Reaching Out: Civic Engagement Strategies for a post-COVID world

MapLight
August 23, 2023
Acknowledgements

We acknowledge and thank Resilient Democracy and Nick Chedli Carter for their support and thoughtful contributions to this report. This report was written by Frank Bass.

About MapLight

MapLight is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit that seeks to achieve a government that (actually) works for the people. We illuminate the influence of money in politics, facilitate informed voting and civic engagement, and advance reforms that make government more responsive to the people. Over the past 18 years, MapLight’s data and reports have appeared in more than 13,000 articles and been seen, read, or heard over 300 million times via outlets including ABC News, Bloomberg, the Chicago Tribune, CNN, Fox Business News, Huffington Post, The Intercept, International Business Times, Newsweek, Politico, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, The New York Times, and hundreds more. Our work has been recognized with a James Madison Freedom of Information Award, a Knight-Batten Award for Innovations in Journalism, and a Library Journal Best Reference Award.
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INTRODUCTION

At last count, there were 90,125 state and local government units in the United States.\(^1\) When the first case of the COVID-19 virus was confirmed on January 20, 2020,\(^2\) it is fair to say that not one of them had been required to adapt to a global pandemic in more than a century. The COVID-19 pandemic was a threat to human life. But it also posed a direct—if often ignored—threat to democracy. Without the participation of citizens, democracies wither and eventually die. As many states, counties, and cities attempted to slow the pandemic spread by mandating school closures and voluntary lockdowns, citizen participation decreased dramatically.

Yet simply because fewer people were using government resources, ranging from schools to highways, didn’t mean the work of government stopped or even paused. If anything, the role of government took on greater importance as elected officials wrestled with the reality of day-to-day life during a pandemic. What were the best policies to protect citizens, and who needed the most protection? Who were considered critical front-line workers? With schools closed, how should children be educated? Should local libraries remain open, and if so, under what rules? How should people be allowed to vote or participate in other important civic responsibilities—ranging from the nationwide decennial Census to setting an annual budget for a small-town library—when such engagement faced unprecedented hurdles?

In the absence of meetings that allowed citizens to participate in governing, a fundamental question arose: How can people take part in the daily life of their state or local government if there were no in-person gatherings?

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The landscape of civic engagement has been changed, arguably permanently. In-person, hybrid, and remote engagements will continue for the foreseeable future. This report is designed to provide an overview of effective civic engagement practices for those responsible for the unglamorous yet vital work of ensuring the daily smooth functioning of the government in a post-COVID reality. It is based on interviews with more than a dozen local officials, community-based organizations, and government associations ranging from Long Beach, Calif., to Wright County, Mo., (the geographic center of the nation), to Burlington, Vt. The report also makes extensive use of literature about civic engagement, with particular attention paid to material provided by the City of Salt Lake; the National Association of Counties; and the University of Michigan’s Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy. While this report is aimed at the people who are responsible for making sure that democracy works through the dozens of small tasks that go into securing citizen engagement, it may also be useful to community-based organizations and individuals who seek to improve access to civic gathering spaces. This report outlines how a number of state and local governments have adapted to the new reality shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lessons they’ve gleaned along the way.

### Key Steps in Effective Civic Engagement

#### Internal preparation
- Decide if, when, and how the public should be engaged
- Identify stakeholders
- Think through how to most effectively conduct outreach
- Coordinate internal roles

#### External roles
- Consider which media/mix is appropriate
- Utilize multiple avenues of outreach: Social media, text, email, and local media

#### Holding space
- Set a clear agenda
- Consider timing
- Identify speakers and set time limits
- Respectful space: Use rules and assistive technology
- Implement best practices for virtual meetings

#### Following up
- Be proactive about seeking feedback
- Keep records for public review
- Seek internal feedback
- Challenge misinformation

#### OVERVIEW

As it upended so many facets of day-to-day life, the COVID-19 pandemic also altered how government functions in ways that are still reverberating. The most obvious change occurred with the proliferation of online meetings, mostly via tools developed by Alphabet (the parent company of Google, Microsoft, and Zoom). Almost 20 years ago, the U.S. Department of Justice observed that, “when government is constantly being asked to do more with less, the Internet is playing a vital role in allowing government to better serve all of its citizens.”³ Although online media have been criticized for many valid reasons, the importance of their role in guaranteeing and in some cases expanding civic engagement cannot be denied.

