

## Emails responding to PolitiFact Texas about Ted Cruz events described as Texas town halls, 2017

### ***Experts fielded versions of this email on Oct. 3-4, 2017:***

I write on behalf of the PolitiFact Texas fact-checking project based at the Austin American-Statesman to ask if you'd assess the chart pasted below as to whether each of the events constituted a town hall. This list, which we confirmed, was provided by Sen. Ted Cruz's office as we inquired into the senator's basis for recently saying **he's done 17 town halls in Texas in 2017**.

On the list, three gatherings focused on veterans and health care (all hosted by Concerned Veterans for America) were open to members of the general public who registered through CVA.

#### **Your thoughts?**

#### **Other research recommendations as we check the accuracy of Sen. Cruz's claim?**

Of course, I'd be happy to visit afresh by phone instead. I am at 512-445-3644.

Here is the Cruz-provided breakdown (with web links added by us):

Date	City	Location	Event
8/24/17	El Paso	Border Patrol Union	<a href="#">Border Patrol Union Town Hall</a>
8/24/17	El Paso	South Central Texas office	<a href="#">El Paso's Pecan Growers and Agriculture Industry Leaders Lunch &amp; Town Hall</a>
8/24/17	El Paso	Plastic Molding Technology	<a href="#">Plastic Molding Technology Executive Roundtable &amp; Employee Townhall</a>
8/22/17	Mission	Royal Technologies Manufacturing Plant	<a href="#">Royal Technologies Manufacturing Plant Exec Roundtable, Tour, &amp; Employee Town Hall</a>
8/21/17	San Antonio	Division Laundry & Cleaners	<a href="#">Division Laundry &amp; Cleaners Tour &amp; Employee Town Hall</a>

8/21/17	San Antonio	San Antonio Chamber of Commerce	<a href="#"><b>San Antonio Chamber of Commerce Q&amp;A</b></a>
8/21/17	New Braunfels	Sysco	<a href="#">Sysco Tour &amp; Employee Town Hall</a>
8/18/17	Amarillo	Sage Oil Vac	<a href="#">Sage Oil Vac Tour and Employee Town Hall</a>
8/16/17	Katy	Igloo Products Corporation	<a href="#">Tour of Igloo Facility &amp; Employee Town Hall</a>
8/4/17	Tyler	Brookshire's Grocery	<a href="#"><b>Brookshire Grocery Company Tour &amp; Employee Town Hall</b></a>
7/8/17	Houston	Concerned Veterans for America	<a href="#"><b>CVA Defend and Reform Town Hall</b></a>
7/6/17	San Antonio	USAA	<a href="#">USAA Tour &amp; Employee Town Hall</a>
7/6/17	Austin	Concerned Veterans for America	<a href="#"><b>CVA Defend and Reform Town Hall</b></a>
7/5/17	McKinney	Concerned Veterans for America	<a href="#"><b>CVA Defend and Reform Town Hall</b></a>
5/31/17	Houston	Southeast Texas office	<a href="#">Air Liquide Tour and Townhall with Employees</a>
5/19/17	Tomball	Tomball Chamber of Commerce	<a href="#"><b>Tomball Chamber of Commerce Q&amp;A</b></a>
4/18/17	Houston	San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce	<a href="#">San Antonio Hispanic Chamber Roundtable</a>
4/17/17	Waller	Daikin, Inc.	<a href="#"><b>Daikin Tour and Employee Town Hall</b></a>
4/10/17	Stafford	Atec, Inc.	<a href="#">Atec, Inc. Tour and Meeting with Employees</a>

Events in bold were open to reporters, Novack said. Web links to news reports, videos and press releases added by PolitiFact Texas, September 2017

SOURCE: Chart provided by email from Phil Novack, press secretary to U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, Sept. 28, 2017

**g.**

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**W. Gardner Selby**

Reporter / News

## EMAILED RESPONSES

Responses from [Joseph L. Smith](#), chairman, Department of Political Science, University of Alabama

5:55 p.m.  
Oct. 3, 2017

Several of these are “employee town halls.” I would say that a gathering at a workplace, organized by the employer, is not a true “town hall.” Employees know that their employer has arranged for and endorsed the visit, and that therefore assertive questions are not welcome. Since employees depend on these employers for their livelihoods, they are not likely to be fully candid in expressing their views. Also, attendees at this sort of gathering won’t feel able to bring up any topics they want to. Topics are likely to be limited to those related to the employer’s business area.

