



**MAXIMIZING THE
USE OF
TECHNOLOGY TO
IMPROVE
COMMUNICATION
WITH
CONSTITUENTS**



PARLAMERICAS



ParlAmericas is an independent forum that promotes **PARLIAMENTARY DIPLOMACY** in the **INTER-AMERICAN SYSTEM**



ParlAmericas fosters **OPEN PARLIAMENTS** by advancing the principles of transparency, accountability, citizen participation, ethics and probity



ParlAmericas is composed of the **NATIONAL LEGISLATURES** of the member States of the OAS from North, Central and South America and the Caribbean



ParlAmericas promotes policies and legislative measures to mitigate and adapt to the effects of **CLIMATE CHANGE**



ParlAmericas facilitates the exchange of parliamentary **BEST PRACTICES** and promotes **COOPERATIVE POLITICAL DIALOGUE**



ParlAmericas works towards strengthening democracy and governance by accompanying **ELECTORAL PROCESSES**



ParlAmericas mainstreams **GENDER EQUALITY** by advocating for women's political empowerment and the application of a gender lens in legislative work



ParlAmericas is headquartered in **OTTAWA, CANADA**

OVERVIEW

ParlAmericas, in collaboration with the Senate of Mexico, organized a training session for English-speaking delegates on the use of technology to improve communication with constituents, on the margins of its [13th Plenary Assembly: Strengthening parliaments and building resilient societies to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals](#).

Technological advances are impacting communications trends and providing increasing opportunities for innovative approaches for parliaments and parliamentarians to better connect with their constituents and enable their participation in legislative decision-making processes, a key objective of Sustainable Development Goal 16 to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”. Adapting to these technological advances has become necessary to modernize legislatures and build citizen trust in our democratic institutions. These issues were prioritized by legislators and civil society organizations during their co-creation of

ParlAmericas’ [Road Map Towards Legislative Openness](#), which translates the principles of legislative openness – transparency, accountability, citizen participation and ethics – into concrete actions that can be implemented within legislatures.

As such, this one-day session facilitated by **Dr. Maurice McNaughton**, Director of the [Center of Excellence, Mona School of Business, University of the West Indies](#) and Director of the [Open Caribbean Institute](#), guided parliamentarians in an exchange on best practices and strategies for the use of social networks with the expert support of **Mr. Sebastián de Lara Gomís**, Managing Partner of [Navegación Política](#), and on the use of information and communications technology (ICT) by parliaments with the expert support of **Mr. Garreth Ferguson**, ICT Director of the [Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago](#). The training session ended with a Facebook Live discussion enabled by **Mr. Gibrán Mena**, Communications Coordinator of the School of Data at [SocialTIC](#). This report highlights the main discussion points from this session.

PARTICIPANTS

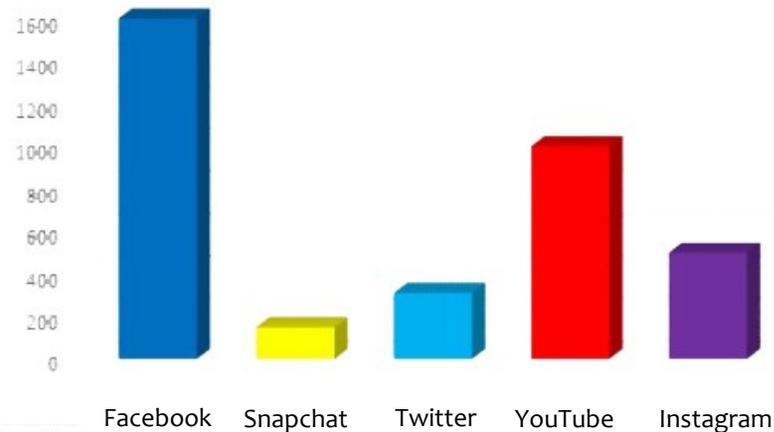
21 legislators representing
13 countries

- Antigua and Barbuda
- Bahamas
- Barbados
- Belize
- Bolivia
- Canada
- Dominica
- El Salvador
- Grenada
- Guatemala
- Saint Lucia
- Suriname
- Trinidad and Tobago

SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat are the most common and effective platforms used by politicians during campaigns and to maintain communication with constituents once elected. Each social network has particular features and numbers of users that should be considered in developing a successful strategy to reach your objectives.

