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THE FUTURE OF CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT WITH CONGRESS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON MODERNIZATION AND INNOVATION

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

December 17, 2025

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THE FUTURE OF CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT WITH CONGRESS

December 17, 2025

SUBCOMMITTEE ON MODERNIZATION AND INNOVATION,
COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION,
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:01 a.m., in room 1310, Longworth House Office Building, Hon. Stephanie Bice [Chair of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Bice, Carey, Torres, and Morelle.

Staff present: Michael Platt, Staff Director; Rachel Collins, General Counsel; Abby Salter, Deputy General Counsel; Jordan Wilson, Director of Member Services, Modernization and Innovation; Marian Currinder, Senior Professional Staff; Kristen Monterroso, Director of Operations; Annemarie Cake, Professional Staff and Deputy Clerk; Jamie Fleet, Minority Staff Director; Sarah Nasta, Minority Senior Advisor and Director of Outreach; Kwame Newton, Minority Oversight Counsel.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. STEPHANIE BICE, CHAIRWOMAN OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON MODERNIZATION AND INNOVATION, A U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FROM OKLAHOMA

Chairwoman BICE. Good morning. The Subcommittee on Modernization and Innovation will come to order.

The title of today's hearing is "The Future of Constituent Engagement with Congress." I note that a quorum is present.

Without objection, the Chair may declare a recess at any time. Also, without objection, the hearing record will remain open for 5 legislative days so that Members may submit any materials they wish to be included therein.

At the beginning of the 119th Congress, we decided to update the Subcommittee's name to the Subcommittee on Modernization and Innovation. The behind-the-scenes work of closing out recommendations made by the Select Committee on Modernization continues, but we also need to look forward and determine how we can ensure that House technologies and systems continue to evolve instead of getting stuck in time. This is where innovation comes into play. Bringing Microsoft Copilot into the House community is a great example of how the Subcommittee is leaning into this work.

For the past couple of months, we have worked closely with the CAO on a comprehensive plan to provide Copilot licenses and targeted training to our House staff. As of today, 150 Member offices have licenses, and in January, licenses will be available to every

Member, Committee, Leadership, and House support office. Integrating AI technologies into House operations is really a game-changing first step in making the House a more efficient and effective institution.

Constituent engagement, the topic of today's hearing, is another area that is ripe for innovation. There are all kinds of innovative tools and technologies that we could be using right now rather than scrambling to play catch-up later.

Communicating with our constituents is absolutely essential for doing our jobs, the jobs we were elected to do. Assisting with casework, responding to questions, and explaining our positions on the issues of the day requires interacting with our constituents in effective and meaningful ways. As we all know, the communications landscape is evolving at a rapid pace, and there are now many different ways to engage and share information.

Our constituents are exposed to new technologies daily, whether they are scheduling appointments, ordering food, or using AI tools that work. The forms of communication they encounter outside of Congress are much less common inside of Congress. Rather than assume that they will read our letters and emails, we should figure out how to meet our constituents where they are at today, tomorrow, and into the future. If we do not begin to incorporate new and emerging technologies and platforms into our constituent outreach strategies, we risk losing the ability to effectively connect with the people we need to hear from the most.

For decades, the House has relied on a small number of constituent management systems, or CMS, for handling Members' constituent engagement and outreach needs. While these systems have added different features and upgrades over time, I do not think that any of us would call these systems cutting edge. That is not at all a criticism as much as it is a reflection of the fact that the market here is limited and it lacks the kind of competition that is typically needed to spark innovation.

All of this presents us with a real opportunity to reimagine constituent engagement. Members represent vastly different districts and constituencies, so maybe a, quote, build-your-own system makes more sense than a one-size-fits-all. That way Members could choose technologies and platforms that best meet the needs of their districts and constituents.

More options could encourage real innovation, and that is really what we want. I am looking forward to learning more about public views on the current and future states of constituent engagement as well as what other countries and States are doing that is innovative and effective. The discussion today will help inform the Subcommittee's exploration of how the House can innovate to improve how we connect with all of the people that we represent.

