



2017-05-11

Town Hall Drama: What's all the Gossip About?

McKay Randall

Brigham Young University - Provo, marandall13@gmail.com

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Randall, McKay, "Town Hall Drama: What's all the Gossip About?" (2017). *FHSS Mentored Research Conference*. 324.
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/fhssconference_studentpub/324

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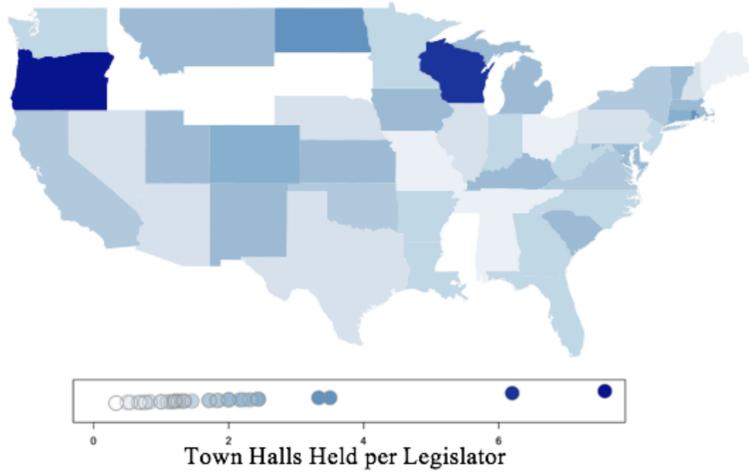
Town Hall Drama:

What's all the Gossip About?

By: McKay Randall,
Peer Mentor: Jay Goodliffe
Department of Political Science



Legislator Access by State

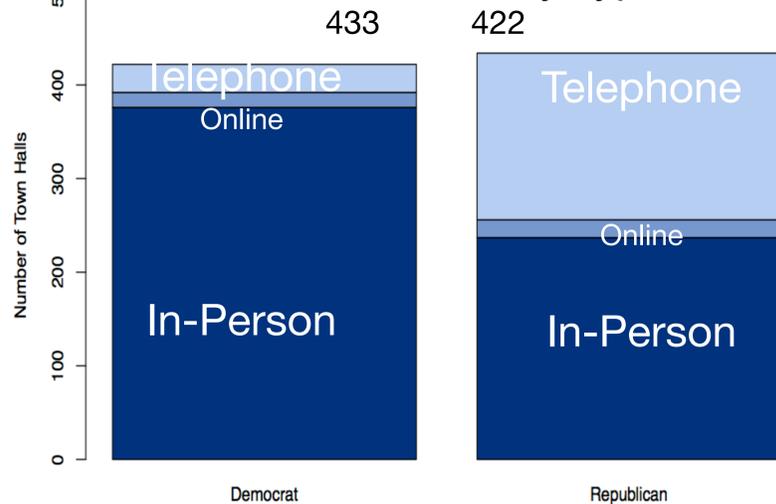


Introduction:

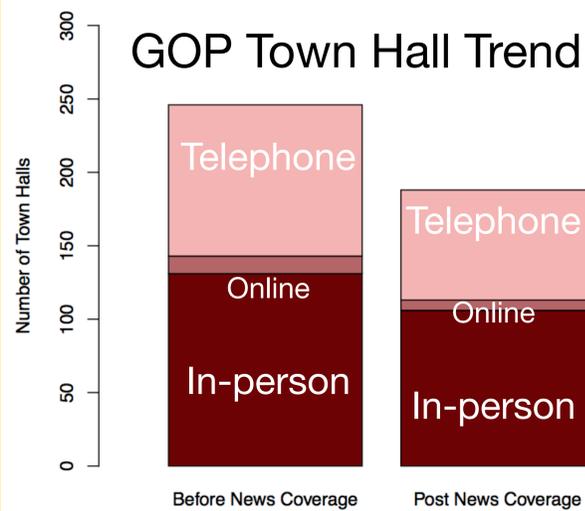
When the new Congress took their seats at the beginning of 2017, Republicans were on a mission to replace Obamacare. To gear up for the legislative struggle, legislators took to the streets and towns of their districts to speak to constituents about Obamacare and other policies. During the first town halls in January and February, Republican legislators found themselves confronted with rowdy and raucous crowds who nearly shouted them down every time they had chance to speak. The News took note of this phenomena in late February and started reporting on the story. The popular headlines from The Washington Post, New York Times, and CNN all reported that Republicans were facing wild crowds in their home states. These same media outlets then discovered that Republicans were cancelling their town halls, presumably so they didn't have to face the tough crowds. This issue gained a lot of media attention. **I aim to test whether a pattern did develop where legislators, especially Republicans, backed down from town halls after the reports of bad crowds.**