Using these criteria, I would say that the three CVA Defend and Reform Town Halls and possibly the three “chamber of commerce” town halls fit the criteria. The Chamber is definitely a friendly audience for Cruz.

I added a column to the table you sent, in which I indicate whether I think this is a true “town hall.”

Date	City	Location	Event	Town Hall?
8/24/17	El Paso	Border Patrol Union	<a href="#">Border Patrol Union Town Hall</a>	Yes
8/24/17	El Paso	South Central Texas office	<a href="#">El Paso's Pecan Growers and Agriculture Industry Leaders Lunch &amp; Town Hall</a>	yes
8/24/17	El Paso	Plastic Molding Technology	<a href="#">Plastic Molding Technology Executive Roundtable &amp; Employee Townhall</a>	No

8/22/17	Mission	Royal Technologies Manufacturing Plant	<a href="#">Royal Technologies Manufacturing Plant Exec Roundtable, Tour, &amp; Employee Town Hall</a>	No
8/21/17	San Antonio	Division Laundry & Cleaners	<a href="#">Division Laundry &amp; Cleaners Tour &amp; Employee Town Hall</a>	No
8/21/17	San Antonio	San Antonio Chamber of Commerce	<a href="#">San Antonio Chamber of Commerce Q&amp;A</a>	yes
8/21/17	New Braunfels	Sysco	<a href="#">Sysco Tour &amp; Employee Town Hall</a>	no
8/18/17	Amarillo	Sage Oil Vac	<a href="#">Sage Oil Vac Tour and Employee Town Hall</a>	no
8/16/17	Katy	Igloo Products Corporation	<a href="#">Tour of Igloo Facility &amp; Employee Town Hall</a>	no
8/4/17	Tyler	Brookshire's Grocery	<a href="#">Brookshire Grocery Company Tour &amp; Employee Town Hall</a>	no
7/8/17	Houston	Concerned Veterans for America	<a href="#">CVA Defend and Reform Town Hall</a>	yes
7/6/17	San Antonio	USAA	<a href="#">USAA Tour &amp; Employee Town Hall</a>	No
7/6/17	Austin	Concerned Veterans for America	<a href="#">CVA Defend and Reform Town Hall</a>	yes
7/5/17	McKinney	Concerned Veterans for America	<a href="#">CVA Defend and Reform Town Hall</a>	yes
5/31/17	Houston	Southeast Texas office	<a href="#">Air Liquide Tour and Townhall with Employees</a>	No
5/19/17	Tomball	Tomball Chamber of Commerce	<a href="#">Tomball Chamber of Commerce Q&amp;A</a>	Yes
4/18/17	Houston	San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce	<a href="#">San Antonio Hispanic Chamber Roundtable</a>	yes

4/17/17	Waller	Daikin, Inc.	<a href="#">Daikin Tour and Employee Town Hall</a>	
4/10/17	Stafford	Atec, Inc.	<a href="#">Atec, Inc. Tour and Meeting with Employees</a>	No

Joseph L. Smith, PhD  
Associate Professor and Chair  
Department of Political Science  
The University of Alabama

**(Selby)**

**Sent: Tuesday, October 03, 2017 6:00 PM**

Thanks. How did you reach your definition for a town hall? I ask because Merriam-Webster's [definition](#) is perhaps more broad; it says a town hall is "an event at which a public official or political candidate addresses an audience by answering questions posed by individual members."

Anything else we should consider for our story?

I appreciate your very fast response.

G.

**(Smith)**

**6:04 p.m.**

My definition is my own. I think a town hall connotes an unencumbered expression of views. When employees know their employer invited a politician to address them, they are unlikely to ask critical questions or bring up subjects that would be troublesome for the politician.

Joseph L. Smith, PhD  
Associate Professor and Chair  
Department of Political Science  
The University of Alabama

***Response from Mark Rozell, dean, Schar School of Policy and Government, Ruth D. and John T. Hazel Chair in Public Policy, George Mason University***

**7:14 p.m.**  
**Oct. 3, 2017**

These appear to be mostly quite different from the traditional open Town Hall that members of Congress often hold for anyone to show up.