I would now like to recognize Ranking Member Torres for the purpose of providing an opening statement.

[The prepared statement of Chairwoman Bice follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF CHAIRWOMAN OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON MODERNIZATION AND INNOVATION CHAIRWOMAN BICE

At the beginning of the 119th Congress, we decided to update the Subcommittee's name to the Subcommittee on Modernization and Innovation. The behind-the-scenes work of closing out recommendations made by the Select Committee on Modernization continues, but we also need to look forward and figure out how to ensure that the House's technologies and systems continue to evolve instead of getting stuck in time. This is where innovation comes into play. Bringing Microsoft Copilot to the House community is a great example of how the Subcommittee is leaning into this work.

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OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. NORMA TORRES, RANKING MEMBER OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON MODERNIZATION AND INNOVATION, A U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FROM CALIFORNIA

Mrs. TORRES. Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Chairwoman Bice, and thank you so much to our distinguished witnesses for taking the time to share your insights with us today.

I am glad to be here working together with my colleagues on these—and experts on the most fundamental goals of an elected Representative. How can we listen to our constituents, and how can we build the trust that we need with them?

I worry that faith in Government is broken. We know that too many people feel like their Government fails them, that we just

simply do not listen to them, that they do not hear from us, they do not unders—we do not understand their complicated lives, and that whatever we do does not help them with their challenges. When they do reach out to us, they feel—will they feel heard? I am not sure that that is a true statement. I think that at least the constituents in my district want to feel that there is a human on the other side representing them.

I represent a district about an hour east of Los Angeles, where Latinos make up more than two-thirds of the population. At a time when Americans need to be able to connect with their elected Representatives in a straightforward, efficient way, the disconnect between Washington and my constituents in the Inland Empire can often feel as an uncrossable divide.

This hearing is an opportunity to confront the reality of record low trust in Government and determine how Congress can improve its approach to constituent engagement through modernization and innovation. What I do believe is that we need to meet people where they are. The goal is to create systems that make it easier for people to be heard. We need tools to better listen, to better hear the American people, and to better serve them.

I must say very loud and clear that a faster system that still excludes people is not progress. We need to design tools that are accessible, transparent, and responsible to the lived experiences of our constituents. These new methods of engagement must also protect constituents' privacy and personal information when necessary.

If Congress is serious about strengthening democracy and encouraging civic participation, we must build the tools that do not just work on paper in Washington, but they actually work in our communities. These tools need to work in practice for every American who needs to be heard, because when a constituent finally takes that step to reach out to their Government, that moment matters. How we respond may determine whether they ever try again.

A good example of a broken system—and that is not just here in Congress—this year, as of August of this year, we had returned over $23 million to our constituents. We can say congratulations to my office, to my employees, to the caseworkers. I want to look at it as a failure of agencies that have failed to respond in a timely manner and a respectful manner and have failed to truly hear the needs of that constituent. Shouldn't take a Member of Congress to have to play lobbyist for our constituents. If they deserve certain benefits, they should get them. A system that could help me deliver even more money to my constituents is what I am here for.

I am going to turn it back to our chairwoman, and I look forward to listening to the conversation today.

[The prepared statement of Ranking Member Torres follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON MODERNIZATION AND INNOVATION NORMA TORRES

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Chairwoman BICE. Thank you, Ranking Member Torres.

Our first witness is Dr. Michael Neblo, director of the Ohio State University Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability, IDEA, an alumni-endowed professor at Okla—I am sorry—at Ohio State University. I have Oklahoma State University on the brain. I just graduated a child from there on Saturday, so my apologies—at Ohio State University.

Dr. Neblo has designed "Deliberative Town Halls" for the U.S. Congress, the Chilean Constitutional Convention, and the Australian, Nigerian, and U.K. legislatures. He has further projects planned for Malawi, Korea, and the European Parliament and Commission.

