

# SERVING AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE PEOPLE: A GUIDE TO ENGAGING YOUR CONSTITUENTS

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*Serving as a Representative of the People: A Guide to Engaging Your Constituents*

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# I. INTRODUCTION, IMPORTANCE AND IMPACT OF CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT

## WHY IS CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

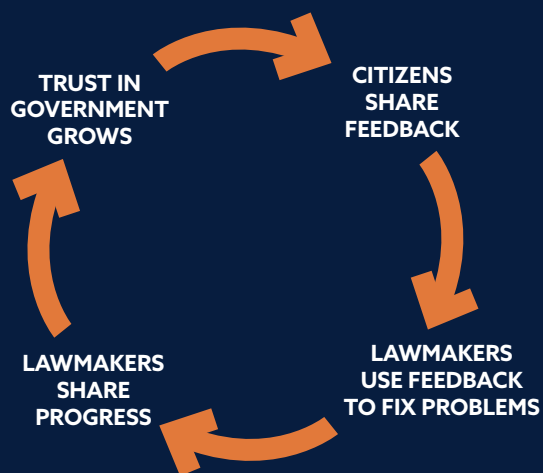
Legislatures have a special and indispensable place in democratic governance because they are mandated to represent citizen concerns most directly in the central government. Embedded in the very concept of representative democracy is the idea that those who are affected by government decisions have a right to be involved in the decision-making process. The duty to support and facilitate this right falls on every single Member of Parliament (MP), and it cuts across every role of the MP, from representative to legislative to oversight. None of these roles can be fulfilled successfully without meaningfully engaging constituents. The benefits of doing so are extensive, and they accrue to MPs individually, to parliament as an institution, and to the public.

MPs who effectively engage with their constituents are better able to build enduring political coalitions and secure continued electoral success. They are better equipped to expand their level of influence in government, elevate their public profiles, and build their personal brands. They have greater ability to control their own messages and speak for themselves, rather than having their narratives mediated by party leaders, the press, or other outside groups. Constituent engagement is also often the greatest source of personal fulfillment, and many MPs cite the opportunity to make a tangible difference in people's lives as where they derive the greatest meaning in their work.

Parliament as an institution benefits very broadly from effective communication with constituents as well. Legislative solutions are better, more effective, and more sustainable when they are based on the input of the people they impact. Furthermore,

institutional capacity is significantly augmented by having access to independent analysis from outside experts and civil society organizations (CSOs). This is especially helpful while parliaments are still in the process of building up the capacity of their own research services and resources, and it ensures they are not solely dependent upon the executive branch. Having independent sources of information is critical for conducting meaningful oversight as well.

### VIRTUOUS CYCLE OF CONSTRUCTIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



Hearing from a broad range of voices diversifies and improves parliament's knowledge base, enriches debate, and expands deliberative capacity. With greater openness and transparency also comes greater public trust, and with this growing trust comes greater legitimacy and relevance, and a stronger position with respect to the executive branch. Regular two-way communication with the public also plays a critical part in educating citizens on the appropriate roles and functions of

parliament, which helps to manage expectations and, in turn, further strengthens public trust.

The public can also greatly benefit from having their voices heard in the legislature and in places where decisions are made. The opportunity to share their lived experiences helps ensure that government programs and services are designed effectively and fixed when they are not. Having confidence that their elected representatives are being open with them and listening to their input helps to create a virtuous cycle of constructive civic engagement<sup>1</sup>. This is imperative for both developing and mature democracies alike.

Effective, meaningful constituent engagement is built upon several core principles, achieves several important objectives, and often happens within the context of a few common challenges, as outlined below.

## PRINCIPLES

1. **Transparency.** Good constituent communication, like good governance, begins with openly sharing critical information. You are your constituents' most direct conduit to the national government. Your engagement should be built on a commitment to share openly the work you are doing on their behalf, as well as to be a source of information more broadly on government action, how decisions are being made, what the costs are, and what the impact is.
2. **Accessibility.** Making yourself and your staff regularly available to your constituents, through a variety of digital and in-person mechanisms, is essential. Constituents should be able to easily submit their requests, comments, or questions, and you should take steps to ensure that they are all fully able to do so, regardless of disability or other barriers they may face.
3. **Responsiveness.** Meaningful engagement demands more than simply broadcasting your message to constituents. You need to create a feedback loop, in which your constituents are able to provide their input to you, and in which you actively work to integrate and apply their input.
4. **Authenticity.** Build credibility with your constituents by being honest and authentic. It is difficult to build a real connection with the electorate if they feel as though you are playing a part. Speaking candidly (yet respectfully) can be particularly important when there are differences of opinion, setbacks in plans, or government failures that demand change and progress.
5. **Inclusivity.** It is essential to engage the full range of individuals and communities within your constituency, including those who traditionally have been marginalized. This often includes women; youth; LGBTQ communities; racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; and those with disabilities. Issues of poverty, inequalities, social norms, and legacies of social injustice create barriers to participation that must be overcome, which requires deliberate action on your part to ensure their voices are heard and heeded.
6. **Consistency.** Engagement with your constituents must happen in an ongoing way. It is not just for campaign season or when a controversial issue arises. It should be a continuous dialogue that grows, deepens, and builds upon itself.
7. **Resource.** Be knowledgeable in how the government works and be able and available to navigate the central government on behalf of your constituents. If you have staff, it is important to divide responsibilities among staff so they can obtain a deeper understanding on how government functions in regard to specific areas such as public health, or transportation, or education, among others. The staff should be able to answer constituents' basic questions on how to interact with the central government.

<sup>1</sup> Lavigna, R. National Academy of Public Administration. <https://www.napawash.org/standing-panel-blog/improving-employee-engagement-a-virtuous-cycle>

## OBJECTIVES

- 1. Craft sound policy.** Ongoing, two-way communication with constituents is important for identifying commonly occurring problems and systemic issues, and then, in turn, developing effective legislative fixes. Your engagement should be focused on gleaning these essential insights and bringing them back to parliament for action; whether that be for new initiatives, for legislative review on how current law is implemented, or to respond to the need for additional oversight.
- 2. Build trust.** Low public opinion polling is an unfortunate reality that many parliaments face. Yet trust in one's own MP is often much higher.<sup>2</sup> Constituent engagement should be focused on cultivating this trust and building enduring relationships with communities throughout your constituency.
- 3. Advance civic education.** Transparency with constituents and regular dialogue are critical for fostering a better and deeper understanding of what parliaments and elected officials are doing and how citizens can play a constructive role in the process. There should be a specific focus on advancing the opportunities for children to learn about the legislative process and how their government should work for them. School visits are one way to accomplish this goal.
- 4. Build consensus.** Every constituency includes diverse communities with a range of views, perspectives, needs, and experiences. Part of your role as an MP is to understand this range and create space to find common ground.
- 5. Improve lives.** The ultimate, overarching objective of constituent engagement is to address the real-world challenges that constituents are facing and to have a tangible impact on their lives for the better.

## CHALLENGES

- 1. Limited time and resources.** Effective constituent engagement requires investments of time and resources. A trip to the far edges of your constituency, for example, can be quite time-consuming and expensive, yet even "free" tools like social media require time and expertise to use them well. Parliaments may provide MPs with support for constituency offices, websites, and other tools, but even the best-resourced MP faces limits and constraints.
- 2. High volume of inquiries and requests.** MPs have often noted that staying on top of constituent engagement can be overwhelming at times. Mail, phone calls, and casework requests can quickly pile up, and offices can struggle to respond to all of them in a timely way.
- 3. Constituent frustration, apathy, or disillusionment.** Many constituents, particularly those who have historically faced marginalization, simply do not trust their elected officials or believe that MPs care about the views and experiences of the people they represent. They may have tried to raise their voices before, only to be shut out. They may have seen government services fail to meet their needs. Their personal experiences or views may generate a level of skepticism that MPs must work hard to overcome. What's more, proactive constituent engagement brings with it the promise of the chance to be heard, so, paradoxically, engagement can raise expectations and run the risk of greater disillusionment if it does not lead to meaningful change. It is important to manage expectations and clearly outline the process and what is possible to accomplish.
- 4. Clientelism.** Constituents often have unrealistic or inappropriate expectations of what an MP can do for them. They may expect personal favors, including direct cash payments. Many MPs have struggled with the need to manage expectations,

educate constituents on the appropriate role of an MP, and keep constituent service in an appropriate lane. Every MP has a profound duty to represent their constituency in a way that is truly responsive and inclusive. Throughout this field guide, you will find a range of tools you can employ for effective constituent engagement.

Along the way, the best practices to apply and pitfalls to avoid are outlined. These will help you to put these tools into practice in a way that stays grounded in the principles, achieves the key objectives, and mitigates the challenges outlined above.

## II: GETTING STARTED

### SETTING A CLEAR AGENDA AND CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT PRIORITIES

Like all aspects of your work as an MP, your constituent engagement efforts should be driven by your overarching agenda. This will ensure that you effectively set priorities and act strategically, which will be particularly important when facing more constituent demands than you can realistically fulfill. By being clear about your strategic objectives, and aligning your constituent engagement efforts to these objectives, you will be able to focus on the most important and impactful activities.

This field guide will outline a broad array of tools and tactics for engaging your constituency. It is not necessary, or even advisable, to use them all. Rather, you should think of this guide as presenting a menu of options for you to consider.

When you are first getting started with developing a plan for constituent engagement and identifying the tools you will use, there are three guiding principles you should keep in mind<sup>3</sup>:

**1. Make decisions strategically.** Once you have set your top priorities – which can begin with your campaign promises – for your term in office, make decisions about what you will and what you will not do based on whether it helps

you achieve your objectives or pulls you away from them. Remember, objectives should align with constituent concerns and priorities.

**2. Align with resources.** It is critical that you have a clear understanding of what resources are available to you as an MP, through parliament, your political party, or CSOs, and that you make full use them. Make sure to be particularly deliberate about the use of your most valuable resource – your time.

**3. Recognize that sometimes “Less is More.”** There will never be enough hours in the day or days in the week to accomplish all that you hope to or all that is asked of you. It is better to do the most important and impactful work well than to try – and fail – to do everything.

### AGENDA SETTING BEST PRACTICES<sup>4</sup>

- Remain steadfast on your principles and priorities but be flexible and responsive to input on the details.
- Once you have set your agenda, actively look to your constituents, including CSOs with relevant expertise, for input on how best to refine this agenda and effectively drive it forward. This should be a continuous feedback loop of inquiry, input, and revision. Stakeholders should also include academia, industry groups,

<sup>3</sup> Congressional Management Foundation’s 90-Day Roadmap to Setting Up a Congressional Office [https://www.congressfoundation.org/storage/documents/CMF\\_Pubs/cmf\\_90-day\\_roadmap\\_to\\_setting\\_up\\_a\\_congressional\\_office.pdf](https://www.congressfoundation.org/storage/documents/CMF_Pubs/cmf_90-day_roadmap_to_setting_up_a_congressional_office.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Agenda setting graphic adapted from: [https://parlAmericas.org/uploads/documents/Toolkit\\_Citizen%20Participation%20in%20the%20Legislative%20Process.pdf](https://parlAmericas.org/uploads/documents/Toolkit_Citizen%20Participation%20in%20the%20Legislative%20Process.pdf)



lobbyists and advocacy groups, as well as local government officials.

For example, you may determine that maternal health will be one of your top priorities for your current term, and initially plan to focus on bringing a new clinic to your constituency. Then, through systematic outreach and engagement with women, healthcare professionals, and community leaders, you may learn that what would be more impactful on maternal health outcomes in your constituency is an increase in community health workers.