Hypothesis: Republicans did do fewer town halls after the news coverage, but this trend will not be specific to the GOP and is due to other factors.

Total Town Halls by Type



GOP Town Hall Trend



Methods :

Download data on previous town halls held in 2017 and future town halls through May 2017. Next, match town hall data to demographic data of the congressional district that is holding the town hall. This data will be important as independent variables.

Use visualizations to detect trends and interesting relationships in the town hall data. I used R to create maps and graphs to display these relationships easily and clearly.

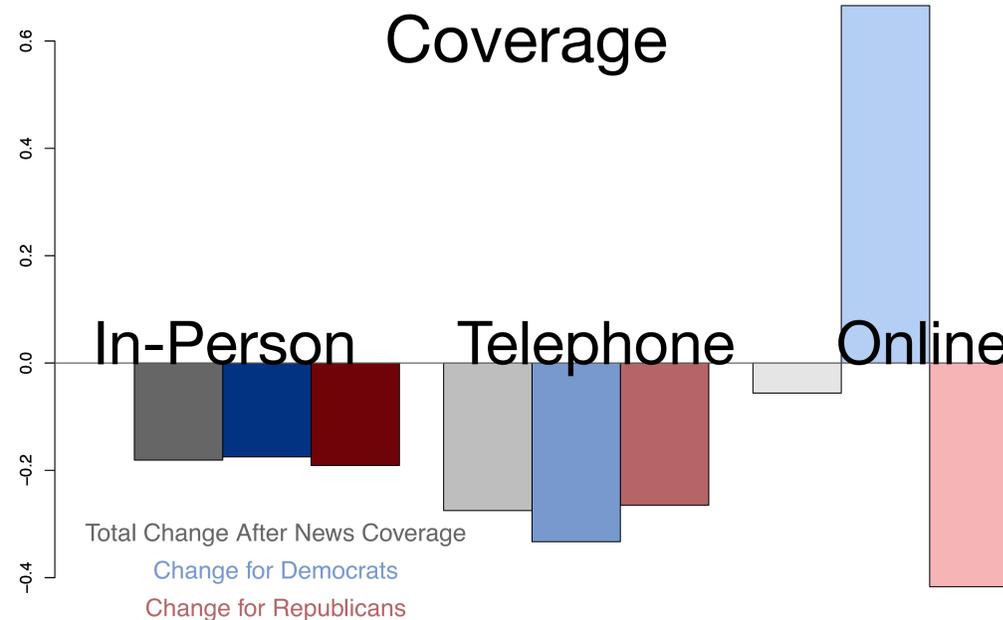
Finally, **use regressions** to predict what contributes to a legislator holding more or fewer town halls. Additionally, I did analysis using **logit models** to predict whether a legislator will hold a town hall or not. This allows me to detect if there was a shift in town hall while controlling for other factors.

Visualization Results:

Given the limited scholarly research on town halls, I tailored my analysis to establish general trends and facts about town halls in the United States.

- I established that all states do not have equal access to town halls. Using the map to the left, we can determine that many states hold no town halls while some have as many as 6 and 7 per legislator. This means not all constituents have equal access to their representatives and senators.
- Proportionally, Democrats held more town halls than Republicans to begin with. The GOP has 54% of the members but only produced 50.7% of all town halls.
- Finally, I show that Republicans did hold fewer town halls after the news coverage (red bar graph), but also find that this trend was true for Democrats as well. The graph below shows % change in town halls by party after the town hall news coverage.