NUMBER OF USERS PER SOCIAL MEDIA



Own elaboration with data of El Financiero, 2016



FACEBOOK

- Good for storytelling
- Likely to have less negative comments
- New interactive applications (Facebook Live)
- Personal and fan pages



INSTAGRAM

- Only for photos and videos
- Easily connects with people's emotions
- Mostly used by youth
- Usually used for sharing personal experiences or aspirational messages



TWITTER

- Short pieces of information
- Conversations flow very fast
- Opportunity for broader public reach
- Likely to have more negative comments
- Mainstream media usually gets information



SNAPCHAT

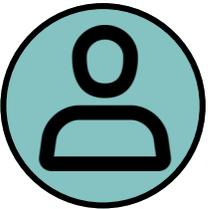
- Only for videos and photos
- Many options for creative customization of posts
- Mostly used by youth
- Limited time to interact

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA



CREATE MORE PERSONABLE CONNECTIONS WITH CONSTITUENTS

By sharing personal experiences, pictures, emotions, past events, music or even daily tasks, constituents can learn more about parliamentarians' interests beyond their work. Personal posts that demonstrate personality and show a personal side can help constituents to connect with their member of parliament on a human level.



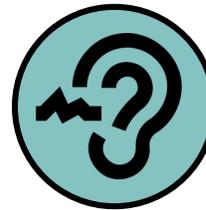
CHOOSE A PROFILE PHOTO CAREFULLY

The photo is the first thing any constituent will see when looking at their member of parliament's account. It can be helpful for parliamentarians to choose a photo that reflects how they want to be perceived by their constituents: close to family, involved in the community, hard-working, hobbies, with inspirational individuals, etc.



BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT THE MANAGEMENT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

If staff are managing a parliamentarians' accounts, this should be indicated in the profile so that constituents are aware with whom they are communicating. It is also recommended to identify a period of time where the legislator will be personally online and responding to comments. Being transparent about this and spreading out posts to avoid oversharing can help mitigate the risk of constituents thinking their representative is spending too much time online rather than advancing the causes they care about.



BUILD SOCIAL NETWORKS IN A WAY THAT ENSURES CONSTITUENTS FEEL HEARD

Parliamentarians can encourage constituents to follow them on social media and use these accounts as a way for them to connect with their member of parliament, share their priorities and receive answers to their questions. A simple action parliamentarians can perform to show that they are listening to constituents is to follow or become friends with those who have made the effort to connect on social media. It is also advised to try to answer all questions and comments received through social media positively, with the intention of understanding and responding to constituents' concerns, except in cases of trolls and bots as explained below. This approach can turn negative commenters into ardent supporters.



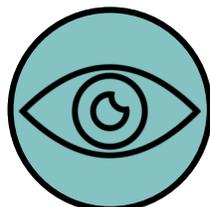
CONTRIBUTE TO THE CONVERSATION

Social networks can be helpful to stay informed on issues that may interest constituents. Twitter is particularly helpful to identify trending topics within constituencies and engage in these conversations, being conscious that any comment a parliamentarian makes online may affect their constituents' opinion of them. These comments may also be picked up by the mainstream media and shared with their audience.



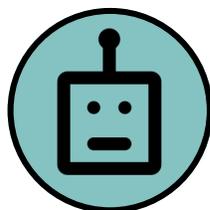
CONSIDER POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS OF ALL ONLINE POSTS

Every comment, picture, re-tweet or like made by a parliamentarian should be consistent with their views and policies, and should be carefully and responsibly thought out in order to avoid any possible damage to their public image. It is therefore recommended to be informed about any situation or issue prior to making a statement online as any mistake made can easily be replicated rapidly over all media platforms. If a mistake is made, it is prudent to make the proper corrections as soon as possible and in a respectful and professional way.



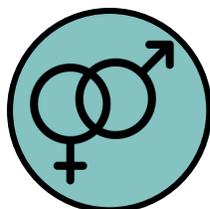
BE ENGAGING

It is of course important to avoid boring constituents on social media. To this end, it can be helpful to use colloquial or plain language – sometimes messages can be unclear due to formality – and avoid being redundant and posting the same information across all social media platforms. Since each platform has its own features, it is advised to try to stay up-to-date on trends and be creative on the use of these networks. Posting questions to constituents online can be a helpful way to engage them on a specific issue and receive feedback to help guide policy decisions. Some politicians are also starting to connect with constituents through other innovative means such as sharing music playlists through the application *Spotify*.