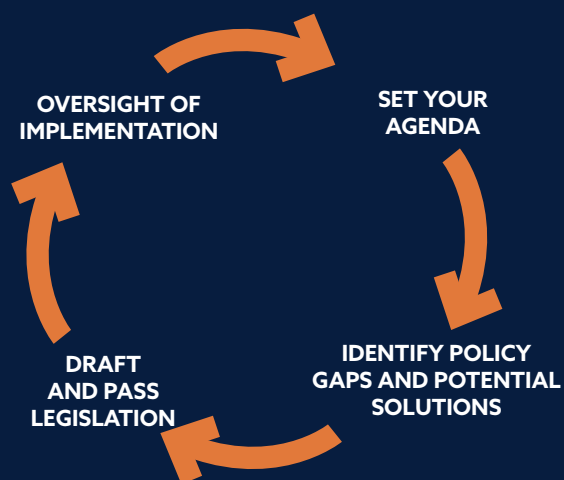
- Be open to a diverse array of input and always be willing to let your constituents educate you and even change your mind when warranted.
- Put in place the mechanisms to be both proactive and reactive in your constituent engagement. Choose the tools you can use most effectively and proficiently to communicate with constituents, while also identifying the tools you need to receive and respond to their input.

## QUICK WINS

When you are first getting started, it is helpful to identify a few ways that you can quickly, but effectively, start an ongoing dialogue with constituents with the intention of building out these efforts over time.

- 1. Start with the essentials.** It a good practice, for example, to quickly put up a very basic website with limited features in the beginning. A simple page with your biography, links to existing online parliamentary resources, and most important, information about how to contact you will provide your constituents with the most critical information, which you can add to over time.
- 2. Maximize limited resources.**
  - Are you able to hire only one assistant? Make sure it is someone you trust and who has the experience to get to work immediately.
  - Do you have the capacity to be active on only one social media platform right now? Choose the one on which you (or your staff) are most proficient and can begin to use most effectively right away. Also consider which platform your constituents use most.
  - Do other duties have you so busy that you have not yet had time to develop creative online content? Start by reposting information from parliamentary accounts as well as trustworthy CSOs and news sites. This will allow you to begin to build an audience as you expand the capacity to create compelling original content. You can also scan local news to share and celebrate constituent news and updates.
  - Can you hire interns and other volunteer assistants? Hiring young people to provide them with a learning opportunity can especially be a benefit to you as you staff your office.

### ADAPTED FROM PARLAMERICAS CITIZEN PARTICIPATION TOOLKIT



- Create templates and constituent services processes – template letters, resources, proactive messaging, staff with specific govt expertise – having a database to organize, etc.

**3. Buy yourself extra time.** There are many ways you can let your constituents know that you are just getting started and there will be more to come soon. Some examples include:

- Set up an email autoreply that lets constituents know that you have received their message, it is being taken seriously, and a more in-depth response will be coming later.
- Add a “Coming Soon” section to your website, letting visitors know what features and information will be added.
- Schedule mobile office hours in your district while you go through the process of setting up a permanent constituency office.
- Lean on your political party to assist with outreach and information sharing.

**4. Learn from your more experienced colleagues.**

Talk to your fellow MPs and find out what they have done that has worked or failed. Ask them what has been most successful with the lowest costs. Ask them what they wish they had done differently when they were first starting out.

## GOING DEEPER

Over time, you will have the ability to broaden the range of tools you are using and the extent to which you are using them. Below are a few approaches you can employ to build out effectively. However, as you expand your constituent engagement operation, you should always remain focused, as noted above, on making strategic decisions that are aligned with your priorities (as informed by constituent needs) and the available resources, with the recognition that it is better to do fewer things well than to try to do more than your capacity allows.

**Map all your available resources.** Leave nothing on the table. This can include:

### Official parliamentary or party resources:

- Budget for staff
- Budget for constituency office
- Budget for travel to constituency
- Laptop, smartphone, tablet, other Information Communications Technology (ICT) equipment
- Official email account
- Official portal for constituent emails
- Support for MP website
- Support for social media
- Internet access, including remote access
- Community Development Funds

### Non-profit or private-sector resources:

- Technical training
- Policy recommendations
- Legislative analysis
- Volunteers or interns
- Direct funding for staff or materials

**Expand and refine your capacity to receive, consider, and integrate constituent input with the same diligence with which you invest in your ability to broadcast your own message.**

An effective, efficient, ongoing feedback loop will not simply happen organically. It requires a systematic approach.

**Take deliberate action to engage marginalized communities.**

What works for communities who have traditionally been more empowered to engage in political, economic, and social structures will often not work for those who have historically faced barriers. Proactively seek out their views and input by visiting with them, calling them, and being intentional in your outreach. Recognize that digital engagement will never be enough, and you will need to visit these communities in person. Publicly demonstrate your commitment to understanding their perspectives and making their voices heard.

# III: ONGOING OUTREACH & CONSULTATION

There are a wide variety of tools and platforms available to MPs to enable ongoing outreach and consultation with their constituents. By maintaining a regular dialogue and keeping the lines of communication open, you will have the ability to understand, engage, educate, consult, and represent your constituency.

You can select and prioritize your methods of engagement based on factors such as resources, staff technical proficiency, and the preferences of your constituents. Some methods are particularly effective in reaching a wide audience while others may be more useful in reaching targeted communities. Some enable a greater level of interactivity while others are more static. What's most important is that you are using an effective mix of tools that enable you to successfully achieve your objectives as an MP while ensuring that all of your constituents regularly hear from you and have opportunities to provide input, make inquiries, and seek assistance. It is particularly important to continually ensure that marginalized communities, including those who have been historically underrepresented or lack full access to information and the tools of communication, are part of your engagement.

## DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL CONSTITUENTS AND CSOS

Your constituents include all people who live within your electoral district. While much of our focus is on constituents as individuals, this field guide will note, in a number of places, when and how it is advantageous to engage with civil society organizations (CSOs) that make up part of your broader constituency, either because they are based in your district, include members of your constituency, or focus on issues of key interest to your constituents.

### What is a CSO?

***“Civil society organizations (CSOs) can be defined to include all non-market and non-State organizations outside of the family in which people organize themselves to pursue shared interests in the public domain. Examples include community-based organizations and village associations, environmental groups, women’s rights groups, farmers’ associations, faith-based organizations, labor unions, co-operatives, professional associations, chambers of commerce, independent research institutes and the not-profit media.”***<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> UNDP: <http://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/dam/china/docs/Publications/UNDP-CH03%20Annexes.pdf>

## DIGITAL TOOLS AND CONTENT

MPs around the world are increasingly using a wide variety of digital tools to inform and engage their constituents.<sup>6</sup> These tools are particularly important for engaging youth, but they offer significant opportunity to reach a broad range of audiences and communities. Keep in mind that these tools may additionally be used to help you reach sections of the population that are typically marginalized or excluded from accessing standard news outlets. Many digital tools are low cost and easy to use, while others may require a higher degree of technical proficiency to utilize effectively. There is a great deal of room for experimentation in order to find which work best for you and your constituents; however, as previously noted, it is better to focus on a few tools and use them well, rather than attempting to use too many at once.

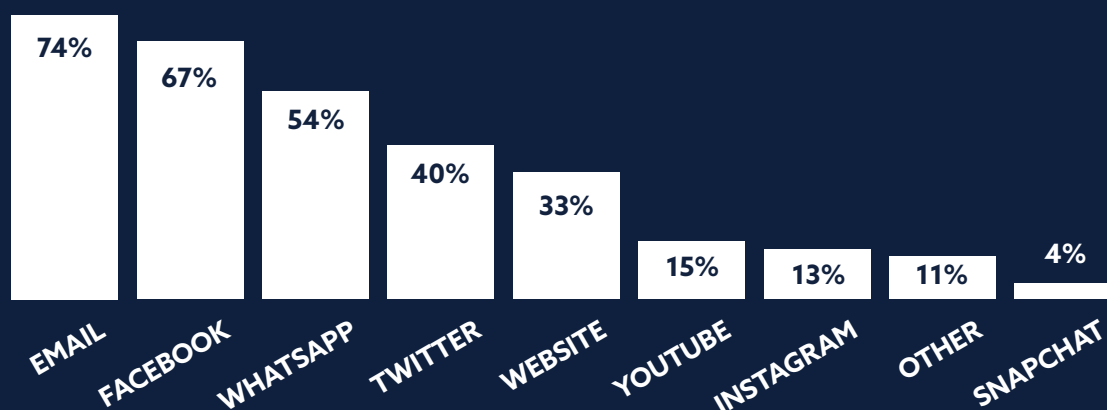
### WEBSITE

Your official website is often the first place constituents will go to learn about you, so it is critical that it leaves a positive first impression and reflects how you want your constituents to view you.

### Features of Effective MP Websites

1. **Informative:** Your website should function as a “one-stop shop” for basic information about you, your constituency, and the parliament overall. This includes:
  - How to contact your office, including email, phone number, and the addresses of your capital and constituency offices with hours of operation.
  - Your background and official bio.
  - Your actions as MP, including policy positions; official statements and press releases; voting record; legislation you have authored, cosponsored or publicly supported; and official events.
  - Links to your social media feeds.
  - Content targeted by demographic or geographic area.
  - Information on parliament and the committees on which you serve, with links to their web sites.

### HOW MPS AROUND THE WORLD COMMUNICATE WITH CONSTITUENTS<sup>7</sup>



<sup>6</sup> 2018 World e-Parliament Report: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2018-11/world-e-parliament-report-2018>

<sup>7</sup> 2018 World e-Parliament Report <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2018-11/world-e-parliament-report-2018>;

- 2. Timely:** Your website content should have regular updates. It is particularly important for the home page to have information that is not outdated or no longer irrelevant. Content should address current issues, including topics that are presently in the news and animating the political discourse at the national level and in your constituency. From the home page, users should be able to see or quickly find:
  - Recent public statements you have made.
  - Information on urgent issues, such as during a natural disaster or other widespread events affecting your constituency.
  - Changes or updates to previously published information.
  - Upcoming or recent events, including mobile office hours.
- 3. Accessible:** It is important to make your website easy to search and navigate, and be accessible to all constituents, including those with special needs. This includes:
  - A well-organized navigation menu.
  - A search engine.
  - Plain, simple language that all can understand.
  - Accessibility features for the sight impaired.
- 4. Helpful:** Your website will often serve as the first point of entry for casework and should provide quick, easy guidance for accessing constituent services. (Note that casework is addressed in greater detail in Section Six of this field guide.) Key information and links to provide include:
  - Instructions on how to formally request assistance.
  - Access to casework documents, such as intake forms and privacy release forms.
  - Links to central, provincial and local government agencies and resources.

Many MPs include a portal for contacting the office directly through their web site. This is a great feature to include, but it should only be set up if your office is adequately prepared to monitor and respond to direct questions, comments and requests for assistance that come in through the web site. It is better to simply direct constituents to an email account, phone number, or office address than to create a portal that goes unattended or leaves constituent inquiries unanswered for a lengthy period of time.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

No communication method is growing more quickly than social media. It is widely used by the general public, particularly youth, and as a result, more and more MPs are using various social media platforms to connect with their constituents. Regardless of which platforms you use, social media is generally a low-cost way to reach large audiences for both sharing information and receiving input.