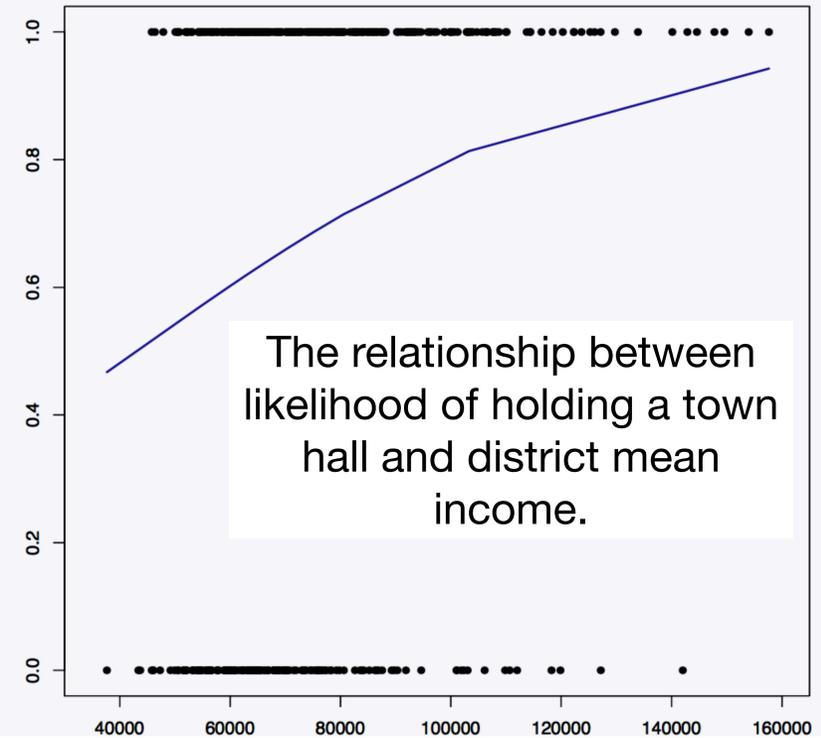
Change in Town Halls After News Coverage



Regression and Logit Results:

Visualizations do a good job showing us overall trends, but not a great job revealing whether those trends are statistically significant. For this, I need regression and logit models.

- I used data on district income, poverty rate, social security rate, ethnic make up, and election competitiveness as independent variables in my models.
- Multiple specifications of regression models did not yield any significant predictors about whether there is a statistical difference between the amount of town halls between the two major parties
- When I used logit models to predict whether a member will hold a town hall or not, the only significant predictor was the mean income of the district. Perhaps districts with higher incomes have more residents who are less dependent on the government, and as a result do not feel the need to cause a scene at a town hall meeting.
- Many different specification of party and timing (before or after news coverage) did not show any significant statistical decrease in likelihood of holding a town hall.



Conclusion and Further Discussion:

I find evidence that the media reports on Congressional town halls did not tell the whole story. While it is true that some Republican legislators cancelled town halls, the members of Congress, in aggregate, did not hold fewer town halls explicitly to avoid confrontation with dissatisfied constituents. My hypothesis is confirmed that we cannot say that the prevalence of rowdy town halls deterred legislators from holding them.

Additionally, I found evidence that legislators in wealthier districts are more likely to hold a town hall. Beyond these results, it appears that legislators who hold town halls are simply legislators who want to go out and hold town halls. I could not find a significant strategic reason why legislators hold more town halls. It seems to be personal preference.

Finally, my research leaves much left to be explored. This was preliminary research as not much has been done on town halls. My analysis did not look at historical data to see if legislators traditionally hold town halls earlier or later in the year. Discovering past town hall trends could be an important factor to consider when deciding if negative news coverage truly did deter member of Congress.