Covid-19 Note: Including Citizens' Voices in Virtual Parliaments

From Brazil to the Maldives, legislatures are moving key parts of their work online. In almost every case, the virtual push prioritises helping parliamentarians to sit, meet, or vote. This emphasis is unsurprising; they have critical decisions to make.

Beyond facilitating regular parliamentary business, the advent of the virtual parliament presents a singular opportunity for legislative bodies to better connect with citizens. As we remain physically distanced, digital engagement—keeping citizens informed and accessing our experiences, ideas, and sentiments on key national questions—may prove more critical than ever.

Many legislative bodies have begun to experiment with digital engagement in recent years, including through web forums and digital debates. But crises provide conditions that can allow for the quicker uptake of innovation, creating rapid, impactful change.

Parliamentary staff are working under trying conditions. To galvanise digital engagement during the Covid-19 crisis, they may benefit from working with internal and external stakeholders to find and implement the best technologies and methods available to them.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution across legislative bodies, but there are common themes and opportunities. The focus of this note is specifically on gathering and integrating citizens' views into parliamentary work, rather than on broadcasting to them.

The remainder of the note outlines:
1) Shared barriers and limitations to digital engagement that legislative bodies often face
2) Suggestions for responsibly pursuing digital engagement under crisis conditions, while avoiding a rushed, ineffective approach

Why engage digitally during a crisis?

Numerous factors have pushed legislative bodies to begin to experiment with digital engagement. Some of these objectives are particularly pertinent to the context of crisis. They include:

1) More holistic evidence collection: on sensitive, crisis-related issues such as health and social care, it is critical for parliamentarians to understand the perspectives of both experts and citizens with lived experience of issues under debate.

2) Better decision making: granular evidence collection can lead to more accurate decision making that takes into consideration the experience of specific and diverse demographics.

3) Reaching new audiences: digital engagement can help parliaments reach citizens who may not typically take part in participatory activities, thus broadening the viewpoints to which they have access.

4) Boosting accountability: digital tools can be engaged to keep citizens looped into critical debates and decisions.

5) Democratic improvement: at a time of increased concern in many countries over state control, including the use of surveillance technologies, engaging citizens may help to improve the overall democratic record of crisis management.

Barriers and limitations

Key barriers and limitations to digital engagement may continue or be exacerbated under crisis conditions.

Barriers in legislative bodies sometimes include:
- Budgetary limitations
- Staffing & skills shortages
- Limited understanding among staff of available participatory technologies
- Limited access to available participatory technologies, and procurement processes that impede rapid technology acquisition
- Insufficient lesson sharing on digital engagement experiences within and between legislative bodies
- Limited digital engagement knowledge and resource management

Limitations to digital engagement include:
- Digital Exclusion: More than half the global population, or over 3.8 billion, is reportedly unconnected. The problem is not exclusive to developing economies. The pandemic is foregrounding the issue of digital exclusion in the UK, the rest of Europe, and the US. Digital exclusion makes digital engagement, by default, an unequal activity. Accessibility requirements must also be taken into account.
- Bias: Experiments in designing out bias on digital engagement platforms are promising but limited. Where participation is voluntary, not by sortition, questions over who chooses to participate online remain.

- Security and Trust: Recent incidents of 'Zoom bombing' of public meetings brings attention to the need to ensure online environments are secure, and enable honest, civil conversation.

Mitigating risks and publicly acknowledging current limitations and unknowns will matter for developing societal trust in the value of participatory experimentation. Parliamentary staff will need rapidly to develop or strengthen networks that include industry and academia to help them consistently to learn, evaluate, and tweak.

Recommendations

1) Technologies

Many participatory technologies already exist (we have recently analysed more than 40). They have often already been tried and tested, reducing some of the risks and hurdles to implementing them in legislative bodies.

There may be concern over creating undue resource burden at a time of huge pressure and financial constraint on public sector organisations. Yet, as noted in Table 1., the uptake of participatory technologies developed by civic technology initiatives and companies often requires only limited staff, time, or digital skills. To derive most benefit from these resources, legislative bodies must ensure that the functionalities of the tools that they select align with their objectives for digital engagement, from reaching specific demographics to wide-scale evidence collection.