The transition from public meetings to online events, however, has been far from seamless. A well-run online meeting requires a level of consideration, preparation, and transparency that can be an order of magnitude greater than in-person public meetings. This report considers four key elements for a successful online government meeting:

##### Internal preparation:
In-person and virtual meetings both share the need for a clear agenda and coordinated internal roles. However, because of the different locations of participants with online meetings (and potentially larger number of people in attendance), organizers should be thoughtful when making decisions about the agenda flow, and the extent and methods of citizen participation. In addition, the technology used for the meeting must be tested to ensure its accessibility, security, and ease of use.

##### External outreach:
Notices of government meetings traditionally relied on public media, such as newspapers, government websites, email distribution lists, and public bulletins posted at various locations throughout a community. Given the relative inability of governments to directly reach out to interested parties, state and local officials must redouble their efforts to ensure all stakeholders are notified of meetings through a multitude of means—ranging from community leaflets to social media—as well as spreading information about the various methods that community members can use to participate. For people lacking private internet access, officials should consider the options for public internet access and how to best educate community members on its availability.

##### Holding space:
Policies and procedures for virtual citizen participation should be clear with simple rules, and communicated via multiple means. As the nation has become more polarized from Congress to local school board meetings, government officials must take proactive, transparent measures in setting meeting guidelines to ensure that all parties have an equitable opportunity to voice their opinions. Much of the art of skillful facilitation is true for both in-person and virtual meetings; online facilitation has the added challenge of increased numbers of participants who are physically removed from each other, but also the benefits of video meeting technology to help create a civil virtual community space.

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### Overview

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Our study considers aspects from three different perspectives: State and local government leaders, community-based organizations, and academia. As all citizens have a responsibility to participate in a democracy, so all three types of community sectors have responsibilities to ensure that opportunities for civic engagement—the ability of a people to learn about, participate, and influence their lives—are maximized and barriers to participation are minimized.

“Engagement is a constant issue,” said Kimi Lee, director of Bay Rising, an Oakland, Calif.-based alliance of community-led organizations. Tom Ivacko, executive director of the University of Michigan’s Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP), said an increasing percentage of Michigan leaders believe citizens should be more engaged in government, but a growing number also believe citizens are less willing to take the time to become well-informed about issues in their communities. CLOSUP has conducted surveys of the state’s 1,856 governments—ranging from Detroit to tiny towns in the Upper Peninsula—since 2009. The survey found that comfortable majorities of citizens only engage with their governments on issues that directly affect them, and that an increasing percentage prefer to complain to elected officials, rather than work with them to find solutions to community issues.

Similarly, government leaders especially must be mindful that communication with their constituents has to be a two-way street. “People are respectful of their government,” said Zach Williams, chairman of the Wright County (Mo.) Commission, “but they don’t want to be controlled.” While citizen engagement is a crucial requirement for a functioning democracy, it is also the responsibility of government leaders to cultivate relationships with all their constituents, regardless of their political persuasion. In today’s increasingly polarized political climate, it is vital for government leaders to ensure all their constituents have the opportunity to be heard and actively involved within the democratic process.

The nature of online communication generally does not allow for post-meeting discussion, but having avenues for feedback is critical to cultivating trust among stakeholders. Government officials should utilize various methods to reach out to participants after the meeting, encourage continued participation by acknowledging their input, and seek feedback to assess the effectiveness of the meeting and improve future gatherings.

Determine the ‘how’ of public involvement. When it comes to civic engagement, proper planning is an indispensable element of success. Democracy, it’s often been said, is messy; leaders must plan for multiple eventualities leading to different and often unexpected outcomes. Although most governments conduct civic engagement planning on an ad hoc basis, some have developed relatively elaborate matrices for involving citizens. Salt Lake City, Utah, for example, has designed a process for planning engagement from the beginning of a project. Its elements can be distilled into four simple criteria:
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Follow-up:
The nature of online communication generally does not allow for post-meeting discussion, but having avenues for feedback is critical to cultivating trust among stakeholders. Government officials should utilize various methods to reach out to participants after the meeting, encourage continued participation by acknowledging their input, and seek feedback to assess the effectiveness of the meeting and improve future gatherings.