Social media can also enable genuine dialogue, with no mediator. MPs and their constituents can have a real conversation, in a more authentic way than may be possible via traditional media and other avenues. Because so much of the general public is using social media, these tools are a way to “democratize” the conversation and allow more constituents to have their voices heard by their representatives. And by the same token, MPs can get their own messages, in their own style, out to a general audience without going through the usual filters of traditional media or political parties.

Yet these powerful tools come with pitfalls and challenges. The pace of social media is very fast, which presents opportunities for gaffes and missteps that may have a lasting impact on an MP’s reputation. And while social media tools may have low costs, that does not mean they are easy to use effectively. Each platform has its own unique style, audience, and ways of working that must be learned in order to leverage them successfully.

Social media tools (and digital tools writ large) also come with increased cybersecurity risks – political officials and their social media accounts are frequent targets of hacking and other online cyber-attacks. Be sure to practice strong cybersecurity habits to protect yourself and your accounts, including enabling two-factor authentication for all accounts; using lengthy and secure passwords tracked by a reliable password manager; and using only encrypted messaging apps for sensitive communications. For additional security, it is recommended to seek verification of your accounts, including on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, to distinguish your official accounts from imposters. Some resources include:

- Defending Digital Democracy, a project of Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, created this Cybersecurity Campaign Playbook<sup>8</sup>
- Instagram’s Verified Badges Help page: <https://help.instagram.com/854227311295302>
- Facebook’s Verified Badge Help page <https://www.facebook.com/help/1288173394636262>

Furthermore, what can begin as a fruitful online discussion can quickly devolve into heated and unproductive arguments, and “fake news” can quickly spread (and sometimes be difficult to spot). It’s also important to keep in mind that the extent to which social media makes political discourse more accessible can be overstated, as many of the most marginalized communities often lack access to these tools, and social norms and power dynamics may prevent them from participating. In short, social media represents both powerful opportunity and peril for MPs trying to actively engage their constituents. Employing best practices and avoiding common pitfalls are key.

## WHAT IS FAKE NEWS AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Fake news is “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake news outlets, in turn, lack the news media’s editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information. Fake news overlaps with other information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people).”<sup>9</sup>

Research has shown that fake news is a potent force that can spread six times faster than accurate information. In some social media contexts, it can even spread up to 10 or 20 times faster. This same research shows that “bots” are not primarily to blame. Rather, the fast rate at which fake news spreads is the result of people resharing false information. This demonstrates the enormous responsibility elected leaders carry to carefully check sources before passing along information and to take deliberate action to help halt the spread of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation.<sup>10</sup>

## Social Media Do’s

- Before getting started, educate yourself on:
  - any relevant parliamentary rules and codes of conduct
  - the basic rules and practices of the platforms you intend to use
- Start with the platforms you know best and with which your constituents are most comfortable, focusing on just one or two at first. Do as much (but no more than) you and your staff can effectively handle.

<sup>8</sup> Robby Mook and Matt Rhoades. “Cybersecurity Campaign Playbook”. Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. [https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/CampaignPlaybook\\_0.pdf](https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/CampaignPlaybook_0.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> David M. J. Lazer, et al., “The Science of Fake News,” *Science* 09 Mar 2018: Vol. 359, Issue 6380, pp. 1094-1096

<sup>10</sup> Soroush Vosoughi, et al., “The Spread of True and False News Online,” *Science* 09 Mar 2018: Vol. 359, Issue 6380, pp. 1146-1151



- Tailor your message to your audience, using language that will resonate with them.
- Create bonds with your audience by being accessible, authentic, and responsive. If they feel as though they are getting unfiltered communication rather than carefully scripted talking points, they are much more likely to connect with your messaging.
- Don't engage in or perpetuate pointless fights or reciprocate when there is name-calling or unprofessional language. If the discussion is devolving into something unproductive or potentially embarrassing, it's time to bow out.
- Don't miss out on the true power of social media by simply broadcasting your message. Embrace it as a tool for listening to what your constituents have to say.

Always be authentic, never be duplicitous. You should tailor your message for your audience, but it should never contradict your message to others. For example, it's ok to use more informal language when addressing a younger audience. But the core message should not be fundamentally different than what you say in other forums.

- Make your content interactive to facilitate a real dialogue.
- Never forget that once something is online, it is there forever. Even posts you take it down can be archived and screen shots can be captured. Balance your spontaneity with sound judgment.
- Know that you will occasionally make mistakes. If you say the wrong thing, be quick to note your mistake and apologize if needed.

## Social Media Don'ts

- Don't limit content to canned responses and formal talking points. This is the place to provide a more spontaneous feel, though you can always refer back to formal statements or press releases you've issued.
- Don't re-share online stories without checking the source first. You should never participate in promoting false information, conspiracy theories, and fake news.
- Don't pretend to know the answer when you don't. It's ok to ask questions, quote others, or say you'll look into it.
- Don't talk down to your audience. Speak plainly and simply, but not condescendingly.

Many MPs make the mistake of only using social media to share information and get their own message out. It is important to be deliberate about also leveraging social media for constituent input.

**Passive listening:** track what your constituents are saying, observe the issues they are raising, note the perspectives they are offering. What are the trends? What are the common themes?

**Proactive engagement:** pose questions such as: What is the biggest challenge you're facing? What should I ask the Minister of Finance at the upcoming question session? What topics should my committee hold a hearing on? Also, make use of polling and survey features available on each platform for more widespread input.

## SMS mass-messaging enables

- Both broad-based and targeted outreach
- Connection with constituents who have limited or no access to smartphones, the internet, or social media.
- Sharing independent news
- Calls for participation in local events and updates on other local activities.
- Active dialogue in a channel where constituents can respond directly with questions and feedback.

### **Utilizing Digital Tools Within Closed Spaces**

In closed political contexts where visible, public dialogue can come with risks, alternative communications channels such as SMS mass-messaging and digital advertising tools can enable MPs to privately communicate and engage with citizens while bypassing censorship and the scrutiny of authoritarian leaders.

### **Digital advertising enables**

- Both broad-based and targeted outreach.
- Identification of new audiences.
- Sharing messages that are customized by location, demographic, or area of interest.
- Increased user engagement.

### **Creating good content**

- Share photos of your meetings and events, especially those in your constituency – show your constituents you are active on their behalf and inform them on what you're doing.
- Post compelling quotes from your events, especially from your constituents.
- Solicit and re-share constituent content with their permission – showcase all the good things happening in your constituency.
- Follow other individuals, organizations and institutions of interest and share their good content – this includes parliament and the committees you serve on or that have jurisdiction over your priority issues, as well as CSOs and others. Be a source of good information and direct your constituents to items of interest.
- Share interesting news articles relevant to your legislative agenda – but only from credible sources.

## **NEWSLETTERS**

Newsletters can be an effective way to regularly share information and highlight key issues or projects with constituents. They can be shared digitally or printed and disseminated throughout your constituency. Newsletters do not require extensive resources or expertise. In fact, short and simple but timely and informative can often be more effective than lengthy pieces with fancy graphics. Nor do they need to be created frequently. It is better to wait until you have interesting updates to share, rather than stick to a regular schedule even when you do not have compelling content to include. Any word processing program can be used to design a simple layout.

### **Style features include**

- Neat organization, using bullets for easy reference wherever possible.
- Plain, straightforward language.
- Photos, clip art, and simple graphics.
- Highlight interesting quotes and key statistics.

### **Content features include**

- Updates on key activities conducted by your office, or the parliament or party at large.
- Issues of importance to you and your constituents.
- Overview of projects in your constituency.



## INTERACTIVE VIRTUAL EVENTS

Platforms like Facebook Live, which allow MPs to host interactive virtual events, are increasingly popular tools for constituent engagement. A common misconception is that high production quality is needed to host one successfully. In fact, a more informal feel can actually be a big part of the appeal for constituents and MPs alike. With a few basic steps to ensure professionalism and a good user experience, Facebook Live and similar tools can be a great, relatively low-cost way to engage with constituents without the resources needed for travel or hosting an in-person event.

### Best Practices

- Post information about when you will host your Facebook Live and how constituents can participate.
- Solicit questions in advance so that you can prepare, but also take questions live to ensure the experience feels authentic and interactive.
- Decide in advance if you will have a general townhall format, where viewers can raise any issue they'd like, or if the discussion will be focused on a specific topic. Be clear about the purpose and then design the discussion around that.
- Sound and video quality will be best if you have a microphone for the device you use to stream the event, whether a computer, tablet, or smartphone. You don't need special lighting or other production equipment, but make sure to choose a room with good light and no background noise so that all participants can easily see and hear.
- Have one or two staff on hand to assist: one to manage the Q&A and comments in the chat, and one to handle the light and sound and troubleshoot problems.

## TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Like most other avenues of engagement, traditional media present a range of opportunities and challenges. Parliaments and media have different but related roles that are often complementary but can be in tension at times. A free and open press is core to a vibrant democracy. The press can also provide an important avenue for informing the public on parliamentary action, particularly major legislative debates and oversight activities. This is an important part of civic education and building an informed and active electorate. Media-savvy MPs can build awareness for their agenda and their priority issues.

Yet there is no question that antagonistic relationships between the media and elected officials can develop. This can be exacerbated if parliamentary institutions and dynamics are poorly understood by journalists. With ongoing engagement and proactive, constructive relationship-building, traditional media can be an important tool in any MP's toolbox for reaching key audiences, providing important information to constituents, and engaging in civic education about your work as an MP specifically and the work of parliament more broadly.

## BROADCAST TV AND RADIO

Despite the rise in social media and other digital tools, TV and radio programming are still key ways to communicate broadly, particularly with older and more rural communities. Participating in interviews for news programs and joining discussions on talk shows are effective ways to shape and engage in public discourse on the issues that matter most to you and your constituents. This is also a prime way to build awareness about what parliament is doing and how it functions. It is particularly effective to participate in programs where there is an opportunity for callers or the audience to ask questions, as this enables a dialogue in which the public can learn more about the specific topics that matter to them, and you can gain insights into what is on their minds.

## **PRESS RELEASES, STATEMENTS, AND OP-EDS**

Actively work to get your message and your agenda into the media by regularly issuing press releases, making official statements (and posting them online), and submitting opinion pieces for publication on the issues of the day.

### **Best Practices**

- Tie your content directly to an issue that is active in the news – it’s much easier to “ride the wave” of the current discourse than to generate attention for an issue that is disconnected to what the media are already reporting on.
- Connect national issues and events with what is going on in your constituency.
- Draw upon the insights you have gained from your constituents to add a new dimension to an ongoing debate.
- Create a media list and use it. This is a comprehensive list of all the people in the news media in your area or who cover national policy issues and parliament. Keep a record of their contact information and make sure to update it regularly.
- Regularly pitch stories and concepts to reporters, and don’t hesitate to correct the record if they get something wrong.

## **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH REPORTERS**

Proactively building relationships and establishing a high level of trust with national and local reporters is a long-term investment of time that can pay off in many ways.

### **Benefits to you as an MP include**

- Opportunity to be quoted in news articles.
- Helping to shape the public discourse around your perspective.
- Earning media coverage for your agenda and priorities.
- Highlighting your constituents and their views in national coverage.

### **Broader benefits include**

- Helping reporters to better understand what parliament is doing and how it operates.
- Improved civic education through better and more extensive coverage of parliament.
- Encouraging more issue-based reporting.

## RESPONDING TO CONSTITUENT MAIL

For many parliamentary offices, effectively managing and responding to constituent mail is a demanding and time-consuming but utterly essential task. Timely responses to inquiries demonstrate to constituents that you care about their input and take their questions and comments seriously. Conversely, failing to provide a timely or adequate response sends the message that you are out of touch and do not take your representative role seriously. Polling shows that many people believe their MP does not really care about what they think<sup>11</sup> – managing constituent mail effectively is an important opportunity to demonstrate that's not true for you.

