

## Arizona Republic

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### **THE ISSUE: HOUSE MEETINGS ON BORDER REFORM** *A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE*

Two congressional road shows.

Two missed opportunities.

The meetings that the Republican-controlled House of Representatives brought to Arizona last week had the potential to bring lawmakers closer to the people whose lives are touched by what Congress does.

Instead, the events in Phoenix and Yuma were highly scripted. House members listened to remarks that had been written in advance, submitted to Washington and neatly printed out in packets released to the press.

Average Arizonans were not allowed to speak.

Criticism from Democratic leaders such as Gov. Janet Napolitano and U.S. Rep. Raul Grijalva was harsh. It was also entirely justified.

These events were about show.

They could have been about substance.

Congress is deeply divided on the issue of illegal immigration. The hearing in Yuma was about border security. Arizona is the nation's hot spot for illegal immigration. The meeting in Phoenix was about proposals for a national version of Arizona's Proposition 200.

The Arizona law's requirements for proof of citizenship to vote were motivated by frustration over illegal immigration, and have been criticized for the potential to intimidate and disenfranchise Latino and Native American citizens.

There is no better place than Arizona to hear what people think about these issues.

Had they listened, members of the House Armed Services Committee, who were in Yuma on Wednesday, would have heard from Lorena Magana, who grew up in the area.

She said she wanted to tell them that "enforcement strategies alone will tear our community apart, split up families, undermine business, including agriculture, and undercut our economy ... Comprehensive immigration reform ... is what's best for Yuma County."

Disagree?

Members of the House, which passed an enforcement-only immigration bill, could have challenged Magana for the facts behind her words. They might have learned something about life in Yuma County.

But the opportunity to question Lorena Magana was missed, even though she petitioned the committee well in advance for the chance to testify.

Grijalva does not sit on the committee, but he does represent Magana's district. His complaints earned him a seat at the table

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for both hearings.

Had lawmakers listened, those who attended Thursday's the meeting in Phoenix could have heard from Valley residents who packed a hearing room at the Capitol.

Their opinions would have been diverse. One man held a baby who wore a headscarf on which someone had printed "Immigration reform NOW." He and the child were also at the protest that Valley Interfaith Project and immigration advocates held outside the Capitol before the meeting. His opinion likely differed greatly from those in the audience who booed when Grijalva spoke.

The meeting was run by Vernon Ehlers, chairman of the House Committee on Administration, who was joined by Grijalva and U.S. Reps. Ed Pastor, J.D. Hayworth and Trent Franks, all of Arizona, at the raised table.

Democrats Grijalva and Pastor wanted to take public comment. But this was Ehlers' show. He said anyone who had something to say could submit a written statement later. No questions from, or to, the public.

As in Yuma, the meeting consisted of pre-selected panel members who read statements that had been submitted to Washington, printed and handed out to the press in neat folders. Elected officials made prepared opening statements and asked the panel questions that sounded suspiciously like mini-speeches.

Though pre-submitted written testimony is the norm on Capitol Hill, democracy should not be so scripted. Why come to Arizona if not to listen to the people who live here? These two events were publicly funded. But those running them did not hear from the public that provides the funds. They did not listen to people who cared enough to show up.

Two meetings.

Two missed opportunities.

Too bad for democracy.

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