Part One: Internal Preparation

Key Takeaways:
- Decide if, when, and how the public should become involved
- Identify potential stakeholders
- Consider technological needs and limitations
- Coordinate internal roles

Determine the ‘how’ of public involvement. When it comes to civic engagement, proper planning is an indispensable element of success. Democracy, it’s often been said, is messy; leaders must plan for multiple eventualities leading to different and often unexpected outcomes. Although most governments conduct civic engagement planning on an ad hoc basis, some have developed relatively elaborate matrices for involving citizens. Salt Lake City, Utah, for example, has designed a process for planning engagement from the beginning of a project. Its elements can be distilled into four simple criteria:

What: The purpose of the project or initiative

Who: Does a decision need to be made, and who might make the decision

How: Will public participation be necessary in order to affect the decision or process

When: The points of the process during which the public needs to be engaged
In the initial step, the goal of the project informs the engagement process. The next steps involve determining who the decision-makers are and if (and when) public engagement is required—critical information for building a timeline that will guide the process. Sometimes the day-to-day operations of governance don’t require any degree of citizen engagement. The design and technical underpinning of a local website may or may not require some degree of engagement from voters. A plan to redesign a government building likely requires a high degree of citizen involvement; a plan to change the paint scheme within a government building likely does not, and so forth.

For Salt Lake City officials, determining the how of public participation means deciding among four methods of engaging citizens (from least to most involved):

1. **Inform**: The city notifies the public about a decision that has been made.
2. **Consult**: The city asks for feedback about different options.
3. **Involve**: The city listens and responds to the goals of citizens.
4. **Collaborate**: The city works with citizens to identify solutions.

Having done the background work of deciding on the goal and the involved parties, the how becomes a strategic decision. For some projects, community groups or interested citizens will need to be engaged from the onset with high levels of collaboration to build public trust; other decisions may simply require that the public be informed after the fact. And sometimes the most effective engagement is a combination of the above options. For example, Salt Lake notes that a new project likely would involve both consulting and involvement, but not necessarily a collaborative degree. For Salt Lake City officials, determining the how of public participation means deciding among four methods of engaging citizens from least to most involved:

**Online meetings “are another element of reaching people.”**

Dan McLean

Online meetings are another element of reaching people,” said Dan McLean, a communications professional based in Shelburne, Vermont. “It’s opened the doors to a lot of people who might have been able to attend a town meeting or government function. It lowers barriers to access to some degree.” Significantly, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the mass-scale adoption of online meeting models. To some degree, the widespread use of virtual gatherings has been a boon for civic engagement, allowing people who might not have previously been able to travel to a public meeting—with all the necessary arrangements required around dependent care, work, transportation, etc.—to participate. For example, officials in Arapahoe County, Colo., told the National Association of Counties that quarterly county commission meetings that used to draw no more than 10 residents began attracting fewer than 250 and as many as 1,300 people. The Chesterfield County, Va., Parks and Recreation Department saw the need to create web applications to provide information about local trails, water access, and playgrounds, resulting in an additional 1 million visitors. And even as searches for federal office locations fell 48 percent, health-related inquiries jumped from 4.6 million to 11.8 million.

Online meetings, however, have not been without complications. It’s important to note that not all people have access to computers or high-speed internet. According to the 2017–21 American Community Survey, more than 1 in 10 U.S. households do not have an internet connection. The problem is especially pronounced in rural areas, which the U.S. Department of Agriculture defines as places with fewer than 500 residents per square mile; a MapLight analysis found that only one urban county (Danville City, Va.) ranks among the 500 counties with the smallest percentage of internet-connected households. “I think Zoom is helpful to a point, but it tends to have the same silo effects that can result from narrow funding and bureaucracies.” Significantly, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the mass-scale adoption of online meeting models.

**Target stakeholders.** Identifying stakeholders is a key step in the background planning for engagement. At times, targeting will be obvious. A transportation agency, for example, is likely to target motorists, mass transit users, and businesses; a public health department may easily determine that it should focus on at-risk populations or vulnerable communities. While presumably knowledgeable about their constituencies, however, government agencies shouldn’t hesitate to utilize the resources available within their communities to improve targeting of stakeholders. A number of successful initiatives can be credited to community-based organizations that served as a bridge between government agencies and constituents. An August 2022 Pew Charitable Trusts report found that utilizing the community organizations in government programs “can further their reach and impact, promote equity, involve stakeholders and local residents in decision making, and better meet community and social needs,” as well as alleviating the silo effects that can result from narrow funding and bureaucracies.