For many MPs, the majority of constituent mail comes in the form of email, though traditional mail remains an important means of communication. Paper and electronic petitions can also contribute to a high volume of constituent mail. Regardless of the method, it is critical to have in place a clear system for responding.

### Key questions to address include

- If you have staff support, who is responsible for organizing and responding to mail?
- For which inquiries will you make use of form letters and which require a more customized response?
- Who approves the response before it is sent? And do all response letters need to be approved?
- What is your target turnaround time?

### Best Practices

- Set the right tone. Use language that demonstrates you genuinely care about their input and concerns.
- Make regular use of form letters on topics that come up often. These can be employed for issue-focused correspondence, as well as requests for information or constituent services.
- For constituent email, make use of the auto-reply. Let them know immediately that you're interested in their input and take their inquiries seriously, and that a more substantive response is forthcoming. This approach can be particularly helpful if you are overwhelmed with a high volume of mail. Let them know that a very large number of inquiries are coming in at the moment, but that you will respond as soon as you can.
- Consider only allowing constituents to send in inquiries, by requiring a form for constituents to fill in their address and identifying information. This helps to prioritize responses to actual constituents.
- Consider a set of policies on petitions, such as a commitment to present them to the relevant committee if a threshold on the number of petitions submitted is reached.
- Leverage the insights contained in constituent mail. Put a system in place to track and analyze the trends. What issues are coming up most frequently? What problems or challenges do they regularly cite? Does there appear to be a majority opinion among your constituents on the prevailing issues in parliament? This information can be used to inform your public statements, legislation, policy positions, themes for townhalls, content for social media, information to put on your website, and any other form of policymaking and engagement.

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<sup>11</sup> Stanford University, the University of California, Santa Barbara, and The AP-NORC Center 2015 Poll – only 2 in 10 Americans believe Congress is listening to the public well.

## MAKING LEGISLATION AVAILABLE FOR INPUT

Your constituents can be an invaluable source of expertise when drafting or considering legislation in committee or plenary. Proactively seeking their input, whether you are engaged in authoring the legislation or simply will be voting on it, is critical to fulfilling your legislative, oversight and representation roles. Viewpoints to consider also include CSOs, academia, businesses and other citizen groups within your constituency. This can include both high-level and in-depth approaches, as well as both broad-based and targeted efforts, such as:

- Post the full bill text or key provisions on your website for review and comment.
- Pose questions or use the poll feature on social media, with inquiries ranging from general (e.g., Do you support this bill?) to specific (Will the proposed changes improve healthcare in our community?).
- Host a roundtable with constituency groups to discuss the proposal in detail and identify any gaps to address and amendments to offer.

## MANAGING OPPOSITION AND OUTRAGE

Facing opposition at times from your constituents is inevitable and facing outrage at times is highly likely. You will no doubt occasionally need to address this at the individual level and may find yourself confronting it in more broad-based or organized ways at times as well. How you respond will go a long way toward determining how sustained and impactful these dynamics will be.

### Best practices

- Take regular opportunities to note that you faithfully represent your entire constituency, not just your supporters.
- Be willing to meet with good-faith actors, whether individual constituents, community leaders, or CSOs, who take a different position from you to hear their point of view.
- If you've taken a position on a highly controversial issue, issue a clear public statement outlining your position, explaining why you've taken it, and acknowledging there are strong differences of opinion. Be direct but respectful in your language.
- Invest in building strong, long-term relationships based on trust with your constituents and community leaders. If there is already a solid foundation built, your relationships will be better equipped to weather the political storms that arise.



*U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan of Alaska meets with students visiting his Washington, DC office from New Stuyahok, Alaska who traveled to the Capitol for a youth program.*

## **EMPLOYING CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES IN PARTY-BUILDING AND CAMPAIGNING IN GEORGIA**

While constituent engagement as an MP should always be a non-partisan effort, the same principles and practices can be effectively applied as a candidate as well. IRI and USAID partnered with civil society, voters, and political parties in Georgia to launch the Georgia Election Compass and the Voter Outreach Online Platform in order to boost citizen participation in the political process and deepen the connections between voters and those running for office.

### **ELECTION COMPASS TOOL**

IRI and USAID, in cooperation with German partners, the Kiescompas Research Institute in the Netherlands, and a team of researchers from the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) in Georgia, the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), and the Policy Institute of the International School of Economics at Tbilisi State University (ISET-Policy Institute), developed the Georgia Election Compass. This new, online voter tool enables users to determine which political party's platform aligns with their values.

### **WHAT IS THE TOOL ACHIEVING?**

- Creating an informed base of voters and encouraging participation in elections.
- Linking voters with political parties that are working to advance the issues they care about.
- Building party capacity to develop issue-based platforms, inclusion plans, and effective outreach strategies.
- Providing a public platform for parties to showcase their work.
- Drawing positive international attention, including from the U.S., Germany, and the Netherlands.

## **VOTER OUTREACH ONLINE PLATFORM**

This has been an important tool for Georgian political parties to maintain virtual, two-way communication with constituents in the run-up to the parliamentary elections and beyond. Through short video clips and social messages, political parties can elaborate on their socio-economic and political platforms. What's more, party officials can use techniques to ensure they are reaching their target voters based on place of residency, the age group of the audience, and other demographic factors. To date, the platform has reached nearly half a million citizens nationwide, enabling parties to reach far more people than would be possible in traditional face-to-face meetings.

### **WHAT HAS MADE THIS PLATFORM A SUCCESS?**

Substantive messages from across the political spectrum on seven major policy issues: healthcare; education; foreign policy, defense, and security; environment; justice and human rights; economic performance; and the inclusion of underrepresented groups in politics.

- Concise but impactful language.
- Iterative process to hone and develop policy-focused and citizen-oriented messages.
- Citizens had the opportunity to provide active, direct input and engage substantively in the discussion.
- Online format made participants feel comfortable expressing themselves.
- Communication between the political parties and the voters on policy issues that continues beyond the election period.



# IV: IN YOUR CONSTITUENCY

## IN YOUR CONSTITUENCY

As an MP, you must regularly inhabit two very different worlds – the world of the capital and the world of your constituency. Voters have sent you to the capital to represent them, and that is where much of your time inevitably will be spent in carrying out your parliamentary duties. However, maintaining a strong, visible, regular presence in your constituency is essential to being a successful MP. Your constituents need to see that you are still deeply tied to the communities you were elected to serve. It is particularly important that they not view you as absent through most of your term, only coming back to your constituency during campaign season.

Above all, it is critical for you to regularly spend time in your constituency in order to understand voters' needs and how best you can fulfill your representative, legislative, and oversight duties. While the exigencies of the capital, resource constraints, and other factors may prevent you from having a perfectly consistent constituency schedule, it is important to prioritize a regular presence, such as weekly, biweekly, or monthly visits, as your circumstances allow.

Just like all forms of constituent communication and engagement, your constituency presence must always be a two-way street, with opportunities not only for you to bring your message directly to your constituents, but also for constituents to have access to you to bring their questions, input, and requests for assistance.

## DOS AND DON'TS OF CONSTITUENCY PRESENCE

### Do's

- Be in your constituency often and at regular intervals.

- Visit all parts of your constituency, with special focus on communities that have been traditionally marginalized or that are located the furthest from your constituency office.
- Take great care in hiring assistants in your constituency office, as they will often be your face and voice to your constituents.
- Partner with local groups and CSOs who can help to organize and promote events.

### Don'ts

- Don't just show up during election season.
- Don't do all the talking at events and site visits – make sure to regularly go into listening mode.
- Don't neglect the important follow-up work after your constituency visits.

While this guide was written with district based representation in mind, the suggestions and best practices can work for MPs that don't have a specific constituency. MPs should seek to engage with citizens in their communities and outside of the capital city. Be with the people in places where they reside, work, and play.

## CONSTITUENCY OFFICE

If the resources are available, there is no single more important investment in your citizen engagement work than a presence at home in your constituency through a permanent constituency office. It provides a consistent and visible point of entry for your constituents to engage with you and for you to demonstrate your commitment to being accessible to them. (Note that if a permanent constituency office is not available, lower-cost options are discussed below.) There are many key factors to consider when establishing your office.

## LOCATION

- Your office should be centrally located and easily accessible to as much of your constituency as possible, while considering marginalized groups, who may live in more remote locations, have reduced capacity to travel, or face other barriers.
- Be mindful of urban/rural divides and work to ensure that the accessibility of your office does not unduly favor one side over the other.
- Ensure that the office is in a building that is accessible to those with disabilities.
- If the location is not easily accessible to all, augment your permanent office with mobile office hours (discussed in further detail below).
- Consider constituent expectations due to your campaign promises, the office locations of your predecessor, and any direct input you have received from constituents and community leaders.
- Consider using an office in a municipal building, which may come at a lower cost and reinforce the non-partisan nature of your constituency work.
- Note that even if it is your political party that provides the space for your constituency office, it is critical that you take a non-partisan approach to constituent service and are equally accessible to all, regardless of party affiliation.
- Seek out qualified individuals with relevant professional background from your constituency who have close ties to key communities in your district, including marginalized communities.
- Instill in staff a mentality of customer service. They are there to listen and be helpful.
- Be clear about the tone and type of language you want them to use, as they represent you to the constituency.
- Use role playing to practice before staff interacts directly with constituents, so they will understand exactly how you want them to engage.
- Provide talking points on major issues that are likely to arise, particularly those with political sensitivities or that are related to your top priorities.
- Clearly differentiate the duties between staff in your constituency office and your office in the capital. Even if some staff serve both offices, be clear about the division of labor and which responsibilities fall to which office.
- The work of paid staff can be augmented or, if necessary, replaced with interns and volunteers, but the same guidelines above still apply.
- Make sure your staff understands how the government works and how to direct constituents to the right government body to resolve issues. Their assistance to constituents in navigating the government is critical.

## STAFF

Hiring the right staff and training them well is paramount. For many constituents, interaction with your staff may be their first or only interaction with your office. They represent you to the people who matter most, so it is essential that you hire competent staff in whom you trust, who share your values, and who are committed to your agenda. Yet even the best staff will be set up to fail if they do not have the proper training.

## OPERATIONS

- Be consistent in the hours and days of operation and clearly publicize them, so that your constituents can count on when they will be able to call or visit the office.
- Enable constituents to set up appointments in advance, but also provide open office hours at regular times throughout the week or month.
- Scheduling meetings with constituents should be both proactive and reactive. You should be available to those who request meetings, but you should also be deliberate in reaching out to key communities and individuals to schedule meetings while you are in the district.
- Creating office handouts with basic information about you, your work, and the services your office can provide is a very efficient and effective way to set the stage for productive engagement with constituents. This can include much of the information that is already on your website (which may not be easily accessible to constituents who lack internet access). A useful handout does not need to be expensive and can be as simple as a one-page flier created on a simple word processing program.
- Constituency offices must keep good records. If your office has a computer, digital records that can be easily searched are best, but many offices maintain paper logbooks and records quite effectively if a digital approach is not possible. It is important to maintain quality records of office activities and constituent engagement, particularly when it comes to casework (which is addressed at length in Section Six).

## TOURING YOUR CONSTITUENCY

While a permanent constituency office provides a consistent, visible presence and space to hold constituent meetings, there is no substitute for regularly traveling through your district and interacting with a variety of communities. If you have a large constituency, it can be helpful to create efficiencies by concentrating your travel by area. For example, you may do a series of meetings and events in one area of your district, and then focus on another area during a subsequent visit.