Our next witness is Ms. Aubrey Wilson. Aubrey is Director of Global Initiatives for the nonpartisan, nonprofit organization POPVOX Foundation. In this role, she leads the Digital Parliaments Project, which is focused on directly assisting legislatures around the world in adopting technology to improve operations, transparency, and continuity. In recent years, this work has had a heavy emphasis on AI, leading Aubrey to present AI training to parliamentarians around the world.

Prior to joining POPVOX, Aubrey served as a deputy staff director and director of oversight and modernization for the Committee on House Administration. Welcome back.

Our next witness is Dr. Beth Noveck. Dr. Noveck is the chief AI strategist for the State of New Jersey and the founder of InnovateUS, which delivers free AI training to States and cities

across the United States. Her newest book is "Reboot: The Race to Save Democracy with AI," that will appear with the Yale Press this summer.

Our final witness is Ken Ward, senior director of House Digital Services. Drawing from his Hill experience and computer science degree from Georgetown University, Mr. Ward founded Fireside 21 in 2007. He led the company for over a decade as it deployed a broad scope of constituent products still used by House offices today. Mr. Ward returned to the Hill in 2020 and has since led a team of technologists to deliver high-impact technology products for the House community. Welcome. We are glad to have you.

Thank you to the panel of witnesses for all being with us today. Please remember to press the button on the microphone in front of you so that the green light is on. When you begin to speak, the timer in front of you will turn green, and after 4 minutes it will turn yellow. When the red light comes on, your 5 minutes have expired, and we would ask you to please kindly wrap up.

At this time, I now recognize Dr. Neblo for 5 minutes.

STATEMENTS OF DR. MICHAEL NEBLO, PROFESSOR, THE OHIO STATE INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY; MRS. AUBREY WILSON, DIRECTOR OF GLOBAL INITIATIVES, POPVOX FOUNDATION; DR. BETH SIMONE NOVECK, CHIEF AI STRATEGIST, STATE OF NEW JERSEY; AND MR. KEN WARD, DIRECTOR OF HOUSE DIGITAL SERVICES, CAO

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL NEBLO

Mr. NEBLO. Chairwoman Bice, Ranking Member Torres, Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today.

Our Founders famously established a republic, fearing direct democracy would lose sight of the common good. Less famously, they feared that if Government were too indirect, Congress would lose touch with the common people. They proposed capping the number of residents per district. Instead, Congress capped the number of districts. Americans today believe Congress has lost touch. You represent 280 times the Founders' limit. How could you stay in touch?

This hearing turns that rhetorical question into a real question. How could future engagement help you stay in touch? How can technology help reconnect Congress to constituents?

We partnered with this Committee and the House Digital Services on a survey of 1,000 citizens to find answers. At best, only one in five contacted their Member last year. What about the other four? Their silence does not mean they are satisfied because only 13 percent trust Congress to do what is right. Are they apathetic? No. The vast majority are frustrated. They are frustrated because they believe Congress does not care what people like them think and only listens to organized interests and party activists, so they see no reason to engage.

We have worked with enough offices to know Members care very much. As average citizens withdraw, however, only organized interests and party activists remain to tell Congress what they want. We have fallen into a self-reenforcing cycle.

There is good news. Governments around the world have used new approaches in technology to engage citizens in meaningful two-way communication. We could easily adapt them, and citizens are eager to try.

Unlike apathy, frustration creates energy for change. Only 9 percent of our survey respondents said they would not be willing to engage if they were invited to what they thought was an authentic and consequential forum. Our research shows that is not cheap talk. When we invite ordinary constituents to online deliberative town halls, previously disengaged citizens prepare, show up, and contribute more than those who already call your office. They find the forums so transformative that 94 percent say they are, quote, very valuable for our democracy and they want to participate in more.

Think about that. In an era when only 13 percent of citizens trust Congress, you can create spaces where 94 percent of citizens say the experience is so worthwhile they would do it again. That 81-percent gap tells us everything about what is possible.