AVOID ENGAGING WITH TROLLS AND BOTS

Negative posts originating from trolls and bots pose a difficult challenge for many public figures. To avoid responding emotionally, it is best for staff to manage the accounts and to resist the urge to answer immediately. The first step should be to confirm if the account(s) that posted a negative statement is real by reviewing profile information and its recent activity. If it is blank or was created recently, it is likely fake. These types of attack often target politicians to attempt to create a crisis. In these cases, not responding and ignoring or deleting these comments is the suggested strategy. These situations are most commonly faced on Twitter, where the feeling of anonymity is stronger and information flows faster than other networks.



SPEAK OUT AGAINST GENDER-BASED ATTACKS ONLINE AND USE SOCIAL NETWORKS TO PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY

Social networks can be helpful to stay informed on issues that may interest constituents. Twitter is particularly helpful to identify trending topics within constituencies and engage in these conversations, being conscious that any comment a parliamentarian makes online may affect their constituents' opinion of them. These comments may also be picked up by the mainstream media and shared with their audience.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN ON SOCIAL MEDIA FROM THE 2016 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION?

Parliamentarians discussed the power of social media by analyzing Donald Trump's performance. Regardless of their political views, they agreed that the President-elect attracted attention easily and his message was well spread thanks to his use of Twitter.

While he followed many of the tips listed in the previous section, he also did the opposite in many cases and was successful regardless. For example, he created a personal connection with citizens by managing his social media accounts himself, making jokes and using colloquial language, though his personal use of his account led him to respond emotionally and engage in "Twitter wars" with various individuals and anonymous trolls. He also made statements on most hot issues and contributed to the conversation, although at times without being well-informed, and these statements were highly distributed by the mainstream media.

However, it was also made clear that the appeal for this candidate came as a result of important social factors including the disillusionment of citizens with the traditional political class and the rise of populism which was fueled through a nostalgic appeal based on the feeling of some groups that the past was better than the present. The electoral campaign was also affected by a significant number of fake news stories that were often believed as true, and were shared through social media. It was therefore concluded that this electoral campaign proved that there is no "right" way to use social media to achieve your objective, and that social media is constantly changing and is creating significant challenges to sharing accurate information and shaping fact- or evidence-based discussions. However, it remains a powerful tool for shaping the public discourse which parliamentarians can use responsibly to better fulfill their role as representatives of the people.

"I'm better equipped to apply online tools because I have a better understanding of the far reach of social media and the online platform services that are very important for parliaments."



Senator Hon.
CHESTER HUMPHREY
(Grenada),
President of the Senate

WHAT ARE...



Trolls: individuals or fake accounts that hide behind the anonymity of the internet and post inflammatory comments online



Bots: programs used to produce automated posts online, often used to attempt to bring negative attention to public figures.

ICT TOOLS AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR PARLIAMENTS

Parliaments are also facing the need to reform their processes to comply with the increased demand for information in open formats and to create institutional mechanisms that enable citizen participation in the legislative process to address a loss of public trust. These reforms all align with the idea of openness and making all information accessible to citizens in a format that they can analyze and use to improve our societies.

DEVELOPING REFORM STRATEGIES

Many parliaments have started to undertake such transformations through the development of strategies to modernize and open their institution to citizens. Such strategies need to enable parliamentary services to be better supported by technology, including both services for the public and support to parliamentarians. In order to achieve this, it is recommended that a committee composed of parliamentarians, clerks and ICT staff analyze the current state of affairs and develop a unified vision and strategy shared by all members to ensure its sustainability. The goals of the strategy should be S.M.A.R.T.: specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic and time-based.

“My awareness of challenges faced by women parliamentarians increased and I encourage the point made by male parliamentarians to support and act as champions for our female counterparts.”



Senator
**ANDRE
WORRELL**
(Barbados)

“As a result of my participation in the training session, I intend to help improve the use of social media in our parliament and to improve my own personal communication with my constituents.”



Member of the Legislative
Assembly **RODRIGO ÁVILA**
(El Salvador)

Senator
**MOBINA
JAFFER**
(Canada)



“This was a very instructive session and also very practical. After this training I will have more confidence to further my social media interactions.”