**Consider technological needs and limitations.** For most of the nation’s history, citizen engagement has involved people gathering in a public building, whether a school, city hall, county office, or legislative hearing room. In the aftermath of the pandemic, traditional meetings held in government buildings have also expanded to include more public safety-minded alternatives such as outdoor venues. Depending on the targeted audience, places considered for meetings by government officials can include grocery store and pharmacy parking lots, farmer’s markets, school playgrounds, or local parks and outdoor recreational facilities.

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Different governmental bodies will have varying capabilities when it comes to technology, which will affect their ability to effectively manage online meetings. Some will have the ability to livestream meetings that can accommodate hundreds of people while simultaneously translating the proceedings in multiple languages; others will struggle to coax an ancient personal computer to run the latest version of Microsoft Teams or Zoom. If there are technological limitations on the part of the governmental body, participants should be made aware of the potential for problems (the internet connection may drop, the video may freeze, etc.) before the meeting occurs and what they may need to do to restore access (i.e., “We may need to disconnect and restart the meeting. If that occurs and you find yourself no longer connected, simply click on the meeting link again to join again.”)

Similarly, technological problems may arise from the participants’ devices. Common issues like screen freezes (the best solution is to request participants turn off their camera) and poor audio quality (redirect participants to type out questions or make comments in the chat function of the meeting app) can often be preemptively addressed by communicating tips in advance.

When the public is asked to use technological programs to access civic spaces, the very valid concerns about privacy and technological surveillance should be addressed. Although civic engagement involves a large degree of public exposure, steps should be taken to reassure people that their private data will not be compromised because of their participation. As a proactive measure, participants should be encouraged to update to the latest versions of their operating systems and antivirus software. Online meeting programs will often have many different options that will, by default: Hide cameras/videos, mute everyone, hide names of participants, etc. It can be helpful to become familiar with the default settings and make adjustments as needed prior to the meeting.

Coordinate internal roles. Whether engagements are online or in-person, the coordination of internal roles is essential to streamlining processes and avoiding duplication of efforts. For example, it’s helpful to assign a moderator for meetings – the earlier, the better – to ensure a smooth process. Ideally, the moderator should have the temperament to control the meeting and the ability to work across agency or department lines when necessary.

Ebony Scott Anderson, external affairs director of the University of Chicago’s Inclusive Economy Lab, noted the need to coordinate the distribution of funds from the American Rescue Plan, a $1.9 trillion stimulus package designed in 2021, which helped improve communication across agencies. “It was an acceleration of what a lot of us have been screaming about for a long time,” she said. “There’s so much value in administrative data collected by governments that integration can inform the way you make decisions.”

In an ideal world, the moderator may also serve as a de facto project manager for the engagement, making sure that the groundwork has been laid for a successful interaction with the public. While this isn’t always possible, especially in large government organizations, the individual selected to moderate any engagement should be well-informed about preparations that have or haven’t been made for the venture to be successful from both a government and a public standpoint.

For more information on this topic, we recommend the 2022 Salt Lake City Engagement Guide.
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Part Two: External Outreach

Key Takeaways:

- Consider the intended audience, and the strengths and drawbacks to specific outreach methods
- Utilize multiple avenues of outreach

Once internal and external stakeholders have been identified, the best methods for engagement can be determined with those audience members in mind. While considerable attention and resources have been devoted to best practices for remote engagement, there is no one best way of reaching constituents. For example, young adults may favor newer mobile apps, different racial and ethnic groups may prefer specific social media platforms, and an older cohort may be most reachable via texts. Closed-caption broadcasts, with translations, may be especially helpful within some disability communities or among viewers where English is not the dominant language. Middle-aged constituents may be best engaged with more traditional social media apps such as Facebook or Twitter. And, of course, some people still rely on direct mail and broadcast media, such as local television and radio, or through postings in physical community locations. Community groups—whether social, religious-based, or identity-based—who have extensive experience with effective outreach may be useful to consult, as both a venue of outreach and a source of knowledge.

The local geography may also affect methods of outreach: Officials in large metros or counties may find some combination of social media, email, and text messaging to most effectively engage constituents, whereas people in smaller locales may, in addition to those virtual methods, also find effective engagement through leaflets at community billboards at local groceries, feed stores, libraries or diners. Smaller towns may also find it easier to involve citizens by soliciting input through local community organizations like social clubs, churches, or schools.