So it's apples and oranges here. A tour of a grocery company with a Q&A labelled a "town hall" is very different from what the Post article analyzed - the decline in traditional open town halls. About half of these besides are closed to media.

The senator's office cannot just slap the label "town hall" on site visits to factories and companies and then claim he's holding a lot of town halls. That's misleading.

Mark J. Rozell

Dean, Schar School of Policy and Government

Ruth D. and John T. Hazel Chair in Public Policy

George Mason University

<http://markrozell.gmu.edu/>

<https://twitter.com/MarkJRozellGMU>

**12:06 p.m.**

**Oct. 4, 2017**

The responses from other academic colleagues here align exactly with my own: if we accept the common understanding of a town hall as open to the public and media, and all are invited to attend and ask questions of the member, then most of these on Cruz's list do not qualify. I would never refer to a factory visit with a restricted audience as a "town hall".

I agree with the colleague who wrote that there is no precise, legal definition of what constitutes a town hall. So I suppose the senator, or any other member, can play word games and try to label any gathering of a group of people a "town hall" in an attempt to rebut criticism for holding too few town halls. But it doesn't pass the common sense test to call a factory visit or selected audience event a "town hall".

Mark J. Rozell

Dean, Schar School of Policy and Government

Ruth D. and John T. Hazel Chair in Public Policy

George Mason University

***Response from [Ashley Trim](#), executive director, Davenport Institute for Public Engagement & Civic Leadership, Pepperdine School of Public Policy***

**9:20 p.m.  
Oct. 3, 2017**

I was forwarded the email you sent to Sheryl Covey regarding the various Town Hall meetings that Senator Cruz has held. I am the Executive Director of the Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership here at the Pepperdine School of Public Policy, so my work centers on Deliberative Democracy and how governments (both the elected and administrative sides) engage with their residents on policy issues.

As I am sure you are aware, the Town Hall meeting has its roots in the local democracies of New England. Historically they were a center of local democracy and public deliberation. However the idea of the Town Hall has evolved greatly over time. In my work at the Davenport Institute I recommend leaders who are trying to engage their public to avoid using the word Town Hall altogether because at this point it pretty much means "any forum where members of the public have a chance to ask questions of government representatives." It is not a legal or legislated term. For instance, the Town Hall style of presidential debate means little more than that the questions each candidate answers originate with members of the audience. There is no real back and forth in that context between the candidate and the members of the public, nor is there really an opportunity for members of the public to engage with one another in that setting. And yet it is commonly called a Town Hall.

During the Affordable Care Act town hall meeting debacle, things became even more chaotic when it came out that some town hall meetings were held after Dems had already voted. Of course some Republicans had done exactly the same thing in 2006 in regards to immigration reform.

John Gastil at Penn State has written much on how Town Halls today are far from the deliberative processes they once were. Almost universally they are either poorly attended, mainly consisting of people supportive of the person in office (possibly informative but rarely deliberative). Or else they devolve into bedlam (as with the Healthcare Town Halls).

I could say much about whether I think these type of town hall meetings are useful, and could offer many alternative ways of fostering a more robust participatory democracy, but the senators claim seems valid within the common use of the term "town hall" in 21st Century America. The list you sent seems very typical of the sort of town hall meeting senators and representatives of both parties hold.

--

Ashley Trim  
Executive Director

Davenport Institute for Public Engagement & Civic Leadership

Pepperdine School of Public Policy

**12:28 p.m.**

I would just add that while I agree that an employee town hall is very far from the original use of the word town hall, it is not an uncommon thing for employers to have or host Q&A sessions and call them town halls. My own university (to my chagrin) is having a "health benefits town hall" later this month. I guess my concern here is that you've uncovered an ambiguity in the way we use political language that speaks to a much broader issue in our democracy than the way Senator Cruz engages with his particular constituency. I would be interested to see what kind of a list you got if you asked other Senators and Representatives the same question. If they generally only included events that were obviously open to the general public you would have the beginnings of an interesting story about Sen Cruz. If others also included Q&A sessions in general even when those were held with a specific group, then you would still have an interesting story - it just wouldn't really be about Senator Cruz anymore.

***Response from [Mark P. Jones](#), fellow in political science, Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University***

**9:30 p.m.**

**Oct. 3, 2017**

There is no official definition of a 'town hall', and, thus, like beauty, in many respects, a town hall is in the eye of the beholder.

