to abide by the unspoken rules of mutually respectful relations between U.S. leaders and citizens. As demonstrated in the meetings studied here, this delicate rhetorical dance is a two-step: first, sound appreciative; next, verbally accommodate citizens’ opinions and capacity for influence. When strung together adroitly, these symbolic acts make “a concession to the authority of the sovereign people” (Kane & Patapan, 2010, p. 372) without sacrificing the leader’s integrity.

**APPRECIATION**

To strike the proper deportment for leadership, legislators must first sound grateful. As Goffman (1956, p. 477) sees it, deference is “that component of activity which functions as a symbolic means by which appreciation is regularly conveyed to a recipient. . . . These marks of devotion represent ways in which an actor celebrates and confirms” relationships. Humans crave the comfort of the clan as well as individual freedom, so deference rituals must both present (draw near) and avoid (respect boundaries). Social life consequently involves a “constant dialectic between presentational rituals and avoidance rituals. A peculiar tension must be maintained, for these opposing requirements of conduct must somehow be held apart from one another and yet realized” (Goffman, 1956, p. 488).

To verbally demonstrate their appreciation, American legislators pepper their constituent meetings with simple and frequent expressions of gratitude. For example:
Thank you for your comments. (Feingold, 1993)

I’m glad you raised it. (Lieberman [D-CT], 1999)

I want to thank Mr. Williams for your kind introduction and all of you for what you have done for our country. So often it is said that our veterans seem as if they are unseen and noticed, unappreciated, and un-applauded. Join me in giving yourselves a hand. (Cummings [D-MD], 2009; see Figure 6.1.)

When we do town hall meetings like this, I always start out with a couple of words of thanks. I say this from the bottom of my heart: thank you for the privilege of working for you. You are my boss. You and the people who live in the first congressional district. Thank you for coming out today. (Bonner [R-AL], 2010)

One might dismiss such statements as platitudinous, but they serve an important purpose. Anything but empty, these ritualistic expressions of
appreciation testify to the speaker’s desire to be in social communion with the listener.

Beyond the ubiquitous “thank you,” legislators take special pains to sell the compliment. For example, Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK; 2009) opened an August 20, 2009, meeting by noting that “outside we have a beautiful Alaska summer day. And you all chose to be here, to give two hours of your evening, to offer your comments, your concerns, yours suggestions, your fears. And I thank you for doing this.” Murkowski could have simply said, “thank you for being here tonight,” but instead she built a case for why the citizens in her midst merited special recognition. Congressman Elijah Cummings, too, took time to explain what made his audience worthy of praise:

My friends, allow me to begin this afternoon by thanking you for coming out. It makes me feel good. . . . Every time that I have come here . . . we always have a good audience. I want to thank all of you. We really have every seat filled. (Cummings, 2009)

In her ethnographic study of town meetings, Townsend (2009) found opening and closing dialogue to be highly formulaic, closely hewing to ritualistic expectations developed over time. The local meetings studied here also conveyed a liturgical, although informal, quality. Rather than following Robert’s Rules, leader-citizen interaction is structured by cultural norms that require politicians to recognize the engaged people before them. Citizens express appreciation in return, thanking legislators for their presence, their leadership, and their work. One of Russ Feingold’s (1993) constituents, for instance, explicitly told the new senator: “I appreciate your sensitivity to your constituents.” Most participants probably do not consciously notice a leader’s words of appreciation, but if these simple expressions of gratitude were missing, constituents would sense their absence.

Likewise, leaders lift up the people in their midst as civic minded and politically astute. As Rep. Dan Lungren (R-CA; 2006) told his constituents, “I appreciate the fact that so many of you have come out, and it seems to me that this is a great demonstration of democracy in action.” Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR; 2010) said that “the gentleman raises another good point and that is, is it possible to take some sort of, I believe you used the word incremental approach.”
Before responding to an audience member, Tom Coburn (R-OK; 2011) expressed the same sentiment in three words: “two good questions.”

As presented here, these statements may sound like so much flattery, but within the town hall setting they present the leader as almost devotional. Particularly when a questioner implicitly gains “a measure of control over the introduction of topics, and hence the ‘agenda’ for the occasion” (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 49), a deferential answer indicates respect for the space between questioner and questioned. For this reason, Newt Gingrich (R-GA; 1998; see Figure 6.2) tells one citizen that he asked “a very good, very sobering set of questions,” and another that he raised “a very good point.” In doing so, the Speaker of the House emphasizes the agency of the inquirer.

