

Research on Virtual Parliaments and Hybrid Sitings

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How Parliaments Around the World Have Been Functioning During the Pandemic

Parliaments around the world are continuing to meet in three main ways:

1. Physically, but with restrictions. These restrictions may include fewer sittings, fewer parliamentarians and staff in the building, and changes to the venue of parliamentary meetings (for example, using a bigger room that allows for social distancing).
2. Virtually, using remote working methods.
3. Not meeting at all. Some parliaments, such as New Zealand, temporarily changed their operating procedures so that a special committee sat, rather than the whole house.

What tools are being used to support virtual parliamentary meetings or sessions?

Online videoconferencing tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Cisco Web Meetings and Google Hangouts are popular choices. Any tool must offer stability, be capable of hosting a large number of participants simultaneously and provide functionality for a moderator to control them. For example, the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies has held virtual plenaries using Zoom with over 500 members connected.

What are the security concerns?

Security is an important consideration for any application chosen to support the work of parliament. Developing internal home-grown tools are one way to mitigate security risks; however, these take time to put in place. If using cloud solutions, parliaments need to understand where data is stored; if it is outside of a parliamentary cloud, security and legal implications must be considered and mitigated.

What about security around voting remotely?

There are important security issues around voting. For example:

- How to ensure that MP votes are cast legitimately: In Brazil, MPs must have a device registered with an internal application used for voting.
- How to ensure that all members can vote: Spain has a remote voting tool which provides an asynchronous voting function. Rather than voting in real time, voting is typically open for a two-hour period before the session so that MPs can vote for alternative or amendment proposals and for a two-hour period following the session so that they can vote on the final text.
- How to ensure that MPs have sufficient connectivity: The European Parliament's use of email is a simple, low-bandwidth and reliable solution.

Case Study: How the European Parliament is Functioning during the Pandemic

Members of the European Parliament can be present unless they are sick or have travelled to risk areas in the past two weeks. Social distancing measures are in place within the Chamber. Those who do not physically attend can participate remotely. On March 26, the European Parliament put in place a procedure to vote from a distance for the first time ever. Voting previously required a physical presence; now, members can vote by email. Members receive ballot forms electronically, which they complete and return via email. Amendments are voted in a single ballot.

How Some Commonwealth Parliaments Have Adapted to COVID-19

The Maldives:

The 87 lawmakers of the People's Majlis have been using Microsoft 365 to debate, legislate and cast votes since the sitting on March 30. Lawmakers joined the session, which was broadcast on television in real time, from their respective homes. According to officials, an 'online parliament' rehearsal was held on the preceding Saturday to help members get accustomed to the software and to tackle any technical issues.

South Africa:

The Parliament of South Africa has amended its rules to enable the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces to operate remotely. Committees from both Houses have been meeting remotely, mostly through the MS Teams platform. Virtual committee meetings are also broadcast live on TV, YouTube and Twitter.

United Kingdom:

On April 22, the House of Commons issued temporary orders to put in place a remote voting system. This system was based on the existing MemberHub platform, used for the remote tabling of questions and motions by MPs and accredited staff. Access to the system was via a single sign-on with multi-factor authentication. On May 20, at the UK Government's instigation, the House of Commons voted along party lines to end hybrid proceedings and revert to voting in lobbies.

Australia:

Members of the Australian Federal Parliament have been practising social distancing measures and adhering to a policy of restricted member attendance in the Chamber. On May 12, the Speaker of the House of Representatives acknowledged that due to high numbers of absent members, parliamentary pairing (where an MP who is absent and who is expected to vote on one side in a particular question is "paired" with an MP who is expected to vote on the other side and who is either also absent or who deliberately does not vote in order to cancel out the effect of the other MP's absence) would be necessary and commonplace for the foreseeable future. This way, the result of votes would not be determined by the absence of particular MPs and the voting intentions of absent members could be recorded.

Tanzania:

The National Assembly of Tanzania has restricted the number of Members who can attend parliamentary sessions to 150 (out of a total 393 Members). Other members can follow debates on TV in designated rooms and vote electronically. All Members of Parliament have been given tablets that they can use to ask questions online. Nurses are stationed at the entrances to Parliament to check the temperature of all those entering.

Seychelles:

The National Assembly of the Seychelles have reduced the number of staff and members required to work in the building, with only emergency matters being considered in the chamber. Parliamentary staff have the opportunity to work on a rotational basis during sittings, with those who are considered at high

risk remaining at home for the foreseeable future. During non-sitting days, the majority of staff are able work from home and have access to laptops provided by the Secretariat. Communication is carried out primarily via email and private WhatsApp groups for staff and Members.

Countries that Are Holding Virtual or Hybrid Sitings

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the way parliaments work. See the chart below to learn more about countries that are utilizing hybrid and virtual sittings during the pandemic.