Participating Members and staff have also found the forums valuable but simply lack the time and resources for ongoing deliberation. Yet in our surveys, citizens rated such forums as the most legitimate and effective way to communicate. Mass emails and social media scored lower, and at the bottom, 80 percent of citizens told us that AI chatbots were not acceptable for matters of substance.

This finding is crucial. AI can transform how staff manage the deluge of routine requests. It is a deluge. Unless we use the freed up time the right way, AI will not dent the core problem. A customer service model makes sense for many important constituent service tasks: scheduling Capitol tours, tallying issue sentiments from correspondents, et cetera.

Think about what customer service implies about representative Government. You own the company, and citizens can take or leave what you are selling. An office could have stellar customer service and constituents will still find that problematic. Lobbyists might be clients of Congress, but citizens want to be partners in self-government. I know that most Members want to be such partners too.

Engagement that treats them like partners produces lasting gains in their political knowledge, trust, voting rate, civility, and willingness to work together. These patterns hold in forums with over 7,000 citizens. Mr. Kilmer and Mr. Timmons' national forum with the predecessor to this Committee rolled back 38 years worth of rising partisan animosity, the largest decline in polarization ever documented.

Citizens also reward and encourage legislative expertise and collegiality in these formats. We have had similar success with official forums as part of the Chilean Constitutional Convention, the Good Friday Accords in Northern Ireland, and many others, with several more projects planned.

Citizens are so frustrated with representative democracy that they are prepared to work around it through referenda and the like, and an alarming number are now willing to consider alternatives to democracy itself. Like our Founders, the vast majority would rather work with and through their Representatives—that is, if we reimagine what that entails.

I am so grateful for this opportunity to testify because I believe the future of American democracy depends much more than we realize on the future of constituent engagement. The technology exists, the models are proven, your constituents are ready and waiting if you are ready to meet them. I know that all of us on this panel stand ready to help you do that.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Neblo follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MICHAEL NEBLO

The Future of Constituent Engagement

Congressional Testimony

Dr. Michael Neblo

December 12, 2025



Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Executive Summary

Americans believe Congress has lost touch. Each House member, however, now represents nearly 280 times the number of people James Madison proposed as a limit to districts. How could members of Congress stay in touch? Only one in seven enfranchised citizens contacted their representative last year. For most, their silence does not imply satisfaction — it signals their frustration. Citizens believe Congress does not care what people like them think, so they see no reason to engage. Meanwhile, only organized interests and party activists remain to tell Congress what they want. We have fallen into a self-reinforcing cycle sliding toward a crisis of legitimacy.

But there's good news: citizens are eager for change. Unlike apathy, frustration creates energy. Our recent survey finds more than 70 percent of Americans are *willing* to engage with their members of Congress. When offered authentic forums for two-way communication, past research confirms that overwhelming majorities say the experience is valuable and want to do it again. In an era when only 13 percent trust Congress, that gap tells us something important about what's possible.

This testimony presents evidence showing what citizens want from Congress, sketches proven models of deliberative engagement to help them get it, and explains how advances in technology can help improve the future of constituent engagement. Congress can realize a modernized engagement routine that rebuilds trust and legitimacy by integrating practices of deliberative communication, particularly with forums and processes supported, not supplanted, by AI.

Introduction

Our founders famously established a republic, fearing that direct democracy would lose sight of the common good. Less famously, they also worried that if republican government was too indirect, Congress would lose touch with common people. Madison warned that a representative body that was not close enough to its constituents risked drifting toward aristocracy. Today, members of Congress represent 280 times more people than the Founders' proposed limit. How could you stay in touch at that scale?