ICT CONSIDERATIONS WHEN MODERNIZING AND OPENING PARLIAMENTS

WEBSITES

Like all technology, websites are evolving and their style is changing to be more intuitive, interactive and user-friendly. The [Inter-Parliamentary Union's guidelines for parliamentary websites](#) in addition to the following key aspects can be considered in reviewing parliamentary websites:

- ⇒ Avoid clutter: Ensure web pages are clean, that information is nicely structured on the page, and avoid unnecessary/irrelevant photos or graphics.
- ⇒ Make it easy to navigate: Use appropriate headings and sub-headings to organize information in a way that is intuitive to the user.
- ⇒ Provide quick access to information: Consider the three-click rule: the user should not have to click more than three times to find the information they seek.
- ⇒ Make it searchable: Include a search engine.
- ⇒ Publish the information that citizens want to know: This generally includes the following information, among other information you will find in ParlAmericas' [Road Map towards Legislative Openness](#):
 - Upcoming events, parliamentary sittings and committee meetings;
 - Latest news on legislative work;
 - Plenary and committee reports; and
 - Parliamentarians' vote information.

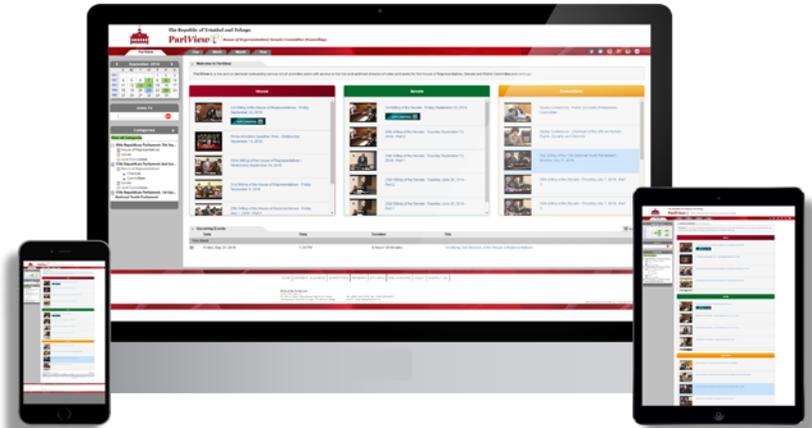


The *Road Map towards Legislative Openness* was developed by parliamentarians and civil society representatives and aims to offer a framework for parliamentarians to develop their own action plans or initiatives on legislative openness at the national level.

VIDEO AND WEB CASTING TOOLS

Parliamentary TV channels were once an innovative approach to ensuring transparency by streaming parliamentary sessions live. However, citizens lead busy lives and do not have the time to watch or even record all sessions of interest when they are live. Technological advancements now provide a more practical solution.

For example, the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago has implemented [ParlView](#), a live and on demand webcasting service which provides users with access to the live and archived streams of video and audio for the House of Representatives, Senate and Public Committee proceedings. It also has a calendar, [Youtube channel](#) and provides a mechanism for the public to submit questions directly to committee secretaries during public hearings. This is similar to the Parliament of Canada's [ParlVu](#) application.

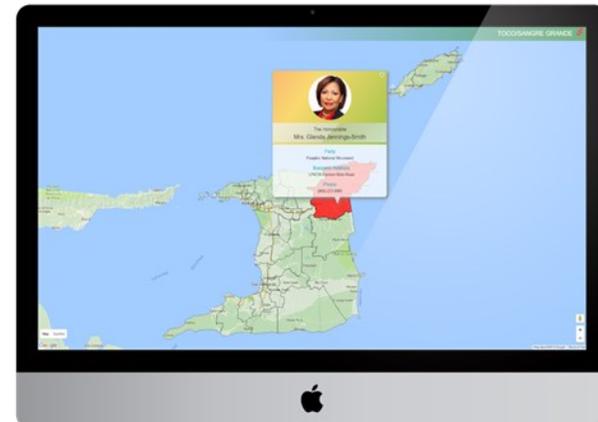


As similar tools are developed, parliaments can consider potential functions that would be beneficial for users, such as the ability to search for statements made by a specific parliamentarian or sessions relevant to a specific topic.

PARLIAMENTARY APPLICATIONS FOR CITIZENS

In most countries, the majority of citizens are now glued to their smart phones, making mobile applications an easy way to connect with them and share parliamentary information.