Governments should consider multiple avenues for reaching citizens.

Outreach Options: One Size Does Not Fit All

Social Media

Social media is popular but highly segmented. Rebecca Pelham, executive director Engage Miami, said her organization has focused on YouTube and TikTok videos as a means of reaching younger residents. Graphics also are playing a role in reaching people. “Graphic explainers are really powerful,” Pelham said. “I believe there’s a strong desire for content that explains what’s happening at a local and state level, a real hunger for that kind of information and knowledge.”

Older forms of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, also can be used to reach constituents. While Facebook skews slightly older, its reach is unparalleled. Rep. David Bowen, a Milwaukee-area state representative, described the social media platforms as being among his “main outlets” for reaching constituents during the worst of the pandemic. Even as fewer COVID-19 cases are reported, he said, his office has continued to rely on it.

Social media is often viewed as being heavily segmented by age, and different platforms also are segmented by race and ethnicity. Lee, the Bay Rising director, noted that the San Francisco-Oakland-Berkeley metropolitan area includes a diverse population of people of Latino, Chinese, Laotian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Burmese ancestry. Most of the Latino population, she said, uses the Meta-owned WhatsApp as its primary social media platform; people of Chinese ancestry are more likely to use WeChat, the world’s largest mobile app.

Texting

Texting or the mass automated sending of messages via mobile devices such as smartphones has been a highly efficient and accessible platform for driving civic engagement. In locales where cellular service may be spotty or weak, texting can offer a viable alternative for people who don’t have access to more bandwidth-intensive programs. According to the Census Bureau’s 2016-20 American Community Survey, roughly 35.7 million Americans have either dial-up internet access or cellular data plans that may not include enough bandwidth to stream a public meeting. Another 16.2 million Americans do not have a computer at their residence.

One major issue for texts, however, has been a crackdown by mobile carriers on automated messages, the subject of a September 2022 Federal Communications Commission response to unwanted spam texts. Jenn Kaufman of the Chicago-based State Revenue Alliance said the effectiveness of texts has fallen over the last decade, from 90 to 95 percent in 2010 to “not in the 90s, maybe not in the 80s, maybe even not in the 70s. It’s a real shame, and it’s coming from oversaturation by bad actors.”

Part Two: External Outreach

Key Takeaways:
- Consider the intended audience, and the strengths and drawbacks to specific outreach methods
- Utilize multiple avenues of outreach

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⁸ Ars Technica. FCC advances plan to require blocking of spam texts from bogus numbers. September 27, 2022.
Lauren Glenn-Davitian, executive director of the CCTV Center for Media and Democracy, observed that local media can be thoughtful about access for disability communities and other historically marginalized groups. The Vermont network offers closed-captioning and translation, including videos about at-home testing in 16 different languages. Kaufman echoed the necessity for governments to remember the needs of communities with disabilities. “It’s still a high-risk period for many disabled people,” Kaufman said. “It’s still not safe for everyone.”

The rise of technology into everyday life offers a plethora of methods for external outreach, but government officials should remember that there is no silver bullet for reaching an entire community, whether it appears on the surface to be diverse or not. “The key is to use multiple methods and not go all-in on one,” said Lea Eriksen, chief information officer for the City of Long Beach, which has been recognized as a top digital city for more than a decade.9

For more information on outreach strategies, especially among historically underrepresented groups, we recommend “Best Practices for Meaningful Community Engagement” by Groundworks USA.8

Email

Email has often been overlooked as an avenue for civic engagement. Yet McLean, the Vermont strategist, notes it’s one of the few online resources available to virtually everyone. “In general, email is one of those things that doesn’t have all the bells and whistles of social media but still reaches a lot of people,” he said. “Everyone is on email. So if you want to reach everyone, email is one of those spots. It’s almost like a weekly newsletter – not the most glamorous thing, but everyone sees it.” Mass emails are also susceptible to being flagged as spam and to trigger an audience oversaturation point, so they should be utilized strategically in conjunction with other forms of outreach.

