

# Town halls gone wild

News – Rep. Tim Bishop, D-NY. (AP Photo/Ron Edmonds)

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Screaming constituents, protesters dragged out by the cops, congressmen fearful for their safety — welcome to the new town-hall-style meeting, the once-staid forum that is rapidly turning into a house of horrors for members of Congress.

On the eve of the August recess, members are reporting meetings that have gone terribly awry, marked by angry, sign-carrying mobs and disruptive behavior. In at least one case, a congressman has stopped holding town hall events because the situation has spiraled so far out of control.

“I had felt they would be pointless,” Rep. [Tim Bishop](#) (D-N.Y.) told POLITICO, referring to his recent decision to temporarily suspend the events in his Long Island district. “There is no point in meeting with my constituents and [to] listen to them and have them listen to you if what is basically an unruly mob prevents you from having an intelligent conversation.”

In [Bishop's](#) case, his decision came on the heels of a June 22 event he held in Setauket, N.Y., in which protesters dominated the meeting by shouting criticisms at the congressman for his positions on energy policy, health care and the bailout of the auto industry.

Within an hour of the disruption, police were called in to escort the 59-year-old Democrat — who has held more than [100 town hall meetings](#) since he was elected in 2002 — to his car safely.

“I have no problem with someone disagreeing with positions I hold,” Bishop said, noting that, for the time being, he was using other platforms to communicate with his constituents. “But I also believe no one is served if you can’t talk through differences.”

Bishop isn’t the only one confronted by boiling anger and rising incivility. At a health care town hall event in Syracuse, N.Y., earlier this month, police were called in to restore order, and at least one heckler was taken away by local police. Close to 100 sign-carrying protesters greeted Rep. [Allen Boyd](#) (D-Fla.) at a late June community college small-business development forum in Panama City, Fla. Last week, Danville, Va., anti-tax tea party activists claimed they were “refused an opportunity” to ask Rep. [Thomas Perriello](#) (D-Va.) a question at a town hall event and instructed by a plainclothes police officer to leave the property after they attempted to hold up protest signs.

The targets in most cases are House Democrats, who over the past few months have tackled controversial legislation including a \$787 billion economic [stimulus](#) package, a landmark energy proposal and an overhaul of the nation’s health care system.

Democrats, acknowledging the increasing unruliness of the town-hall-style events, say the hot-button issues they are taking on have a lot to do with it.

“I think it’s just the fact that we are dealing with some of the most important public policy issues in a generation,” said Rep. [Bruce Braley](#) (D-Iowa), who was confronted by a protester angry about his position on health care reform at a town hall event several weeks ago.

“I think in general what is going on is we are tackling issues that have been ignored for a long time, and I think that is disruptive to a lot of people,” said Bishop, a four-term congressman. “We are trying, one by one, to deal with a set of issues that can’t be ignored, and I think that’s unsettling to a lot of people.”

Freshman Rep. [Dan Maffei](#) (D-N.Y.), whose event at a Syracuse middle school was disrupted, said that he still planned to hold additional town halls but that he was also thinking about other options.

“I think you’ve got to communicate through a variety of different ways. You should do the telephonedown hall meetings. You should do the town hall meetings. You should do the smaller group meetings,” said Maffei. “It’s important to do things in a variety of ways, so you don’t have one mode of communication.”

“You’re going to have people of varying views, and in this case, you’ve got the two extremes who were the most vocal,” Maffei said of the flare-up at his July 12 event.

On Tuesday, Rep. [Chris Van Hollen](#) (D-Md.), who handles incumbent retention duties for House Democrats in addition to chairing the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, met with freshman members to discuss their plans for the monthlong August recess. While the specific issue of town hall protesters never came up, according to sources familiar with the meeting, he urged them not to back away from opponents.

"He said, 'Go on offense. Stay on the offense. It's really important that your constituents hear directly from you. You shouldn't let a day go by [that] your constituents don't hear from you,'" said one House Democratic leadership aide familiar with the meeting.

Some members profess to enjoy the give-and-take of the town halls, even if lately it's become more take than give.

"Town halls are a favorite part of my job," said Rep. Russ Carnahan (D-Mo.), a third-term congressman from St. Louis who noted that a "handful" of disruptions had taken place at his meetings. "It's what I do. It's what I will continue to do."

"People have gotten fired up and all that, but I think that's what makes town halls fun," said Perriello, a freshman who is among the most vulnerable Democrats in 2010. "I think that most of the time when we get out there, it's a good chance for people to vent and offer their thoughts. It's been good."

"I enjoy it, and people have a chance to speak their mind," he said.

Both Carnahan and Perriello said they were plunging forward with plans to hold more town hall meetings.

Republicans, with an eye toward 2010, are keeping close track of the climate at Democratic events.

"We've seen Russ Carnahan, we've seen Tim Bishop, we've seen some other people face some very different crowds back home," said National Republican Congressional Committee Chairman Pete Sessions (R-Texas). "The days of you having a town hall meeting where maybe 15 or 20 of your friends show up — they're over. You've now got real people who are showing up — and that's going to be a factor."

Asked later how or whether the GOP would use the confrontations against Democrats, Sessions responded: "Wait till next year."

But Democrats are quick to point out they're not the only ones facing hostile audiences. They single out Rep. Mike Castle (R-Del.), who found himself in a confrontation earlier this month with a "birther" protester, and insist that Republicans face a backlash of their own if it appears the party is too closely aligned with tea party activists or other conservative-oriented protesters.

"It's a risk that they align themselves with such a small minority in the party," said Brian Smoot, who served as political director at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in the past election cycle. "They risk alienating moderates."

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