For example, the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago launched a mobile application called [Constituency Map](#), which provides information about parliamentarians, including their name, title, position in parliament, political party membership, short biography, business and constituency office addresses and contact details through geographic reference, powered by Google Maps. This map is also colored by party affiliation and divided into all of Trinidad and Tobago's constituencies.



INTERACTIVE APPROACHES TO CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Parliaments can establish programs to institutionalize opportunities for citizen engagement and participation in legislative processes. These can range from educating citizens about the work of parliament to creating a space for citizens to contribute to the debate around draft legislation.

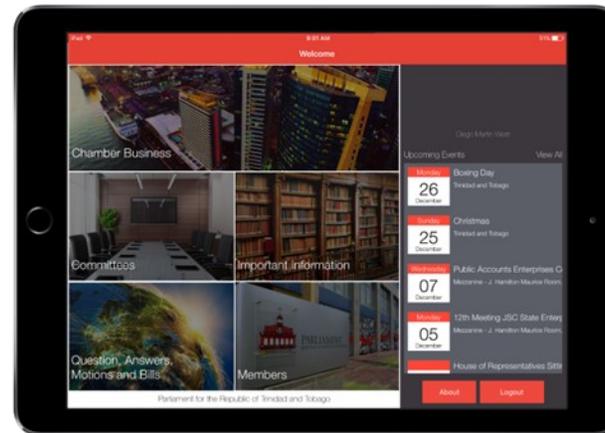
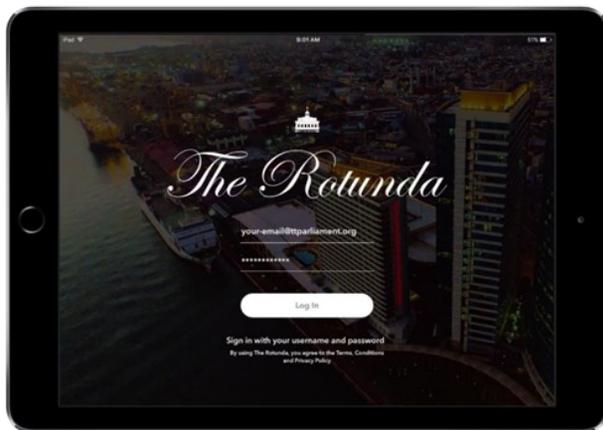
For example, the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago has created [Democracy Challenge](#), a television game show where contestants prove their knowledge of the parliament and its history by answering questions about it in a battle group format. The contestants are usually from communities and schools invited by the parliament.



PARLIAMENTARY APPLICATION FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS

Beyond tools to increase transparency and public participation, technology can also improve internal parliamentary practices to make them more efficient so that parliamentarians and staff can focus on the issues that matter to their constituents.

For example, the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago has developed a mobile/tablet application called Rotunda, which is powered by SharePoint and provides parliamentarians and their staff with easy access to information critical to their work, such as:



- ⇒ Sittings & meetings
- ⇒ Order papers
- ⇒ Member's contributions
- ⇒ Minutes of sittings
- ⇒ Questions and motions
- ⇒ Budget documents
- ⇒ Papers laid
- ⇒ Bills & related documents
- ⇒ Acts of parliament
- ⇒ Parliamentary calendar

OPEN SOURCE / DATA SYSTEMS

Systems that are open source, free, and allow users to study and modify data from its original design are important to foster openness and collaboration. Providing information in this format allows citizens, researchers, and journalists to perform objective analysis of data which can be used to improve parliamentary practices, allows citizen access to data in an easy-to-understand fashion, and provides a helpful mechanism for civil society to hold the parliament to account. By publishing information in an open format, parliamentary monitoring and civil society organizations, as well as academia, can also develop applications and tools that help citizens understand legislative data, hold parliament to account and enable citizen participation in the legislative debate.

Parliaments can therefore consider adopting an open data policy to create a standard for the format in which documents are published. For example, Portable Document Format (PDF) documents were created for securing information not to be modified by anyone, so this format should be avoided. In drafting such a policy, parliaments should consider the international technical standard named [Akoma Ntoso](#), an initiative of the [Africa i-Parliament Action](#)

[Plan](#), which provides a uniform and organized structure for legislative documents with machine readable content. There is also open source software that is free and available online, which can result in cost-savings for parliaments: [LibreOffice](#), [Apache OpenOffice](#), [WPS Office Free](#), [SoftMaker FreeOffice](#) (excellent compatibility with Microsoft Office), and [Google docs](#) (for collaboration).