Too much appreciation, however, can be smothering, so leaders also use words to convey separation and autonomy. For example, when a citizen questioned Gingrich (1998) about an education-financing option being considered in the neighboring state, the representative said that he would “let Alabama decide for itself whether that’s a road Alabama wants to go down.” Texas Rep. Kevin Brady (R-TX; 2011) also sought to distance himself from one citizen, but for a different reason. When questioned by a constituent who disapproved of
Republican tax cuts, Brady responded: “With all due respect, I disagree with the way you characterized everything you said.”

Nonetheless, leaders rarely choose words that explicitly distance themselves from citizens. More often, they find subtle ways to be present and avoidant at the same time. Lisa Murkowski (2009) illustrates this when she responds to a local physician speaking at a health care meeting: “I want to acknowledge you and thank you as a family practice doctor. You are almost a dying breed in our state.” Murkowski’s words draw attention to the citizen, presenting her as a person of special value in the community. At the same time, as a “dying breed,” the doctor also stands apart, distinct from the people in the room, not to mention other Alaskans. With her words, Murkowski wove the doctor into the community but also left space for the doctor’s individuality. Terms signaling presentation and avoidance collectively honor the inherent contradictions of democratic citizenship.

**ACCOMMODATION**

While Goffman saw appreciation in the everyday interactions among people, other social theorists have conceptualized symbolic deference as a kind of accommodation. These scholars foreground differences in status, expertise, or power, which create social divisions that might otherwise become adversarial. Symbolic deference naturalizes the resulting hierarchy, creating a buffer useful for smoothing interactions between people on different rungs of the social ladder. For example, Steve Clayman and colleagues (Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, & McDonald, 2006; Clayman & Heritage, 2002) argue that journalists display their lack of deference for the president through active, direct, assertive, and adversarial questioning. It thereby follows that a deferential style is one that accommodates others by making space for them. In local meetings, legislators do so in at least two ways.

First, the leaders studied here explicitly allowed for citizen initiative, symbolically opening the door to the audience’s political assertions. For example, after an exchange with a constituent whom Bob Kerrey (D-NE; 1993) clearly knew, and with whom he disagreed, the senator invited his interlocutor to bring others into the conversation. He asked, “To get an
open dialogue started, what do you think should be the alternatives” to lower mileage requirements on cars and trucks? His question sparked no broader dialogue, but the citizen did explain her position and, as a result, Kerrey was able to identify points on which they agreed, as well as reasons he supported lower mileage standards. Kerrey took a risk, granting a great deal of leeway to the citizen, but considering their differences, as well as his prior experiences with the constituent, it probably was a risk worth taking. In contrast, Kevin Brady (2011) used his more secure position with a like-minded person to open an exchange of ideas. When responding to a constituent’s question about the growing Federal Register, Brady first explained his own bill to curtail rulemaking and then asked the audience member if “that is something [he] could support.”

In both instances, the leaders spoke in ways that accommodated certain differences in opinion. Clearly, Brady had good reason to expect that his questioner would support his position, but nevertheless, in asking the question Brady tacitly acknowledged that citizens have their own ideas. Both Brady and Kerrey suggested a measure of equality between themselves and the citizens in their audiences. Differences in opinion may still divide, as they did in Kerrey’s case. Even so, Kerrey found what commonality he could uncover, including a mutual desire to reduce oil imports, as well as a shared ability to opine on important public matters.

Second, leaders use words to acknowledge and accommodate citizen power. Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA; 2007; see Figure 6.3), for example, told her constituents that their work against the Iraq War had resulted in specific legislative victories. Speaking of legislation to disestablish U.S. military bases in Iraq, she said, “That came from you, right here in the ninth congressional district. It’s accepted now as a policy by both Democrats and Republicans in the House.” She also assured her audience that a budget supplemental that denied more funding for the war—a bill many in the audience supported—was having its intended effect: “This bill that passed yesterday has them, the White House, on the defensive,” she said. Overall, “the elections in November sent a strong message to the White House to do something,” said Lee.

Two years later, on the other side of the aisle and within a different debate, several leaders assured their constituents that, thanks to the “huge turnout at meetings like these” (Grassley [R-IA], 2009), Congress would have to
abandon comprehensive health care reform. Dan Lungren (2009) said that “the outpouring and passionate views of the public have made a huge difference in Washington D.C.” Senator Grassley voiced the same sentiment, but he also reminded Iowans that votes matter most: “Every two years, you have an opportunity in an election; and there are significant times when elections have made a difference. Elections have consequences. We’re finding that out right now.” Lee, Lungren, and Grassley acknowledged citizens’ political actions, implicitly encouraging them to continue their political engagement. More profoundly, such talk acknowledged and tacitly approved of citizen initiatives, crediting them with a relatively high level of political influence.