Table 1.
Three examples of digital engagement products & services

CONSUL
What does it do? An opensource, customizable engagement platform, constituents and legislative bodies can debate, create and vote on proposals, and make collective decisions. **Staffing requirements:** A web administrator for set-up. There are clear instructions on CONSUL's website, and an active community on GitHub for troubleshooting. A staff member is required to populate the platform with basic information and set up individual debates, forums, etc. **Example use case:** Madrid City Government

Bang the Table
What does it do? A platform for governments to listen to and inform citizens, measure their engagement, and build communities. **Staffing requirements:** Clients are directed through the onboarding process. A parliamentary staff member would need to manage the relationship and explain their user needs. **Example use case:** National Assembly for Wales

Insights.US
What does it do? Platform for organisations to ask the public questions. Their algorithms then quickly analyse the results. Parliaments can follow up with participants on the platform. **Staffing requirements:** Following set-up, staff upload questions to ask citizens, and can share project outcomes with them via the platform. **Example use case:** Austrian Parliament

*Digital engagement in legislative bodies is in its infancy. Evidence of 'what works' is still developing. Table 1 does not represent a direct endorsement of any commercial product or service, and should be engaged as a source of inspiration, illustrating the types of digital tools available.

2) People and Organisations

Some legislative bodies already have active digital engagement teams. In the context of Covid-19, they, or a small, newly created emergency engagement team, can be given a mandate for:

a) Research, including rapid stakeholder and capacity mapping to create a snapshot of:
- Internal capacity
- Local civic technology initiatives
- Relevant technology suppliers, including SMEs
- What other legislative bodies are doing, and how

b) Engagement with technology sectors and civic technology initiatives. More than any recent time, legislative bodies are in a position to contact any organisation or individual to seek help, gaining quick access to ideas and resources, within legal bounds.

c) Implementation, running online events where there is appetite and clear utility, and ensuring findings are fed into broader evidence collection

d) Standards, including checking how suppliers meet **cyber security** standards and **accessibility** requirements, consulting technologists in other teams or trusted outsider advisors where internal team capacity lacks.

The longer view

As legislative bodies begin to think about longer term resilience and relevance, they may do well to consider the following approaches.

» Building internal capacity
At least some parliaments that have swiftly digitalised have pre-existing internal digital knowledge and skills. The same is likely to be true for digital engagement. Building capacity may serve parliaments well both for a new post-pandemic normality and for preparedness for future crises.

» Measurement and Evaluation
There is often little systematic M&E of digital engagement processes. Without a clear overview of impact to articulate to senior decisionmakers, sustaining, improving, and scaling nascent organizational and technological channels for digital engagement can prove challenging. Robust, nimble M&E practices can help.

» Maintaining awareness of emergent research and practice
Research into digital engagement is developing at pace, including with a focus on the role of machine learning on digital engagement platforms. Giving an individual or team responsibility for knowledge transfer is useful, so that evidence-informed change can be implemented as efficiently and accountably as possible at the relevant moment.

» Developing a digital engagement ecosystem

Digital activity in legislative bodies sometimes takes place in silos. Better connecting internal teams with digital responsibility, and / or reorganising for simplicity, may be key for ensuring strong flows of ideas and information between them. Centrally developing and organising a strong relationship with external stakeholders, from market engagement to lesson-sharing with other legislatures and researchers, may also prove valuable.

In the long run, digital engagement may not completely replace offline forms of citizen participation, just as fully virtual parliaments are unlikely to become the norm.

That may be for the best. In the UK, as elsewhere, many committee inquiries focus on contentious or highly personal topics—from humanitarian intervention to the funding of adult social care—making empathy requisite for all involved. Face-to-face contact may be particularly valuable in these contexts.

As societies and our governing institutions recover and build resilience post pandemia, 'blended' approaches, using digital tools to facilitate, not annul, face-to-face encounters, may prove the best approach. The current crisis could set parliaments on a path there.

Read related insights on digital engagement here.

Read related insights on Covid-19 here.

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