Local media

Local media, ranging from weekly newspapers to statewide broadcast outlets, have been financially pressured over the last decade but still remain a vital source of outreach for governments. Bowen, the Wisconsin state representative who was one of the state’s first elected officials to contract COVID-19, said daily press conferences carried by local broadcast outlets were especially valuable in keeping constituents informed and engaged. Local media also is augmented in many places by community efforts. In Vermont, for example, the Vermont Access Network operates more than 40 channels serving 100,000 households, offering programming ranging from the meetings of the Colchester Planning Commission to pandemic updates from the state’s governor.

Part Three: Effectively Holding Space

Key Takeaways:

- Set a clear agenda
- Be thoughtful when selecting the day/time
- Identify potential speakers and set time limits
- Respectful space: Utilize rules and assistive technology
- Best practices for virtual meetings

Set a clear agenda

Internal planning and external outreach can set the stage for successful civic engagement, but it’s also equally important for officials to create a virtual space for civility, respect, and the chance for constituents to voice their opinions. To effectively prepare for multiple contingencies, government officials should begin by setting a clear agenda—and making sure it’s distributed to all parties. An agenda should outline the topics to be addressed; the people who will speak about agenda items; and, where necessary, action items needed for agenda items. It’s also best to specify a length for meetings, whether it’s 30 minutes or two hours, although research from Microsoft has found that engagement tends to drop off noticeably after a half-hour.10 For meetings that last longer than an hour, it’s wise to schedule breaks of five to 10 minutes per hour.

Consider timing

The timing of an engagement is as important as the clarity of an agenda. Although an increasing number of Americans have benefited from a work-at-home situation during the pandemic, it would be unwise to assume that everyone is capable of taking an hour-long break for a planning and zoning meeting at 10 a.m. on a Friday. When possible, allow for meetings to occur outside of standard office hours to maximize the number of people who can attend. In an increasingly diverse country, organizers should also consider national and religious holidays.

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Plan for speakers

Whether the engagement is in person or virtual, advance planning in determining speakers will assist with time management during the meeting. Organizers should encourage participants to indicate their interest in speaking in advance of the engagement. An online sign-up sheet is recommended for virtual meetings, with the topic clearly indicated. This is especially important for meetings involving more than a few people; a screen (or three full of people with virtual hands raised who are unable to voice their opinion will often lead to a disgruntled constituency.

By the same token, time limits for speakers are particularly advisable and should be communicated in advance. (A former Texas county judge once noted that although the U.S. Constitution guaranteed freedom of speech, it did not guarantee an endless amount of it, especially in his office. To save time and ensure that more people have the opportunity to speak, prepared statements can simply be summarized and posted online. Officials can also request that multiple speakers from the same organization consolidate their statements and allow only one person to speak for the organization.

Respectful space

The National Association of Counties, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that represents almost 40,000 county officials and 3.6 million employees, stressed the importance of ensuring that engagements with constituents—and with other government officials—remain civil. Noting that civil behavior “is far too rare in all aspects of our lives together,” the association cited the “Ten Commandments of Civility” developed by New Jersey local government lawyer John C. Gillespie in a September 2016 report.11

Finally, a few simple rules for promoting respect and effective use of meeting time should be established for engaging with constituents, whether for a five-minute, in-person conversation to assess the level of support for a particular project or a multi-hour remote video meeting to collect constituent feedback about a government policy. Rules should not be arbitrary (i.e., only five people speak but should reinforce the purpose of the engagement and ensure that constituents are heard.

Two technological issues to assist with maintaining a respectful space bear mentioning. First, the moderator should establish a virtual “waiting room” to admit participants. Although rare, disruptions of online meetings have occurred.12 The moderator also should have the ability to mute speakers. This is useful not just to avoid disruptions, but to ensure that no one participant can monopolize a meeting.


Gillespie’s Ten Commandments of Civility

1. Thou shalt not rudely interrupt a colleague midsentence; nor “speak over” a colleague while she/he is speaking.
2. Thou shalt not assume that shrillness of tone is a substitute for substantive dialogue.
3. Thou shalt treat the members of the public with the same courtesy as you would if they were members of your body—and perhaps more importantly, require that they treat you and your colleagues the same way.
4. Thou shalt not resort to “zingers” designed solely to embarrass your target.
5. Thou shalt, where possible, explore areas of common ground where legitimate disagreements exist, in an offer to move forward on matters of public importance.
6. Thou shalt not allow legitimate critique of policy and practice to become a personal attack aimed at the person who devised the policy or implements the practice.
7. Thou shalt always recognize that your colleagues were also elected, just as you were, and deserve the same level of respect for having run and won.
8. Thou shalt not ridicule or belittle a colleague, or a member of the public, simply because he or she disagrees with you on an issue.
9. Thou shalt not pretend something is much more important than it really is, simply to score points with and audience.
10. Thou shalt always remember that it is okay to agree to disagree, and that reasonable people can indeed disagree reasonably.
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American Bar Association: Accessibility Checklist