Similarly, parliaments can consider free and open source software for video recording and live streaming, such as [OBS Studio](#), and for a database/helpdesk to track constituency office issues and facilities management issues, such as [Spice Works](#). Another free open source tool is [OwnCloud](#), which is a self-hosted file sync and share application platform.

Parliaments can also consider new open desktop operating systems instead of Windows or macOS. An example of such a system is [Zorinos](#), which has a free standard version and a low-cost ultimate version, and is currently being tested by the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago.

OPEN DATA

Digital data that is made available with the technical and legal characteristics necessary for it to be freely used, reused, and redistributed by anyone, anytime, anywhere. Data must comply with the following six principles:

1. Open by default
2. Timely and comprehensive
3. Accessible and usable
4. Comparable and interoperable
5. For improved governance and citizen engagement
6. For inclusive development and innovation



SOCIAL MEDIA FOR PARLIAMENTS

Parliaments can also use social media as an effective way to communicate new developments on legislative issues and upcoming events. For example, the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago is quite active on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

MAIN CHALLENGES

The main challenge faced by parliaments in developing a successful ICT strategy is the lack of political support to prioritize this initiative. This usually leads to a lack of personnel and training in ICT, as well as a very limited budget. This is also linked to limited knowledge about the power of ICT for parliamentary work, which creates barriers to and affects the rate of adoption of new technology. This lack of knowledge can also lead to a lack of planning and therefore improper implementation of new strategies.

As previously mentioned, a parliamentary committee composed of parliamentarians, clerks and ICT staff can play a powerful role in building political will and ensuring that all the appropriate steps are taken to develop the required knowledge within the institution, and plan and implement a strategy to reach the parliament's goal of modernizing and opening itself.



ONLINE HEARING

The training session ended with a citizen engagement experiment through [Facebook Live](#). This platform enables you to share a live video with your audience, and you have the option to keep the video on your page once it is over. It remains available on [ParlAmericas' Facebook page](#).

This Facebook Live session allowed for further reflection on legislative openness through a discussion with civil society organizations from the Americas and the Caribbean, who participated remotely by posting comments and questions online while listening to the live discussion. The following civil society organizations participated in the online hearing:

- ⇒ [Apathy is Boring](#) (Canada)
- ⇒ [Citizens For a Better Bahamas](#) (Bahamas)
- ⇒ [Transparency Institute Guyana Inc.](#) (Guayana)
- ⇒ [Trinidad and Tobago Transparency Institute](#) (Trinidad and Tobago)
- ⇒ [Open Knowledge Foundation Argentina](#) (Argentina)
- ⇒ [Open North](#) (Canada)



OVERVIEW OF THE DISCUSSION

APATHY AND LACK OF TRUST AFFECT CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Parliamentarians and civil society organizations (CSOs) participating agreed that public participation is directly affected by general apathy among citizens and pointed out that transparency is an important aspect that is also inherently related to the level of trust citizens have in their elected officials. Likewise, legislators stated that people in general feel disconnected to the legislative process, and this is reflected by low levels of participation in public meetings organized by legislators and the government, as well as low voter turnout. Another critical factor affecting public participation is the distortion of parliamentary information disseminated by the mainstream media, which contributes to citizen distrust in politics. The media has a responsibility to report news fairly and accurately in order to empower and involve citizens in politics. Parliamentarians can also contribute to overcoming this obstacle by communicating with constituents directly about their work through social media and promoting citizen engagement policies and initiatives. It is also important to have a multiplicity of tools for disseminating parliamentary information tailored to reach citizens of all social and age groups.

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Participants recommended doing more than simply allowing people to comment on legislation. Specifically, it was proposed to also allow comments before and during the drafting process for bills, and to promote open committees where citizens can participate in legislative debates. It was highlighted that it is important to have mechanisms such as e-petitions in place in order to build confidence in the system and to allow citizens to contribute to forming the legislative agenda. In addition, parliamentarians suggested establishing educational programs for youth to understand and participate in the legislative process and discussion of issues in parliament. It was also noted that for effective public participation, citizens must be responsible, invest time and try to suggest possible alternative actions rather than simply criticize measures or programs run by government.





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