As you plan your activities over the course of your term, it is important to regularly visit all parts of your constituency, including those where you did not garner much of the vote, to demonstrate that you take seriously your obligation to represent all constituents, not just your voters. It is also critical to put special focus on face-to-face interaction with marginalized communities, particularly those that may be in geographically isolated regions or who face barriers to digital engagement.

## MOBILE OFFICE HOURS

Many MPs maintain close, regular contact with constituents throughout the district with mobile office hours. Employing this approach can:

- Augment the accessibility of a permanent office, providing greater reach into more remote locations.
- Provide an effective alternative to a permanent office for those who do not have the resources to open and maintain one.



## Best practices

- Be as consistent as possible in when and where you conduct mobile office hours.
- Prominently advertise when and where you or your staff will be in advance.
- Work with CSOs and community groups who can help get the word out.
- Consider a wide range of options for locations – municipal buildings, restaurants and cafes, local business offices, private homes, schools, libraries, and others. Be mindful of how different types of locations may create barriers for some constituents and ensure you are selecting locations where all will feel comfortable and provide a variety of options to offset any challenges that a particular location may present for some.

## EVENTS AND PUBLIC SPACES

Joining community events and existing public spaces provides efficient and low-cost opportunities to maintain a strong presence throughout your constituency. This can include sporting events, fairs, ceremonies, clubs, churches, and mosques, among many others. These locales have the advantage of providing access to a variety of audiences, often with minimal planning or other resources needed on your part. As you arrange your schedule, it is important to consider a diverse set of events and spaces to ensure that you are visiting a broad cross-section of your constituency. Your participation can include:

- Mingling and chatting with other participants.
- Making formal remarks.
- Taking Q&A from the audience.

- Providing space for members or participants to share their views and concerns with you.
- Setting up a table or booth with handouts and information from your office.

## SITE VISITS

Arranging to visit key sites throughout your constituency in order to connect with and better understand a variety of interests and issues is also an important avenue of engagement. These can include public service sites, such as health clinics or water treatment facilities, business and economic centers, such as factories or farming cooperatives, community groups, such as youth centers or community theater groups, or civil society organizations, such as women's advocacy non-profits or environmental organizations.

In the case of government sites and public services, site visits present an important oversight opportunity, as you see firsthand how well they are working and what areas of improvement there may be, and hear directly from those the services are meant to support.

Site visits can range from very public events, with speeches and tours that are open to the press, to smaller, more private gatherings enabling discussion on more sensitive matters.

## USING SITE VISITS TO TACKLE SENSITIVE TOPICS: AN EXAMPLE FROM AUSTRALIA

MPs in the state-level parliament in New South Wales, as part of their Inquiry into Domestic Violence Trends and Issues, conducted extensive outreach with survivors, as well as other stakeholders, by going to them directly. They visited courts that handled domestic violence cases, held private roundtable discussions, and conducted briefings with those directly involved in related public services.

This approach was critically important, as communities and individuals facing challenges that warrant policy solutions may not be politically organized to advocate on their own behalf. Furthermore, they may face barriers or, by the very nature of the issues they face, be hesitant to participate in open hearings even if invited. Going directly to where impacted communities gather and proactively seeking their input in a safe and protected space can ensure that those left out of the political process can provide the essential insights that MPs require for developing effective, inclusive, and responsive policy solutions.

### Best Practices

- Be clear on your objective. Is this an open-ended inquiry, in which you hope to simply gain a basic understanding of the work conducted at the site and the people who are involved? Or will you focus on doing a deeper dive on a particular issue?
  - Come prepared. Make sure you are briefed on basic information related to the site and prep some questions in advance.
  - Be ready for requests. You will likely be asked to help identify means of financial support or make a policy commitment. Make sure to not make any promises you cannot fulfill.
- Anticipate any sensitive or politically charged issues that may arise. In the coordination process prior to your visit, make sure to ask about what is likely to be raised.
  - Advertise appropriately. If the visit is meant to gain public attention, share it widely on social media and other platforms, encourage the organizers to get the word out, and notify and invite the press. However, if this is meant to be a more private visit with closed conversation, treat the information as sensitive. Always make sure that you and the site coordinators have a shared understanding on the approach.
  - Make use of smaller, more private settings when appropriate, such as when discussing sensitive topics, engaging vulnerable communities, or operating in a restrictive political environment where visible civic participation can come with risks.

## KENYA: A MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH TO MEANINGFUL CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT

The gap between citizens and governments is a persistent problem in Kenya, leading to growing distrust in political entities by the citizens, a lack of transparency and accountability in governance processes, and an undermining of democracy.

To address this problem, several Kenyan legislators partnered with IRI and the U.S. House Democracy Partnership (HDP) to create opportunities to connect with constituents in community engagement forums. Kenyan Member of Parliament Hon. Gertrude Mbeyu was able to reach approximately 400 constituents over the course of one week, using a variety of best practices, to address issues of vital importance to her and her constituency.

## HOW DID HON. MBEYU DO IT? SHE

- Toured her constituency throughout the week, specifically targeting outreach to traditionally marginalized communities, including women, youth, and persons with disabilities.
- Participated in four constituent forums, with a special focus on high-priority policy issues, in which constituents had the opportunity to share their input and experiences with her, while she provided updates on her legislative work.
- Joined a community radio program as a guest.

## WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES FOR HON. MBEYU? SHE

- Learned about the challenges faced by traditionally marginalized groups in her constituency, gaining much-needed insights for her legislative agenda.
- Addressed a wide range of policy issues ranging from government service delivery and youth unemployment to gender-based violence.
- Educated her constituents on a government funding program – with opportunities including school fees for needy students, youth economic empowerment programs, and financial support to women-led micro-enterprises – and how to apply for support.
- Changed constituent perspectives on appropriate forms of support from MPs and the potential to engage with their representatives outside of campaign season.

As one participant said, “Most times, we only get to interact with our leaders when they come back hunting for votes. Hon. Mbeyu’s forum has been different, though. I have learned a lot, and now I know what documents I need to put together to apply for funding for my start-up business.”

Hon. Mbeyu also expressed her satisfaction with the outcomes of the forums: “I was happy to engage with women and youth at such a close range and in a very nonpolitical setting,” she said. “Such public forums would normally always be politically-driven, and participants would only expect handouts from political leaders, and that is why most legislators shy away from holding community forums. The guidance and mentorship I received from HDP [and] IRI, however, made it so easy for me to talk to the citizens. For instance, while planning for the forums, IRI and I worked together to develop an agenda that would ensure that the forums are focused on a few critical topics, that there is ample time provided for participants to present their development priorities and that the feedback loop is closed from my end with a session on action-planning and next steps.”

## PUTTING KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION

Most important, Hon. Mbeyu knew that the full impact of constituent engagement comes in the follow through. After her week-long constituency tour, she immediately put into place plans to roll out additional community engagement sessions in the following months to help address the ongoing challenges that were raised. She also made plans to share her constituency outreach experience with her parliamentary colleagues, to serve as a model to better serve Kenyans across the country.

## CONVENING POWER

MPs have considerable power in their constituencies to act as a convener and bring together individuals and groups in a variety of forums and formats. While acting as a convener often demands more time and resources than visiting existing public spaces and participating in events, creating your own spaces allows you to largely set the parameters and drive the agenda. As always, it is important to design these in a way that not only enables you to share information and convey your messages, but also empowers your constituents to share their input and engage in a meaningful dialogue.

## TOWNHALL MEETINGS

Townhall meetings are one of the single most important tools for an MP to use in order to be accessible to constituents and provide an open opportunity to raise their concerns. They should be a regular part of your constituency agenda. There is no question that convening an open public meeting with constituents can come with challenges. MPs are likely to be bombarded with a wide range of questions and opinions, and the discussion can become unruly at times. However, there is simply no substitute for making yourself available to your constituents in this way. What's more, there are a variety of techniques to employ to help ensure townhall meetings remain productive and constructive.

### Anatomy of a townhall meeting

1. **Planning and advertising.** Determine the focus, identify an appropriate venue, widely publicize the event, and consider working with local government officials, CSOs and other community partners who may be able to help organize and get the word out.
2. **Opening remarks.** Welcome your audience, use plain (but never condescending) language to share what you want your constituents to know, set a positive and respectful tone, and don't monopolize the conversation. Your constituents came to have a dialogue, not hear a lengthy speech.
3. **Q&A.** This is the main event. Most of the program should consist of comments and questions from the audience. Consider inviting a community leader to act as moderator. Make sure you have staff or volunteers on hand to take notes and record each of the issues raised, with particular attention to items requiring follow up on your part.
 

Additionally, it is critical that there are opportunities for anonymous questions to be posed. Methods could include questions submitted on note cards ahead of the meeting or electronic messages.
4. **Following up.** Townhall meetings should always be followed by action that demonstrates you were listening and are actively incorporating what you heard. This can include making public statements about key issues that were raised, putting together a newsletter with relevant information and updates, opening new casework files, posting on social media, scheduling follow-on meetings for deeper dives, letters to thank constituents for their attendance – any activity that builds upon the discussion and demonstrates follow through.

### Tips for keeping townhall discussions constructive and positive

- Be clear in advance about the format and agenda. Is this an open forum to raise any issue? Will there be a focus on a specific issue? Set a clear objective and publicize it well...
- ...BUT be ready to be a little flexible if constituents do not fully adhere to the agenda. Even if the stated purpose is to discuss a specific issue, do not be surprised if other issues are raised. Be willing to hear them out and then redirect the discussion back to the intended topic.
- Set the right tone at the outset. Let your constituents know that you are there to listen to them. Acknowledge that there are likely to be a range of views, and you want to hear everyone's perspective. Speak to them with and ask them to be respectful of each other.

- Don't commit to anything you're not yet ready to commit to. If you are being pressed to take a new position or commit to a specific course of action that you have not yet had the chance to fully weigh and think through, let your constituents know that right now you are in "listening mode," that their input is an essential part of the process and you will be considering it carefully.
- Hold townhall meetings regularly. If you are viewed as accessible and available to your constituents, they are far less likely to become belligerent in a townhall meeting. However, if this is their first opportunity to interact with you and they believe it may be their last, they may be more inclined to speak harshly.

## JORDAN TOWNHALLS

For years, IRI has successfully encouraged Jordanian municipalities to hold town hall meetings in order to facilitate formal communication between city residents and local officials. These meetings have proved beneficial for local officials and citizens alike and have become a hallmark of IRI's local governance programming in Jordan, with the team executing 61 town halls across Jordan from 2014-2019. IRI works with volunteer Citizen Committees who liaise with municipal staff to coordinate, moderate and follow up on town hall meetings. In 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, IRI adapted the town hall meetings to a virtual platform, using Facebook Live to broadcast sessions with mayors and other municipal officials as they communicate their strategies for dealing with the crisis and answer citizen questions. To date, IRI has held 14 Virtual Town Hall Meetings. IRI continues to encourage municipal officials to listen to citizens and incorporate citizen feedback in decision-making processes. One example of how these town halls have resulted in concrete action is the development of a map outlining the jurisdiction of the Ministry of

Public Works vs the Municipality of Ajloun, which now hangs in the Ajloun Municipal Hall. This map clearly delineates which entity is responsible for the upkeep of roads in the area, so people can direct their complaints about road infrastructure and repair to the correct entity. Seemingly small solutions, such as this, relieve stress in the community and demonstrate transparency on the part of officials, which builds trust and results in more effective management of public services.