Our work turns that rhetorical question into a genuine question. Trust in Congress remains near historic lows. The main methods of constituent outreach — newsletters, social media blasts, and automated responses — are not satisfying constituents. As Desmond Tutu once said, "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the water. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in." Constituent engagement falters upstream from capacity constraints. The problem emerges from mismatches between the perceptions and postures of citizens and officials toward representation. Political institutions have struggled to evolve at the pace of the problems they need to address. Many citizens feel the political system does not reflect their priorities, eroding trust and undermining legitimacy. Yet our research consistently shows that citizens' willingness to engage remains strong when opportunities are meaningful, deliberative, and respectful. The challenge is not citizen apathy but design. How can we create systems that promote genuine, reciprocal communication? Our collaboration with this committee and House Digital Services contributes to that effort by examining how Americans think about interacting with Congress and assessing how technologies — from AI to outreach innovations — can create meaningful channels for engagement. We draw on new survey data from 1,001 US adults fielded between August 20 and October 2, 2025. The results show that while skepticism toward institutions runs deep, Americans remain open to experimentation and willing to engage in novel ways, especially when opportunities feel authentic, transparent, and consequential.

We combine these findings with evidence from nineteen years of field experiments on Deliberative Town Halls and our recent research on AI's role in public opinion. Together, they provide specific, practical guidance for Members and staff on processes that can deliver meaningful, responsive communication with constituents. The goal is to reimagine how Congress communicates, but even more urgently, how it *listens*. New technologies can help representatives synthesize large volumes of citizen input. Used in the right way, AI has the potential to scale human interaction rather than replacing it. That must be the goal — to build a system of engagement that scales authentic interaction between citizens and their elected representatives.

Frustration, Not Apathy

Public confidence in Congress remains deeply pessimistic. The share of Americans giving Congress an unfavorable rating reached its highest point in more than four decades of polling. Our survey shows the same: 54 percent somewhat or strongly disapprove. Just 14 percent trust Congress to do what is right most of the time. These findings hold across demographics: race, gender, age, and party affiliation. This widespread negative perception of Congress as an institution contrasts with somewhat more favorable (though declining) views of individual representatives: 41 percent rated their own House member positively, while 27 percent rated them poorly (Pew Research Center, 2023). These patterns persist across party lines, although partisans tend to view representatives who share their affiliation more positively.

Who Contacts Congress?

Despite widespread dissatisfaction, direct constituent engagement remains modest. Approximately 22 percent of U.S. adults in our survey report having contacted their Member of Congress in the last year. This aligns with previous research (Pew Research Center, 2018), but self-selection and over-reporting of civic engagement suggest that the true contact rate is likely about one in seven. Low engagement appears nonpartisan: 25 percent of Democrats, 19 percent of Republicans, and 18 percent of Independents reported contacting a member in the past year. Even this modest outreach generates volumes that regularly overwhelm congressional staff (Goldschmidt & Sinkaus, 2021).

Education remains one of the most consistent predictors of political engagement. Individuals with college degrees or higher are more likely to report contacting elected officials, as reflected in our 2025 data and longstanding civic engagement research (Verba et al., 1995). While education can improve engagement rates (Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022), pervasive disengagement reflects factors beyond individual-level characteristics. For many Americans, structural differences rooted in income, race, geographic isolation, or limited social capital shape both the likelihood of participation and the belief that their voice matters (Leighley & Nagler, 2014; Verba et al., 1995). These disparities are reinforced by gaps in access to civic infrastructure.

Among those who do contact Congress, most use low-cost digital channels, including email, responding to polls, and submitting online petition forms. These tools lower barriers to entry but can dilute the perceived authenticity or salience of communications in staff's eyes. Offices are caught between rising message volumes and limited mechanisms for really understanding what constituents are trying to communicate. This produces communication overload without corresponding gains in representation (Bimber et al., 2015; Goldschmidt & Sinkaus, 2021; Karpf, 2016).

Barriers to Communicating with Congress

It is equally vital to ask *why* people choose not to contact elected officials. The gap between dissatisfaction and outreach reflects both motivational barriers, like low trust or alienation, and structural barriers, like unequal access to civic knowledge, social networks, income, or time. Structural inequalities also shape who feels empowered to reach out (Leighley & Nagler, 2014; Verba et al., 1995).