From Senator Cruz's perspective, these 19 events meet the definition of a 'town hall' because they involved the senator engaging in a dialogue with relatively large groups of constituents. And, more than half of the events were open to reporters.

A town hall purist would object to these events being defined as 'town halls'. First, the events were not open to the general public. Sixteen of the events were restricted to specific groups and the three other events were only open to members of general public who were willing and able to register through Concerned Veterans of America, a non-profit largely funded by the Koch brothers and widely associated with conservative causes. In addition, more than half of the events were held at companies where the attendees were the company's employees. Since First Amendment rights largely do not apply to private companies, and most employees know it's unwise to rock the boat, these events likely lacked the type of free flowing exchange between an elected official and his/her constituents that a purist would associate with a 'town hall'.



Given the prospects for liberal activists to disrupting town halls that allowed unfettered access to the general public, it is politically understandable why Senator Cruz preferred to limit his town halls to largely controlled and friendly settings. Why for instance provide a platform to your political adversaries in what could possibly degenerate into an unproductive and unseemly scrum that would only benefit these adversaries via media coverage.

For a town hall minimalist, all of Cruz's 19 events would qualify as a 'town hall' because they involved the senator speaking to, and fielding questions from, constituents from all walks of life across the state, from El Paso to Tyler, any everywhere in between.

For a town hall maximalist, none of Cruz's 19 events would qualify as a 'town hall' because they were held in largely controlled settings and were not open to the general public. For purists, to paraphrase Mobb Deep, ain't no such things as halfway town halls.

I would rate this statement as 'Half True.'

Senator Cruz held 19 events where he interacted with diverse groups of constituents, but those events were not open to the general public and were in largely controlled settings that did not lend themselves to a free flowing exchange of opinions and ideas.

***Response from [Mike Dillon](#), associate professor/chair, Media Department, McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts, Duquesne University***

**9:46 a.m.**

**Oct. 4, 2017**

In my opinion these are Potemkin Town Halls, that is, not "town halls" at all. The term town hall implies an event is open to the entire community and that competing ideas will be welcomed and discussed. It seems these town halls are open only to the people from the sections of "town" that support Ted Cruz. These are scripted pseudo-events not genuine public forums.

According to Stars and Stripes and the Washington Post, Concerned Veterans of America frames itself as a grassroots advocacy group but in fact is part of an integrated lobbying effort that supports a Koch brothers-sponsored conservative agenda. Source Watch concurs and cites a Pro Publica investigation linking the group to the Kochs. So, more semantic fuzziness.

**9:47 a.m.**

p.s. meant to include this link:

[https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/Concerned\\_Veterans\\_for\\_America](https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/Concerned_Veterans_for_America)

***Response from [John Gastil](#), professor, Department of Communication Arts & Sciences, senior scholar, McCourtney Institute for Democracy, Penn State University***

**10:43 a.m.**  
**Oct. 4, 2017**

A principal challenge with your fact check is that the term "town hall" has lost any clarity of definition it might have once had. That said, I think the claim is made in this context to affirm one's availability to the public. After all, the "town hall" concept originated from a time when the town would gather together in a common space to discuss common problems, either when the town itself exercised authority (New England Town Meeting) or when meeting with an elected representative (Congressional town halls). So, to count as this kind of town hall, the following would have to be true:

- (1) The event was open to the public (when seating's often limited, there should be a lottery-like quality to getting those seats)
- (2) The agenda was either open, or focused on a particular public issue
- (3) The public was given the chance to speak and ask questions
- (4) The representative was responsive to the questions/concerns raised by the public present

I don't have the time to fact-check this long list via those links, but I'd say that on their face, only a few seem worth checking further. Events held by and at private corporations wouldn't count as a town hall. Those sponsored by nongovernmental organizations have a better prospect of being town halls (e.g., Chambers of Commerce), but you'd need to see affirmative evidence of esp. requirements #1 and #3.

So, on its face, this claim of 17 town halls strikes me as dubious. Electeds do meet-and-greets with employees and other such things frequently, as part of their outreach, but it's disingenuous to call them "town halls."

...

John Gastil  
Professor, Dept of Comm Arts & Sciences  
Senior Scholar, McCourtney Institute for Democracy  
Penn State University