- Is the platform accessible for disabled persons?
- Has the platform been tested by users with different types of disabilities?
- Is the platform compatible with assistive technologies used by disabled persons (e.g., screen readers for blind persons, screen enlargement applications, closed-captioning, cognitive aids including computer devices, etc.)?
- Does the platform have real-time automated captioning, or does it support manual captioning by a third-party vendor? Is the real-time captioning available in the platform or will users have to interact with a separate window?
- Does the platform allow for ASL Interpreters to stay visible throughout your event?
- Does the platform have simple keyboard shortcuts for users who may not use a mouse?
- Does the platform have a chat, note, Q&A, or other features for participation? If so, are they accessible?
- Does the platform allow for computer-based and phone-based audio listening/speaking?
- Does the platform have customizable interfaces, so anyone using screen readers or screen magnification can adjust the video windows as needed?
- Does the platform provide good video quality, including the ability to show two screens at once?
- Are there barriers/steps to joining the event? For example, is the event password-protected or require a user to input information to join?

Best practices

It's safe to assume that the vast majority of the nation's 90,000-plus government bodies don't have a dedicated information technology specialist (or two, or more) to ensure that online gatherings run smoothly. Officials should test their equipment in advance of the meeting and verify:

- An Internet speed test to avoid screen freezes;
- Operating system and software are up-to-date to prevent lags and security issues;
- Audio (check that the correct microphone and speakers are selected) and video/camera function as expected;
- All relevant documents are either shared in advance or posted to a shared site (to ensure clear communication and provide information in writing and/or visual form for improved accessibility);
- Remote meeting capabilities have been tested internally;
- Live transcription function, if available and turned on, will generate real-time captioning during the meeting (this can greatly improve accessibility and can also provide a written record for internal or external use).

In addition, officials should ensure that technological distractions are minimized. They should mute their microphone when not speaking, and speak clearly and slowly. Officials should place their phones on silent mode, and preferably not use them during the engagement. They should avoid typing, especially if it’s on a computer that’s being used to broadcast the engagement, and use a pen and paper to take notes.

Some other useful tips to consider for the computer being used for the meeting:

- Browser pages and other programs should be closed.
- Disable the autofill function on the computer browser to avoid displaying sensitive information.
- Any pop-up notifications from news sites, Slack or other messaging sites, etc. should be muted.
- Lastly, for a few practical and simple tips that can affect the effectiveness of online meetings, consider:
- Posting supporting documents online on a site where participants can view them, either during the meeting or afterwards.
- Avoiding poor lighting or distracting backgrounds
- Avoiding or minimizing background noise (i.e., loud traffic, construction sounds, etc.) and look for plug-in programs that can cancel as much external noise as possible.
- Best possible video quality (generally speaking, even an inexpensive laptop is preferable to a phone, and the computer should be placed on a stable surface to avoid shaky video.)

For more information on this topic, we recommend “In Search of Civility” by the National Association of County Officials.

A respectful space is also an accessible space. According to the Census Bureau’s 2021 American Community Survey, almost 42.5 million Americans – 13 percent of the nation’s population – have a disability. Many online meeting platforms offer real-time transcription and other assistive technologies can be deployed as needed. The American Bar Association offers a checklist for officials to ensure that people with disabilities are able to participate in civic activities.¹³

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Part Four: Follow-Up

Key Takeaways:

- Be proactive in seeking feedback
- Keep records available for public review
- Follow up internally
- Challenge misinformation

Civic engagement doesn’t end with a meeting or gathering. For engagement to succeed, governments must follow up with citizens. It’s important to respond to direct questions promptly, but meeting organizers should also be proactive and send materials—notes, transcripts, and/or additional materials—to participants after the meeting along with a brief thank-you note and any requests for feedback. Were all the issues addressed? What could be improved? What worked and what didn’t? What should be the next steps, if any? How can governments ensure that citizens remain engaged and continue to participate?

