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Calls give new meaning to party line  
*'Tele-town meetings' are new tool Upstate congressmen are trying*

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Phones are ringing across the Upstate with taxpayer-funded solicitations from Capitol Hill, where a growing number of elected officials are tapping into teleconference technology.

Congressmen including the Upstate's Bob Inglis and Gresham Barrett are soliciting opinions via "tele-town hall meetings," the latest trend in Congress.

The tele-meetings are funded by tax dollars earmarked for mailings, meetings with constituents and other communications with voters.

"It's an opportunity for people to say what's on their mind," said Inglis, who represents the 4th District, including Greenville.

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But what about the interruption? The government officials are exempt from the national Do Not Call list.

"It is intrusive, and I worry about that some," Inglis said. "We ask permission."

People who want to be included in the call are asked to press the pound button, and others are asked to pardon the interruption and have a good night, Inglis said.

Inglis and Barrett spokeswoman Colleen Mangone said neither congressman has received complaints.

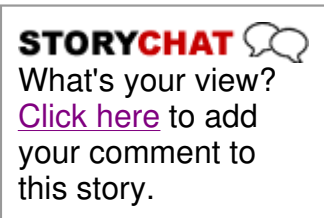
The teleconference call approach is another tool in the box to help elected officials reach out and engage citizens in two-way communication, said Bruce Ransom, policy studies chair at Clemson University's Strom Thurmond Institute.

However, it should be combined with other methods, such as newsletters, the Internet, questionnaires and in-person meetings, and not replace them, Ransom said. All have strengths and weaknesses, he said.

Inglis and Barrett start the one-hour to 90-minute tele-meetings around 7:30 p.m. or so, with automated dialers working to reach people after dinner and before children's bedtimes.

"Technology is available to give people the opportunity to be heard and talk directly to their representative in Washington," Inglis said. "The beauty of these tele-town hall meetings is the people bring up whatever topic they are interested in."

People like the convenience because they can listen and do other things around the house at the same time, Inglis and Mangone said.



The first calls to Barrett's constituents, made randomly across the 3rd District, came on a recent cold February night. Mangone said about 9,000 people opted to stay on the line at some point during the hour and be part of the "town hall meeting" without leaving the warmth of their homes.

People who want to ask a question or make a comment can push a button to be put in line to speak. Barrett talked directly to 11 people during his hour-long meeting. When it ended, another 200 people responded to his invitation to leave messages, Mangone said.

At a cost of about \$2,500, the tele-meeting is much cheaper than a mailing, Mangone said.

"We do look at the fact that we are using taxpayers' dollars," Mangone said. "It is a far more cost-effective way to use the dollars."

Inglis has hosted a series of tele-town meetings in recent months, some randomly calling large numbers of people in certain geographic areas for broad listener-driven discussion, and others limited to small groups of individuals who've expressed interest in a certain topic.

Typically Inglis will have about 250 people on the line at any point in time in the larger tele-meetings.

Costs vary from \$700 to \$2,500 depending on the size of the meeting, Inglis said. Meanwhile his in-person town meetings, promoted by more expensive mailings, typically attract anywhere from 20 to 80 people, Inglis said.

Inglis plans to call households in his district at some point over the year, and Barrett plans his next call on March 26. Both said they will continue to hold in-person meetings and use other methods of communication as well.

While the idea is popular in the House, Kevin Bishop, spokesman for U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, said the senator, who represents about 4 million people compared to a House district of about 600,000, is watching to see how it goes on a smaller scale before jumping in.

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