## FIELD HEARINGS

Holding field hearings in your constituency can be a powerful complement to hearings held in committee in the capital, allowing for an on-the-ground perspective and the opportunity to hear directly from communities impacted by the topic at hand. They can support the full range of your duties as MP, but can be particularly useful for your oversight work.

Field hearings can serve several purposes, such as:

- Bringing greater local, regional, or national attention to an important issue affecting your constituency.
- Gathering information and gaining a deeper understanding of the issue at hand.
- Investigating the situation on the ground and compiling real-world examples.



- Gathering evidence.
- Uncovering program failures, corruption, or malfeasance.<sup>12</sup>

While field hearings can, and often should, garner media attention, it is important to ensure that they are substantive and contribute to an ongoing body of work, rather than simply serve as a one-time “stunt.” This can be achieved by utilizing a few best practices:

- Identify needs and opportunities for local expertise and experiences as part of your broader legislative and oversight agenda in parliament.
- Lay the appropriate groundwork by first conducting meetings and fact-finding trips throughout your constituency, to ensure you are focusing on the most critical needs and gaps, soliciting the input and advice of the appropriate experts and impacted communities, and engaging a diverse set of stakeholders.
- Follow through on the findings of the field hearings. Incorporate what you learn into your legislative and oversight agenda and develop an action plan for how you will address the problems and gaps that are identified whether through legislation, program fixes, or other remedies.

### **CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

The Citizens’ Economic Council initiative<sup>13</sup> used innovative citizen participation approaches to bring constituents, particularly those typically disengaged from political processes, into the policymaking process in a meaningful way. The program had five main elements:

- The Economic Inclusion Roadshow, with workshops in a range of locations throughout the country to explore the views and experiences of marginalized citizens and consider new approaches for greater inclusivity.
- The Citizens Economic Council, ensuring diversity across ethnicity, age, gender, and social circumstances.
- A DIY Economics Toolkit.
- Online public crowdsourcing.
- Ongoing stakeholder engagement.

### **KEY APPROACHES**

- Build participants’ understanding and capacity to engage, through educational tools and technical support.
- Remove barriers to participation, such as disability access and translation services.
- Utilize innovative deliberative design techniques, such as Augusto Boal’s theater of the oppressed, in conjunction with more traditional approaches like focus-group style discussions.
- Draw out insights on how participants perceive the economy, the barriers they face, and how to dismantle those barriers.

### **OUTCOMES**

- Increased citizen understanding and education.
- Deeper, more meaningful participation, including by communities typically excluded from economic decision-making.
- Direct link between citizen input and policy change, including the Bank of England adopting project recommendations.

<sup>12</sup> Tools for Engagement: A Guide to Strengthening Relations Between Parliamentarians and Citizens

<sup>13</sup> Citizen’s Economic Council: <https://www.thersa.org/projects/archive/economy/citizens-economic-council/about>

## AWARDS AND COMPETITIONS

You can also use your profile and convening power to organize awards and competitions among your constituents. These can be a particularly good way to engage school groups and youth organizations. They can serve a variety of purposes:

- **Highlight local talent**, such as through a student art competition, with winners displayed in your constituent or capital office, or throughout the community.
- **Find solutions**, such as a competition to identify the most creative way to address a local challenge.
- **Foster entrepreneurship**, such as an award ceremony recognizing small business owners in the community.
- **Promote civic engagement**, such as an event to honor local volunteers.

## RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Building enduring relationships with leaders in your community is an especially important tool for understanding your constituency, maintaining ongoing and productive dialogue with a wide range of communities, and growing your base of political support. They are often closer to, and have more regular contact with, your constituents. As a result, having a productive relationship with them will help you to further earn the trust and support of your constituents. They can also be indispensable sources of information and insights, with an insider's perspective on the challenges that communities are facing. And they can be key partners in identifying and implementing effective solutions.

What's more, partisan politics are often not as entrenched at the local level, allowing for more productive and solutions-oriented engagement. It is important not to only engage with leaders who are of the same party or who share your same views. Making a point of developing a constructive

relationship with community leaders who are not always "in your camp" will not only make you a more effective MP, but it will also help you to build more durable support in your constituency.



### ONE WORD OF CAUTION

Engagement with community leaders, though critical, can never replace proactive engagement with individuals and those who are excluded from the places where decisions are made. Even leaders of marginalized communities may not speak fully for the entire community. Working with leaders should always go hand-in-hand with an awareness of power dynamics and efforts to ensure that all have a seat at the table and are not excluded from the conversation.

## LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

Elected officials at the municipal and sub-national level constitute an important cadre for you to engage. They too have earned the support of your constituents. Where your agendas overlap, they can be highly effective partners and amplifiers of your messaging. Where your agendas diverge, there can still be valuable space for constructive dialogue and understanding competing local dynamics. Additionally, appointed officials should be included in your outreach.

Community leaders present the opportunity to connect with a broad range of groups that cut across lines of geography, interests, gender, ethnicity, and other identities. They are powerful spokespersons for the communities they represent, and in much the same way as elected officials, can be critically important partners and sources of information.

### Forms of engagement can include

- Regularly call on them to hear their ideas and perspectives, to ask what issues are top of mind for them, and provide the opportunity to weigh in on parliamentary action.
- Conduct joint meetings on topics that intersect with your respective agendas.
- Participate in joint events.
- Coordinate on press releases and public statements.
- Seek their input on site visits and meetings throughout your constituency.

### Best practices for productive relationships

- Don't be transactional. If you only ever contact them when you need something, they will be far less inclined to be helpful.
- Be honest. Candidly but respectfully let them know your point of view, even if it is different from theirs.
- Show respect for their expertise and their own constituencies.
- Foster a sense of partnership and ongoing collaboration.
- Regularly be in listening mode. While you want them to be well informed of your work, reserve plenty of time to hear and learn from them.

## ADVISORY COMMITTEES AND "KITCHEN CABINETS"

As you build relationships with local leaders and experts, you may find it useful to develop a more systematic approach to leveraging their expertise and incorporating it into your parliamentary work through the formation of an advisory committee or a more informal "kitchen cabinet." Such groups can be formed as a pool of expertise to draw from in an ongoing way or be formed with a specific and time-bound purpose, such as developing a particular piece of legislation.

Advisory committees might be publicized by sharing their stated purpose and membership on your website. A kitchen cabinet may be a more informal group of trusted experts that you consult for advice and problem solving. In either case, they can be very helpful in drawing upon local expertise and developing effective solutions to pressing problems.

### A successful set of advisors will be

- **Diverse**, bringing to bear ideas and input that is inclusive of all who are impacted by the topics at hand.
- **Knowledgeable**, with relevant expertise and experience.
- **Trustworthy**, enabling candid and fruitful discussion.

### Activities can include

- Reviewing and appraising proposals.
- Making recommendations.
- Conducting research.
- Canvassing other stakeholders and members of the community.



## PRIVATE SECTOR AND BUSINESS LEADERS

The business community is an important constituency with which to engage, in order to understand current laws that may be impeding the growth of local businesses or public policy changes that could help increase local business. It is important to engage both large and small business owners and employees in your district to understand the economic impact these businesses have in your community, as well as areas of potential growth. Key strategies in engaging the private sector in your community include:

- **Site Visits:** A way to engage the community is to conduct site visits in order to see firsthand how the business is doing, what they do and meet the employees.
- **Engage the Local Chamber of Commerce:** engaging business groups such as chambers of commerce also are important opportunities to understand overarching policy issue changes or current policy that impact the business community. The chamber of commerce may also have experts who can provide advice on issues from business impact to potential law changes.
- **Community Highlight at the Capitol:** Invite businesses to get involved in the policy making process by asking them to testify at a committee hearing on an issue that may impact them. Highlight local businesses in your community at the capitol to showcase the key assets your community brings to your country. Both methods are also ways to invite your constituents to the capitol and to showcase their community impact.

## VOLUNTEER CITIZEN COMMITTEES IN JORDAN

IRI Jordan has worked with thousands of citizen committee members in more than 50 percent of Jordanian cities across the country. In 2020, 1666 applicants from 35 Jordanian municipalities applied to join a citizen committee in their city, in which 586 members were selected to participate in the program. After being trained by IRI, members of those committees carry on conducting and implementing different local governance interventions and best practices in their communities to address citizens' priorities and communicate them to local elected officials. Committees then work to understand the issues in their communities and assess the needs of their communities. This is done through: civic education activities, accessing strategic planning and needs assessments that the municipality has developed, conducting community surveys using the Baladytak process, and through the moderation of town-hall meetings.



*Hon. Mbeyu of Kenya conducts a townhall meeting with constituents, part of a larger one-week campaign to better engage marginalized citizens in her district through forums.*

# V: IN THE CAPITAL

## OFFICIAL OFFICE

While much of your work in the capital will be very different from your work in your constituency, your work in the capital should always remain deeply grounded in your constituency. Whether speaking in plenary, questioning witnesses at committee hearings, meeting with government officials, or other legislative, oversight, or political activities, your efforts should always be informed and guided by the needs and circumstances of your constituents.

It is also important that your capital city office be a welcome place for visiting constituents. Play the gracious host when they come to the capital and take the opportunity to help them better understand how parliament works, and the work you are doing on their behalf. Every constituent visit is an important engagement and education opportunity.

## STAFF

Just as is the case in your constituency office, hiring the right staff for your capitol? office and training them well is paramount. They will often be the first point of contact for key government, civil society, and community stakeholders, as well as for constituents. As such, it is essential that you hire competent staff in whom you trust, who share your values, who are well-versed in government process and policy areas and are committed to your agenda. Yet even the best staff will be set up to fail if they do not have the proper training.

- Seek out experienced professionals with a connection to you, your policy agenda, and/or your constituency. The best capitol? staff bring a mixture of experience and loyalty.
- Encourage active networking with other parliamentary staff, government officials, CSOs, and the media.

- Be clear about the tone and type of language you want them to use when interacting with stakeholders. Use role playing to practice before they interact directly with constituents, so they will understand exactly how you want them to engage.
- Provide talking points on major issues that are likely to arise particularly those with political sensitivities or that are related to your top priorities.
- Clearly differentiate the duties between staff in your constituency office and your office in the capital. Even if some staff serve both offices, be clear about the division of labor and which responsibilities fall to which office.
- The work of paid staff can be augmented with interns and volunteers, though the same principles above still apply.

## MEETINGS

You are likely to get more requests for meetings than you have time. As you set priorities for your daily schedule, there are a few best practices to employ to ensure that your itinerary in the capital is guided by constituent needs:

- Preserve time for follow-up from your constituency visits. What issues were raised that require further inquiry? What commitments did you make? Identify the government and stakeholder meetings and calls necessary to take the next steps, and then make sure to report back to the relevant stakeholders in your district.
- Be proactive and reactive, but always strategic – proactive by seeking out the meetings necessary to fully represent your constituents' interests, reactive by prioritizing the meeting requests that are most relevant to constituent priorities, and strategic by setting meetings that advance your agenda and priorities.

- Set meetings within a context of long-term relationship building. One-time meetings often do not yield results. Strategic progress largely comes through building trust and maintaining ongoing dialogue.
- When you cannot meet with groups, have a trusted staff take them in your place. Ideally, that staff member is well versed in the policy area groups care about.
- Make time to meet with constituents when they come to the capital. Even just a handshake and brief conversation will show that you consider them a priority. If you can take pictures and share them to show your constituency that you are available to them, do so!