Country	How Parliamentary Sitings Have Adapted to the Pandemic
Argentina	The President of the Chamber of Deputies has approved working remotely through a digital platform and videoconferencing on Zoom. The videoconferences are broadcast live on Diputados TV. In the Senate, committee meetings will take place via videoconference and will be broadcast on the channel Senado TV.
Belgium	In March, the Belgian House of Representatives amended its Rules of Procedure to allow Members, under certain conditions, to be considered as "present" at selected committee and plenary meetings even when they are not physically in the chamber, and to vote electronically or by email. For the plenary sitting, voting is through a digital voting system developed by the parliament's IT department available to members physically present or remotely.
Bhutan	Meetings in the Bhutan parliament have been limited. Virtual meetings take place via Google software. Any physical meetings respect social distancing measures.
Brazil	Brazil has passed a new resolution which enables the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate to work remotely using video-conferencing and virtual management tools. The system allows MPs to register to a session and shows all phases of the legislative process including the bill under discussion, amendments, the results of each voting round, speeches, and committee agendas.
Chile	The Senate has passed a law allowing it to hold sessions remotely, using the appropriate technology to allow debates and remote voting. The Chamber of Deputies has limited its plenary and committee meetings. In-person and remote voting is through an application developed by its own technical teams. Videoconferencing is through the software Zoom.
Estonia	The Parliament of Estonia (the Riigikogu) has reorganized its work. The committees of the Riigikogu have been meeting once a week with priority given to teleworking. Regarding committees meeting remotely, the Constitutional Committee of the Riigikogu agreed that the current legislation may be interpreted to allow teleworking if all relevant conditions for participating in the sitting, like making remarks, asking questions and voting, are ensured.
France	The French Senate is holding reduced plenary sittings – only one plenary sitting a week, limited to 10 questions for the government. They are attended only by the authors of questions and presidents of political groups. The National Assembly of France has reduced the number of its meetings and is holding them remotely. Remote meetings

	(audio and video-conferencing) are regulated legally and, while remote voting is not legally authorized, committees can carry out debates and hearings.
Greece	During the crisis, the Parliament has decided to adapt its work to avoid having too many Members present at the same time. The Standing Committees meet when necessary both physically and remotely. Regarding voting during plenary sessions, Members of Parliament enter and exit the Plenary room one by one to avoid overcrowding. Postal votes are also accepted. A remote system of meetings was developed, tested and ready to run two days before the quarantine started.
Latvia	On May 26, the Parliament of Latvia (the Saeima) began using a new e-Saeima platform that allows plenary sittings to be held remotely, with MPs debating and voting on items in the plenary agenda in real time. Although MPs used the tool from different rooms in the Parliament building during the sitting, it is set up to allow them to participate from outside the building. The e-Saeima platform can be accessed through a dedicated website, using e-signatures. The interface displays the plenary agenda and the list of MPs participating in the debate. Upon activation of the voting mode, MPs have 30 seconds to vote through one of three buttons: “for”, “against”, and “abstain”. During this time, MPs may also change their vote. When the voting is over, the results are displayed on the screen according to the seating plan of the Plenary Chamber. Live information about the sitting, including the progress of the consideration of items, the list of speakers and voting results, is available online on the Saeima website. The work of the Saeima remains open to the public, and the remote sitting can be followed live on the Saeima website and the Parliament’s Facebook account.
Monaco	MPs from the National Council unanimously agreed to hold meetings that are a mix of virtual and physical, respecting social distancing. MPs can vote with a show of hands or a verbal nominal vote. The National Council uses Cisco’s Webex Meetings for videoconferencing.
Mongolia	The State Great Hural (Parliament) of Mongolia held the opening of its spring session on April 6 using electronic technology for the first time. Members of parliament attended the session in five chambers, seated at pre-assigned desks at a distance of at least 1.5 metres, using intramural TV conferencing system inside the parliament building.
Namibia	The National Assembly has been meeting virtually for the first time in its history, in compliance with emergency regulations that limit the number of lawmakers present in the chamber. Meetings are taking place with 50 members present in the chamber, which ensures a quorum of voting members. Members who were not physically present were connected via an online video link in separate meeting rooms in the parliament building.
Paraguay	The Paraguayan Parliament modified its rules to allow sessions to be held remotely. The Senate and the Chamber of Deputies will be holding sessions using Zoom. Some sessions are being held in the Parliament building to deal with urgent matters, using large rooms with fewer MPs, so they can sit two metres away from each other.

Poland	The Polish Sejm will allow parliamentarians to vote remotely. The Sejm statute does not permit holding sessions online, so the Presidium passed a resolution to change the statute specifically for COVID-19. Meetings are held in a mixed system. Some senators are in the meeting room, others in two other rooms in the Senate building, and others are taking part in the meeting remotely from home. Each deputy will receive a video clip showing how to connect to the remote session, and their identity will be authenticated via text messages. Those staying at home will be able to ask questions and express their opinions.
Romania	The Parliament of Romania is holding plenary and committee meetings remotely. The Standing Orders of the Senate have been amended to provide for the holding of remote meetings. Remote plenary sittings are broadcast live on the Senate's webpage. Voting in plenary sittings is done over the phone by roll call.
Spain	The Cortes (Parliament) of Spain has put in place video-conferencing and remote voting was for deputies who cannot attend in person. Remote voting is restricted and was already regulated for circumstances such as pregnancy, maternity or paternity leave or serious illness.

Sources

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