In comparison, legislative leaders speak circumspectly of their own power. Senator Joe Lieberman (1999), for example, was careful not to promise so-called “notch babies” higher Social Security benefits, despite what was then projected to be a $1 trillion budget surplus. Even with the extra public cash, Lieberman could only commit to his effort, not the benefit: “We’re going to give it a shot this time—I don’t want to raise your expectations or anything,” he said. The distinction here is subtle but important: legislators may promise the moon when it comes to their personal efforts, but their political power is
limited and ultimately overshadowed by that of citizens. “That’s why we need you to keep pushing, keep fighting,” said Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) (Mikulski & Sarbanes [D-MD], 1999) in reference to Social Security.

THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF DEFERENCE

Duncan (1985, p. 262) observed that “superiors, inferiors, and equals use . . . ceremonies as social stages to display themselves before audiences whose approval sustains their position in the local hierarchy.” By examining congressional town halls as a type of social ceremony, we find that senators and representatives maintain their positions, paradoxically, through words venerating others. That is, the legislators adhere to the American preference for other-directed leadership (Kellerman, 1984) and sustain the cultural mythos of a sovereign citizenry (Mercieca, 2010). Even so, it is entirely possible for leaders to rely too much on a good thing.

MUTUAL VERSUS ASYMMETRIC DEFERENCE

At its most egalitarian, the language of deference approaches citizens as political equals, presuming that they can form, hold, and voice their own opinions. The Bob Kerrey (1993) example cited earlier is representative of this stance. By asking a disagreeing citizen to share her views, the senator momentarily deferred to the citizen, accommodating her difference of opinion, and implied that others had the right to express their ideas as well. In that same exchange, Kerrey also asserted his own right to disagree.

At its extreme, the language of deference approaches citizens as political superiors, elevating their local knowledge and experiences above those of a distant or centralized leadership. Indiana Congressman Mike Pence (R-IN; 2010; see Figure 6.4), for example, joked that

throughout my nine years we’ve done town halls on a regular basis, my wife says they’re my anecdote to Potomac fever. She means things
that sound like a good idea in Washington before [I] come home, I go to a town hall meeting, and get an attitude adjustment.

Rep. Mike Lee (R-UT; 2011) of Utah was more serious when warning that onerous regulation is the consequence of allowing “laws to be made by people other than Congress. . . . The reason why we got rid of King George III is because we could not get him out of office.” Pence deprecates himself with clichéd humor, while Lee gains Tea Party credibility by referencing the Revolution. Using slightly different styles, both Lee and Pence aligned themselves with praiseworthy citizens even as they distanced themselves from Washington and called into question the capacities and motives of other leaders.

In the meetings studied here, it was not unusual to hear both inflections of deference—and sometimes within the same meeting. Why the shape-shifting? Warren Bennis (2007) answers that effective principals will consider what is
possible in a given time and place, offering a different form of leadership as needed to capitalize on a given situation. From a philosophical perspective, Kolers (2005, p. 156) concludes that sometimes political movements require a kind of deference that is critical and questioning, while at other moments appropriate action “is to be determined by someone else’s judgment.” Likewise, Fenno (1978) found that an elected representative’s interpersonal demeanor is largely a function of what the leader understands to be unique about the district and the particular group being addressed. Barker and Carman (2012) argue that the cultural divide within the United States demands different styles of leadership, with red America preferring minimal deference and blue districts listening for more consideration. In the town halls I studied, I found further evidence that politicians must be attuned to facts on the ground when deploying a given leadership style.

Even if there are situational benefits to unbalanced deference, this analysis also demonstrates that it comes at a cost. Rep. Joe Barton (R-TX) paid that price when he briefly lost control to two citizens attending his August 19, 2010, meeting in Crowley, Texas. His constituents insisted that the congressman support militarization of the southern U.S. perimeter and shoot-to-kill orders for border jumpers. This was a position judged too extreme even for a member of the Tea Party caucus, but Barton had trouble finding words to say so, struggling through seven minutes of dialogue to come to a defensible position that satisfied his interrogators. He finally settled on an explicit statement of disagreement: “I believe in civilian control, and I do not want to militarize the border between the U.S. and Mexico” (Barton, 2010). This was a difficult turn for Barton because, up to that point in the proceedings, he had deferred to populist wisdom and reflected a deep suspicion of the current leadership in the nation’s capital. 3

Some 1,300 miles to the north at his town hall on health care, Bart Stupak (D-MI; 2010) adopted a style of deference moderated by a measure of self-respect. He opened the meeting by acknowledging the differences of opinion in the room, asking constituents to contact his office and expressing appreciation for those who came to ask him difficult questions. However, Stupak in no way denigrated his own leadership or that of the opposing political party. When the grilling started, the representative consequently held a relatively strong position. Stupak frequently corrected his constituents, explained his thinking in
detail, defended his legislative actions, and insisted that participants show him and others respect by refraining from shouting, interrupting, or cursing. The hour-and-a-half meeting was tense and both sides of the debate were heard.