Recordings of any gatherings should be made accessible to the public and archived for future reference. The follow-up format should be tailored to the audience; email, direct (snail) mail, and social media are all perfectly acceptable communication channels for following up. Telephone conversations may also be helpful, depending on the number of participants. In some instances, where feedback is essential to the success or failure of a project, Eriksen said Long Beach officials have authorized using gift cards to local businesses as an incentive for participation.

Internal follow-up is also important, especially for projects that involve a degree of inter-agency coordination. Officials should take care to ensure that action items don’t fall through the cracks. A checklist can be circulated via email or an internal website to make sure that nothing has been missed, and internal meetings scheduled to keep projects on track and constituents engaged.

Even as social media has given governments new methods of reaching citizens, it’s also been responsible for disseminating vast amounts of misinformation and disinformation. To counter this, government officials increasingly need to be nimble and proactive. Laying the groundwork against misinformation starts with establishing reliable and trustworthy communications before false stories begin proliferating, as well as strengthening media literacy skills for community members. Additionally, government officials can use their avenues of communication to uplift credible sources and highlight trustworthy sites or professionals as a way of counteracting misleading claims. Once misinformation has spread, it’s important for officials to debunk false stories clearly and systematically.

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Part Five: Conclusion

The last decade has been a tumultuous time for democracy. The nation is more divided than it’s been in a century, and a global pandemic that forced people out of the physical public square and into virtual ones has posed unprecedented challenges for officials. The divide between rich and poor has grown, creating more pressure on governments to offer social services even as the opportunities for citizens to become more engaged have grown exponentially, thanks to new technologies.

To some extent, technology remains a barrier for some communities, especially in poor and rural parts of the United States. But technological developments are also offering more opportunities for citizen engagement. Slowly but surely, high-speed internet is becoming ubiquitous. Other advances – instantaneous closed-captioning, translation, and archival material such as meeting transcripts and video – are increasingly commonplace.

Governments, community-based organizations, and citizens will need to adapt to a new reality that includes hybrid online meetings for maximum civic engagement. Although many Americans prioritize participating in self-government, the reality is that attending in-person meetings is not always possible. Governments will need to understand the competing priorities of constituents and act accordingly. Effective government means meeting people where they are, which increasingly means online and in virtual congregation spaces.

As much as we all want to lean on tech, “you are really never going to be able to get away from person-to-person outreach. This has to be rooted in trust.”

-Ebony Scott Anderson, University of Chicago’s Incusive Economy Lab

Technology, then, can be one more powerful tool in the kit for civic engagement. However, it is not a silver bullet, but simply another avenue that allows citizens to take an active hand in their governance; along with its strengths in extending accessibility to many, it also poses unique risks against which governments need to remain diligent. “As much as we all want to lean on tech,” said the University of Chicago's Scott, “you are really never going to be able to get away from person-to-person outreach. This has to be rooted in trust.”

Additional Resources:

- Center for Media & Democracy. Free Speech for Change. 
- City of Burlington, Vermont. Community Engagement, Neighborhoods and Workforce Development. 
- Florida Center for Civic Engagement. About Florida Center for Civic Engagement. 
- Long Beach, California. Community Engagement.
- National League of Cities. Making Public Meetings Accessible to All. 
Part Five: Conclusion

The last decade has been a tumultuous time for democracy. The nation is more divided than it’s been in a century, and a global pandemic that forced people out of the physical public square and into virtual ones has posed unprecedented challenges for officials. The divide between rich and poor has grown, creating more pressure on governments to offer social services even as the opportunities for citizens to become more engaged have grown exponentially, thanks to new technologies.

To some extent, technology remains a barrier for some communities, especially in poor and rural parts of the United States. But technological developments are also offering more opportunities for citizen engagement. Slowly but surely, high-speed internet is becoming ubiquitous. Other advances — instantaneous closed-captioning, translation, and archival material such as meeting transcripts and video — are increasingly commonplace.

Governments, community-based organizations, and citizens will need to adapt to a new reality that includes hybrid online meetings for maximum civic engagement. Although many Americans prioritize participating in self-government, the reality is that attending in-person meetings is not always possible. Governments will need to understand the competing priorities of constituents and act accordingly. Effective government means meeting people where they are, which increasingly means online and in virtual congregation spaces.

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