## HOSTING YOUR CONSTITUENTS

### PARLIAMENTARY TOURS

The Capitol building, parliament or other seat of the legislative branch is often a source of national pride and a powerful symbol of representative democracy. Facilitating tours for your constituents is a prime way to foster a connection to the branch of government closest to the people and to better help them understand how it functions. If there is no central visitor's office in parliament, your office can serve this role for your constituents. And if there is a central office, you can still take opportunities to provide a personal touch.

- Ensure informational materials about parliament are available in your office. Ensure that it includes easily digestible overviews of what parliament does and how it functions.
- If possible, arrange opportunities for constituents to view plenary or committee sessions so that they can see parliament in action.
- If permissible, provide custom tours for constituents by you or your staff as often as practicable, even if there is a central parliamentary office that arranges tours.

Constituents deeply appreciate the special touch and will often remember it for years to come. This is also a prime opportunity to showcase what you are doing on behalf of your constituents, as the tour can highlight what you have recently spoken about in plenary or committee, votes you have taken, or bills you have introduced. Constituent tours can also point out items in parliamentary buildings of specific interest to the constituency, such as statues, paintings, awards or other items with a historical or geographic connection.

### INVITATIONS TO TESTIFY AT COMMITTEE

There is perhaps no more powerful or direct way to give constituents a voice in parliament than to invite a constituent who has relevant expertise or experiences to testify in committee. While the opportunities to do so will necessarily be limited, every committee hearing is an opportunity to consider whether there is a member of your constituency who could contribute to the proceedings. This may include lawyers, academics, business owners or other community leaders, but could also include individuals who are not often invited into the places where decisions are made, but who have very valuable first-hand experiences on challenges and gaps, particularly related to how government services may be failing those they are intended to serve.

It is also important to consider stakeholder groups who work on relevant issues, including those that are based in your constituency or who work on issues relevant to it. When committee hearings are being planned or considered, there are several key questions to ask:

- What are the links between the topic at hand and my constituency?
- Do I have constituents who have raised related issues or who engage in work that affords expertise or experience with these issues?

- Are a range of voices with different experiences and perspectives being invited to give input, and if not, who is missing?
- Are special interests being balanced, and again if not, who is missing?
- Is there anyone in my district who could bring needed diversity and balance to the witness list?

## OPEN HOUSES

Hosting periodic open houses in your capital office is a good way to augment individual visits and tours or replace them if your office does not have the capacity to regularly host constituents in the office. Open houses can be held regularly – such as monthly, quarterly, biannually, or annually – or can be planned opportunistically – such as around a major event or festival in the capital when an increase of visitors will be likely. You can design the format to fit the level of resources and capacity you and your team have, but some key elements to consider include:

- Provide informational materials on parliament and your office.
- Schedule a designated time when you personally will be available to greet constituents for handshakes and photos.
- Advertise widely in advance, such as on your website, social media, in your constituency office, or in an office newsletter.
- Share photos on social media.

## SCHOOL GROUPS

It is worth putting special focus on inviting and hosting school groups – primary, secondary, and university – in your capital office. Visiting, touring, and learning directly about parliament and its functions and importance in a representative democracy are formative educational experiences. They can lay a strong foundation for lifelong civic engagement and help to ensure a new generation of citizens who understand what an MP can and cannot do, with high but appropriate expectations for constituent service.



*Hon. Mbeyu of Kenya conducts a townhall meeting with constituents, part of a larger one-week campaign to better engage marginalized citizens in her district through forums.*

## WORKSHOPS WITH CIVIL SOCIETY, ADVOCACY GROUPS, AND OTHER POLICY EXPERTS

You can take advantage of the high concentration of quality CSOs in the capital by proactively organizing workshops or other forms of structured and focused dialogue. These often are most productive when there is a clearly defined objective. This can include:

- Identifying gaps or challenges in existing policy.
- Developing specific policy recommendations.
- Reviewing and analyzing existing legislation.
- Drafting new legislative text.

If there are a variety of groups and interests working on the same topics, focus primarily on groups who have a direct connection to your constituency or have already earned the trust of key communities in your district. As always, when bringing together a group that will contribute to the formation of policy, it is essential that you include a range of voices and ensure diversity across gender, racial, ethnic, religious, and demographic lines.



## VI: CASEWORK

### TREMENDOUS REWARDS, CONSIDERABLE CHALLENGES

Perhaps no element of an MP's job is more fraught than casework. On one hand, it has the potential for enormous benefit for MPs and constituents alike. MPs often cite constituent service as the single most satisfying part of their job. It provides the opportunity to make a tangible, demonstrable difference in people's lives. What's more, casework affords invaluable insights to MPs for legislation and oversight, as it opens windows into how government is working – or failing to work.

Yet casework also comes with significant pitfalls. It can quickly become overwhelming with the sheer volume of cases, not to mention difficulties in resolving cases and the complexities of the various challenges that constituents face, often under circumstances that generate strong emotions.

An even bigger challenge faced by many MPs is the problem of clientelism, in which constituents may request and expect MPs to provide favors or direct financial support that is outside of the MP's purview. Such requests may go so far as to violate anti-corruption laws, but even when they fall short of that threshold, they can constitute unrealistic and unattainable expectations for what their MP can provide. These expectations may stem, in part, from a lack of civic education and understanding of what the proper role of an MP is.

The ability to successfully respond to appropriate requests, manage the caseload, and pivot away from inappropriate requests requires a strong investment of resources – including your most valuable resource, of time – and an ongoing commitment to civic education; but like MPs around the world, you are sure to find the investment deeply rewarding.

### WHAT IS CASEWORK?

Given the pitfalls and challenges surrounding casework, it is important to begin with a clear understanding of what casework is and what it is not.

Appropriate casework includes:

- Supporting constituents in navigating bureaucratic hurdles.
- Problem solving when basic public services aren't functioning, and basic needs are not being met.
- Making inquiries of, or working directly with, government agencies to resolve disputes, such as a missed pension payment.
- Engaging with local or provincial government agencies, over which parliament may not have direct jurisdiction, but where MP engagement can help expedite resolution.

Appropriate casework does not include practices of clientelism, such as MPs paying out of their own pockets for funerals, school fees, and other personal favors that can be easily construed as buying support.

It is also important to note that successful casework does not always involve directly solving your constituents' problems for them but can often entail acting as their advocate with government bureaucracies, identifying available resources, and being a partner in the resolution of their cases.

### PROCESS AND BEST PRACTICES

You should establish a clear system in your office and ensure adequate staff training for managing the three stages of casework:

## INTAKE

Start with collecting the relevant information needed to proceed with the case. This often includes a standardized intake form to record basic information, such as name, contact information, the nature of the challenge, the government agency involved, and any action taken by the constituent to date. It is most efficient for a staff member to work with the constituent to fill out the form together, so that the staff member can answer questions and clarify anything confusing in real time and ensure that the form is fully and appropriately filled out.

When appropriate, this intake process may also include an authorization form, formally giving your office permission to contact other agencies on the constituent's behalf. The relevant information and forms should be kept in an organized filing system or database for easy reference, follow up, and resolution.

While it is essential for you and your staff to remain patient, sympathetic, and understanding throughout the casework process, it is particularly important to be calm, reassuring, and non-judgmental during the intake process. Casework often involves circumstances in which constituents feel upset, and simply feeling as though they are being understood and taken seriously will go a long way.

## DECISION POINT

Once you have all the relevant information, you can decide if and how your office will proceed. There are generally four courses of potential action:

**Provide information.** The appropriate level of engagement may be to simply serve as a resource for your constituent to assist in their own efforts to resolve their problem. This can include providing them with links to government or CSO resources, brochures or other informational documents your office has created, or other sources of helpful information.

**Referral.** You may be able to provide a formal referral to a government agency at the national,

provincial, or local level, or to a CSO or other private sector entity that can help to resolve their problem or provide direct assistance.

**Direct resolution.** If appropriate, and the problem is within your power and authority to resolve or assist, you may choose to directly intervene on your constituent's behalf and actively work to resolve the situation.

**Decline to assist.** If you determine that the request is not one that you can faithfully respond to, including requests for favors or payments, you should respectfully decline to get involved, with a clear explanation as to why the request falls outside of your role as an MP. (In some cases, you may also be able to direct them to other resources for assistance.)

## ACTIVE ASSISTANCE AND RESOLUTION

Once the challenge is understood and the appropriate form of response is determined, you or your staff can take the necessary follow-on steps to assist and resolve the case. These can include:

- Make calls to government agencies or CSOs.
- Send formal letters of inquiry.
- Engage in ongoing interaction with the relevant agencies and organizations.
- Incorporate any new information from the constituent into the case file and action plan.
- Provide updates to the constituent at appropriate intervals.
- Upon closing the case, ensure all pertinent details are recorded and archived for future reference and analysis.

## DO'S AND DON'TS OF CASEWORK

### Do's

- Before getting started, familiarize yourself with parliamentary codes of conduct and ethics rules to ensure that you are engaging in an appropriate way.

- Proactively incorporate education about the role of parliament and your role as an MP and the full range of constituent outreach you can engage in, so that your constituents have a better understanding of what you can and can't do.
- Provide brochures and fact sheets in your constituency office and online, with detailed information about what services you can provide and how you can assist them on appropriate matters.
- Be a learning operation. Continually identify lessons learned and incorporate them into office operations. Use them to update constituent handouts, brochures, and web site content. This can include common challenges, questions and misconceptions, steps constituents can take on their own, and updated agency contacts, bureaucratic processes, and best practices. This process of refinement will greatly benefit both you and your constituents with increased efficiency and effectiveness.
- Set and communicate clear priorities for staff, so that they can effectively manage casework based on importance, urgency, and your areas of focus.
- Set a clear policy for when and how to keep constituents informed throughout the casework process that is responsive to their needs, without overburdening staff.
- Invest time and resources into reviewing and analyzing casework to identify trends and systemic solutions.

### Don'ts

- Don't expect that government agencies will always be consistent in how they manage their own processes. There will often be variations depending on the person handling.
- Don't make promises that you cannot (or should not) fulfill.
- Don't be evasive when you are asked to do something that you cannot deliver – be sympathetic and respectful, but firm and clear.

## MANAGING EXPECTATIONS AND MAXIMIZING OUTCOMES

While it is unrealistic to assume that constituent expectations will always be reasonable and achievable and all cases will be satisfactorily resolved, there are many factors that will enable you to “right-size” expectations and allow you to better leverage the power of casework.

The four most powerful antidotes to unreasonable or clientelist requests, are:

- Civic education.
- Honesty.
- Fulfilling your appropriate duties of representation.
- Addressing constituent needs in a strategic way.

## TURNING CASEWORK INTO STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS

- Identify widespread problems. Look for problems that arise regularly that could be solved with new policies and legislative fixes.
- Develop collective solutions. Solving problems one-by-one is highly inefficient. Look for solutions that can benefit a broad number of people.
- Think locally, act nationally. Bring the expertise you've gained in your constituency to parliament for legislative action and oversight that benefits the whole country, not just one person or one community.

## **REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA: CHANGING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF CASEWORK THROUGH EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT<sup>14</sup>**

When the Assembly of North Macedonia launched a nationwide program of constituency offices for its MPs, constituents assumed that the offices were available as a means to request personal favors, such as a job offer. By employing best practices for constituency offices and casework, MPs were able to ensure that constituent expectations evolved over time, putting into place a system in which MPs focus on impactful and appropriate casework and constituents focus on utilizing the offices effectively and appropriately.