As these examples illustrate, leadership rhetoric is not unidirectional, nor is it inconsequential. Most basically, town hall meetings highlight the dialogic nature of public address, making them part of an ongoing public conversation. Interpersonal scholars have long recognized that the tenor of talk influences how conversational partners subsequently interact with one another (Bateson, 1979). Recent applications of social learning theory also demonstrate that, in a deliberative setting, communicators will model the civility or incivility of others (Han & Brazeal, 2013). This chapter indicates that the same may be true of oratory: citizens will respond to the rhetorical projection of leadership in predictable ways, choosing a tone that fits the interactional frame suggested by the leader’s discourse.

In the end, even if situational exigencies sometimes demand a stoutly populist tone, asymmetrical deference cannot sustain itself. Demeaning fellow politicians is a reliable but lazy way to connect with American citizens who have been taught that politics is beneath them. Ultimately, however, a rhetoric that defers to citizens by denigrating political leadership sacrifices its ability to be transformational. American politicians instead must work hard to harmonize deference to the people with a language of inspired transcendence.

**THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF LEADERSHIP**

Ultimately, the language of deference speaks directly to the ongoing debate over political representation. After more than 200 years of experimenting, Americans are still troubled by leadership questions: Are elected officials to be trustees, making wise choices on behalf of citizens? Or should they be delegates, acting as a conduit for the majority’s wishes (Barker & Carman, 2012; Pitkin, 1967)? Do legislators act in the best interests of their constituents when they embrace the most advantageous policy for their district or when working for the national common good (Disch, 2012)? As long as these debates remain unsettled, senators and representatives must answer to all at once. For this reason alone, members of Congress arguably have the hardest job in U.S.
politics, being forced to demonstrate allegiance to their party, to Congress, to the country, and to their home districts—all at the same time.

Meanwhile, scholars of politics and communication must wonder if the language of deference has kept up with the contemporary challenges of representative leadership. They might ask, for example, how symbolic deference works in a highly polarized, ideologically coherent political environment (Jacobson, 2013). The 2009 health care forums notwithstanding, informal observation of the C-SPAN sample studied here indicates that citizens who speak at public meetings largely share their legislator’s partisanship and opinions. When listening specifically to openly hostile proceedings, does the language of deference sound different? Can the lexicon even be heard in such situations, or does it serve a different end?

Similarly, deference might be a useful construct for those interested in leadership debates. Others have found that congressional proceedings are mostly civil (Jamieson, 1997), which seems at odds with contemporary experience. Examining deference in floor speeches, committee meetings, and procedural discourse might shed new light on congressional operations in an era of elite polarization. Undoubtedly, the wealth of data in the C-SPAN Archives could be put to use researching these issues.

Finally, future studies might ask if and how legislative leaders indicate their devotion to citizens when those represented are not in the room: Can deference be heard as clearly in other kinds of political discourse? Since most people never meet politicians face-to-face, surely elected officials seek to meet the obligations of U.S. political culture in press conferences, blogs, and franked mail. Even so, the language of deference might sound very different when the discourse is carried via an official congressional Web page or social media, for example.

Until scholars provide more informed and formal answers, cultural critics will fill the void, assessing perceived dysfunction and its causes. Some say it is unfortunate that our leaders fail to “push us out of our comfort zone and make us great” (Friedman, 2011, para. 9). Others say that the problem lies not with our leaders but with ourselves, persons now unaccustomed to acknowledging “just authority” (Brooks, 2012, para. 6). In light of this analysis of deferential language, we might conclude that the real problem lies somewhere in the middle. In true democracy, that is, both the leaders and the led
have their obligations, obligations demanding someone defer to someone else about something.

NOTES


2. Using the search functions of the C-SPAN online Video Library (http://www.c-span.org), I first identified as many meetings between 1993 and 2012 as possible, using search terms including “town hall,” “listening session,” “public forum,” and “public meeting.” I continued using different keywords until satisfied that I had discovered nearly all possible meetings. I next eliminated meetings that did not meet the following criteria: at least one elected legislator spoke at the meeting, which was held outside of Washington, DC, and some of the legislator’s constituents were in the audience. Finally, to avoid oversampling discourse on a particular issue, I identified the main topic of each meeting and randomly eliminated all but 10 of the meetings primarily about health care. A complete list of meetings analyzed is available from the author.