### **THE BEST PRACTICES THAT WERE EMPLOYED INCLUDE**

- Using municipal buildings to reinforce the non-partisan nature of casework.
- Employing professional staff and training them well.
- Conducting civic education on the roles of MPs.
- Making constituency offices widely accessible throughout the country.
- Conducting a Constituency Day every Friday.

### **POSITIVE OUTCOMES INCLUDE**

- Keeping casework focused on helping constituents navigate government bureaucracy, expediting important infrastructure projects, and resolving challenges with public service delivery.
- Improving MPs' legislative and oversight work.
- Changing public perceptions of parliament from a faceless institution to a personal connection to their MP.
- Promoting social cohesion.



# VII: SPOTLIGHT ON CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT DURING COVID

## CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT DURING COVID

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the operations of parliaments globally. While all crises can strain parliamentary functions, this pandemic has been a prime example of the paradox of crises – which can significantly strain the ability of MPs to engage with constituents precisely at a time when it is more important than ever to understand how citizens are impacted and what is needed from their elected representatives.

While the pandemic is ongoing and its impacts are still very real, there have been some lessons learned thus far that can point to best practices for ensuring that meaningful constituent engagement continues throughout the remainder of the pandemic. These can be applied to future crises as well.

### LESSONS LEARNED

- While it was initially challenging from a technical perspective to pivot to virtual engagement, many MPs and their constituents are finding that they have grown much more comfortable with new approaches and technologies and would like to continue to use them into the future.<sup>15</sup>
- Moving to virtual sessions comes with risks, including privacy and cybersecurity concerns that must be addressed, but it also creates new opportunities for citizen engagement and can make parliamentary proceedings more accessible.

- Taking into consideration citizens' needs and concerns when implementing emergency measures results in:
  - reduced risk to long-term erosion of rights,
  - greater citizen compliance with temporary measures,
  - more effective public health responses.<sup>16</sup>
- Misinformation and disinformation spread very quickly in a pandemic, and MPs have an important role to play in both amplifying official guidance and stopping the spread of "fake news." ]<sup>17</sup>
- The negative impacts of the pandemic have fallen disproportionately on those who already faced inequalities and marginalization prior to the outbreak, making the need to put special focus on engaging these communities and ensuring they are not left behind all the more acute.<sup>18</sup>

### ENGAGING CONSTITUENTS THROUGH ONLINE HEARINGS IN ARMENIA

The National Assembly of Armenia offers a successful model for engaging constituents while making the shift to virtual committee hearings during the pandemic. In partnership with IRI, two Standing Committees – the Committee on Education and Committee on Foreign Relations – conducted online hearings on a range of policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis, including distance learning and online education. They employed several best practices, including:

<sup>15</sup> Congressional Management Foundation <https://www.congressfoundation.org/projects/communicating-withcongress/coronavirus-report-2020>

<sup>16</sup> Parliaments and Crisis: Challenges and Innovations <https://www.congressfoundation.org/projects/communicating-with-congress/coronavirus-report-2020>

<sup>17</sup> UNESCO <https://en.unesco.org/courier/2020-3/health-crisis-fertile-ground-disinformation>

<sup>18</sup> Removing barriers and disparities in health: lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41584-020-00524-8>

- Seeking direct input from the public on the policies and approaches that were having an impact on day-to-day lives.
- Engaging MPs, high-level government representatives, a diverse circle of civil society actors, and the general public in the discussions.
- Broadcasting the meetings via major media channels.
- Facilitating Q&A with teachers and parents.

As a result, they achieved important objectives, including

- Receiving timely input from citizens.
- Issuing specific policy guidance that was directly based on constituent recommendations.
- Demonstrating to the public that their voices are essential in times of crisis.
- Engaging over 17,000 viewers in the live broadcasts.

## IN-PERSON ENGAGEMENT DURING COVID

In some instances, in-person engagement activities may be possible while adhering to local guidelines, observing social distancing measures, and taking other safety precautions. This may be particularly important for activities like delivering COVID-19 prevention kits with items such as facemasks, plastic gloves, and hand sanitizer, teaching citizens how to use these materials properly, and sharing public health guidelines and best practices to mitigate the spread in their communities. When conducted properly and safely, activities like these can help build trust between government officials and community members while boosting public health outcomes.

## LEVERAGING DIGITAL TOOLS

While many parliaments have moved to virtual plenary sessions, committee hearings, and smaller meetings and discussion groups, so the opportunity for even greater leveraging of digital tools during the pandemic.

Example: “In the Czech Republic, the Department of Communication and Education of the Parliamentary Institute of the Chamber of Deputies is launching a new user-friendly portal for educational purposes, with informative sessions, workshop materials and a virtual tour of the Chamber of Deputies, in order to fill the gap left behind by the cancellation of all in-person educational activities”.<sup>19</sup>

## BEST PRACTICES

- Be a timely source of important, credible information. Through your website, social media, newsletters, and other platforms, direct constituents to the latest guidance from public health officials. When you see false information being shared, redirect your constituents to accurate information. Never post or promote faulty information or conspiracy theories.
- Realistically assess what services you and your staff can maintain, compared to normal procedures. For example, if you are closing your constituency office and providing virtual office hours instead, determine how many hours a day and how many days a week you and your team are equipped to operate them. Clearly communicate to your constituents what you can and can't do, what changes are being made, and how basic services can be accessed. Constituents are much more likely to accept reduced services if you are transparent about what constraints you are facing and effectively managing expectations.

- Seek out information from your constituents on how they are impacted by the crisis. It is particularly important to understand how their needs have changed and what their most pressing challenges are. Utilize a variety of tools to solicit input, including social

media and online surveys, as well as hosting virtual discussions and roundtables. Focus your attention especially on reaching out to marginalized communities that were already facing economic or social inequalities prior to the pandemic.

## VIII: BE A CHANGE AGENT

While the responsibility to meaningfully engage with constituents falls on each MP, individual actions are dramatically enhanced when parliament as an institution prioritizes and invests in constituent engagement. One of the single most impactful efforts you can engage in on behalf of your constituents is to be a change agent within parliament, helping to drive reform efforts that will make your institution more transparent, inclusive, and responsive.

### ASSESSING PARLIAMENT

The first step to being an effective change agent is to take a comprehensive look at parliament and assess the extent to which it prioritizes and invests in constituent engagement. There are several specific, tangible markers you can look at to make this assessment. There are also more qualitative questions to ask to determine what the culture of parliament is and whether it fosters a true commitment to meaningful, ongoing engagement – or whether it neglects or even inhibits it.

#### Institutional features to consider

- Is there a central citizen engagement office?
- Does parliament broadcast or live stream all plenary sessions and committee hearings?
- Are plenary and committee votes posted publicly?
- Is the building accessible to those with disabilities?

- What is the quality of the parliamentary website? It should be informative, easy to read, easy to navigate, and have a mechanism for citizens to submit comments or petitions.
- Are institutional funds made available to MPs to open constituency offices?
- Do committees regularly consult CSOs on legislation?
- Are committee witness lists diverse and inclusive?
- Are opposition MPs allowed to call witnesses?
- Is written testimony of witnesses made publicly available?
- Do committees publicly post hearings and business meetings in advance?

#### Cultural norms to consider

- Do parliamentary leaders regularly emphasize the importance of constituent engagement?
- Do you feel supported as an MP in your constituent engagement?
- Do your fellow MPs prioritize constituent engagement?
- Do your constituents perceive parliament to be open, transparent, and committed to understanding their views?
- Does public polling or survey data indicate a high level of citizen trust in parliament?

## Driving reform

Once you have taken stock of how well parliament supports meaningful engagement with citizens and where the biggest gaps are, you can begin to formulate a plan for driving needed reforms.

Much like with your legislative or oversight agenda, there are a few best practices to employ for developing and executing a successful reform agenda:

- Identify the most needed and impactful changes that you believe parliament should adopt in order to truly represent the people as a transparent, inclusive, and responsive institution.
- Seek allies for your agenda. Find other MPs and CSOs who share your concerns and objectives and work together to make the case for change.
- Build a broad base of support, but put special focus on convincing those in decision-making roles who have the power to make the needed reforms.
- Don't reinvent the wheel. Identify existing forums, such a reform caucus, that you can join.
- Never forget that reform is a long, continuous process. Be committed to this effort for the long haul and do not get discouraged by setbacks.
- Always be an example. The best way to drive change is to embody the values and engage in the practices for which you are advocating – and demonstrate the impact that they can bring about for your colleagues.

### **SERBIA: STRENGTHENING PARLIAMENT THROUGH MEANINGFUL CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT<sup>20</sup>**

By implementing several institution-wide reforms to make parliament more transparent and accountable to the people, the National Assembly of Serbia strengthened its position as an oversight and legislative body.

#### **WHAT STEPS DID THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY TAKE?**

- Passed its first Law on Parliament and new Rules of Procedure with transparency and accountability provisions, including provisions for public hearings to review legislation and monitor implementation.
- Established cross-party caucuses.
- Hosted field hearings throughout the country.

#### **WHAT DID THESE REFORMS ACHIEVE?**

- Forged direct ties between parliament and the public.
- Earned stronger public trust in and support for parliament, as demonstrated in public opinion polling.
- Increased the effectiveness of legislation in addressing local and national issues.
- Strengthened parliament's position in demanding greater oversight of the executive. Significantly improved budget oversight through a new portal that regularly posts expenditures from the Ministry of Finance, as well as funds available to MPs.

## **CHILE: A MODEL FOR IMPLEMENTING A PARLIAMENT-WIDE ACTION PLAN FOR LEGISLATIVE OPENNESS<sup>21</sup>**

When the Open Government Partnership was established in 2011, with support from UNDP the National Congress of Chile became one of the first parliaments to develop and implement an action plan to make the institution more open and responsive to the public.

### **THE ACTION PLAN MADE 10 COMMITMENTS TO THE CHILEAN PEOPLE, WITH THREE CORE AREAS OF FOCUS**

- Improving public services.
- Increasing public trust.
- Increasing institutional responsibility.

### **WHAT SPECIFIC STEPS DID THE NATIONAL CONGRESS TAKE TO IMPROVE TRANSPARENCY, INCLUSION, AND RESPONSIVENESS?**

- Consulted with the public on their priorities.
- Established new codes of conduct for MPs.
- Adopted new structures and content for parliamentary websites.
- Commissioned studies for further insights, including exploring new mechanisms of consultation with, and participation of, citizens in the legislative process.

<sup>21</sup> 2017 Global Parliamentary Report <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2017-10/global-parliamentary-report-2017-parliamentary-oversight-parliaments-power-hold-government-account>

# ANNEX: KEY RESOURCES

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**Agora: Portal for Parliamentary Development**

<http://www.agora-parl.org/>

**Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments**

<https://www.asgp.co/>

**Democracy Reporting International**

<https://democracy-reporting.org/>

**Global Centre for ICT in Parliament**

<https://eldis.org/organisation/A42572>

**House Democracy Partnership**

<https://hdp.house.gov/>

**International Republican Institute**

<https://www.iri.org/>

**Inter-Parliamentary Union**

<https://www.ipu.org/>

**National Endowment for Democracy**

<https://www.ned.org/>

**National Democratic Institute**

<https://www.ndi.org/>

**Open Government Partnership**

<https://www.opengovpartnership.org/>

**ParlAmericas**

<https://parlAmericas.org/>

**The Parliamentary Network**

<https://www.parlnet.org/>

**Westminster Foundation for Democracy**

<https://www.wfd.org/>

**Winning to Governing Effectively**

<https://www.movedemocracy.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/02/From-Winning-to-Governing-Effectively-IRI.pdf>

**World Bank**

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/parliamentarians>



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