In our survey, respondents who have not contacted representatives cite both motivational and structural hurdles. More than 40 percent believe members do not care about their concerns. About 35 percent think members will not change their minds. This suggests disengagement is not apathy; rather, it stems from the belief that contacting Congress will not lead to being heard or receiving a response. This perception may be rooted in lived experience and broader patterns of institutional distrust (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Leighley & Nagler, 2014).

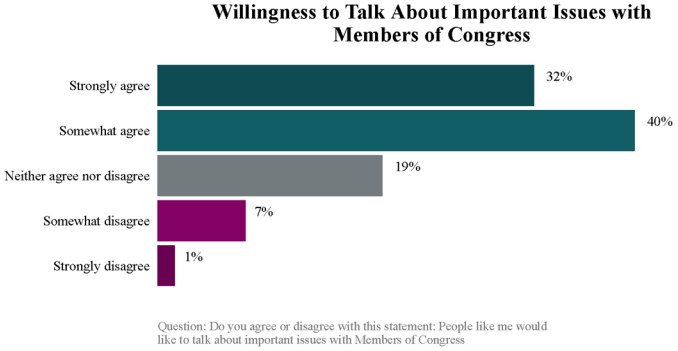
Structural hurdles matter too. More than 47 percent find it too difficult or time-consuming to contact congressional offices. A majority think it is difficult to let members know where they stand on an issue. Only respondents with post-graduate education are equally divided on whether contacting offices is easy or difficult. We find echoes of these hurdles in the open-ended responses about what communication with members should be like. To analyze the responses, we used AI text analysis to identify emerging themes. Several state that members "don't care what people say." Respondents articulated broader distrust and viewed members as disconnected elites more concerned with their own political trajectories. Overall, respondents emphasize the gap between members and the constituents they represent. These doubts threaten the health of representative democracy.

The mismatch between the public's perception of barriers and the institution's experience of over-

load reveals a deeper breakdown in the feedback loop between representatives and the represented. Lowering barriers through digital communication has proven insufficient without more substantive reforms to how Congress listens and responds. To address this democratic gap, we must examine the underlying motivational and structural factors that prevent equitable and sustained engagement.

Citizens are Willing to Engage

More than 70 percent of respondents are willing to engage more directly with elected officials on important issues. This willingness is not just theoretical. Our experimental research consistently shows that when Americans and citizens globally are given opportunities for dialogue — such as online Deliberative Town Halls that connect citizens across ideological and demographic lines — they participate at high rates (Neblo et al., 2010, 2018).

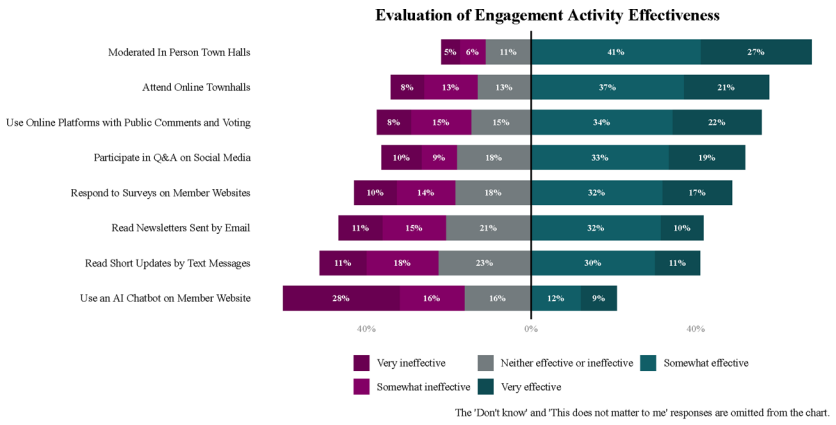


Despite frustrations with the institution, many *believe* Congress wants to hear from them. Congressional staff affirm this, noting that personalized constituent input influences their work. This suggests the public's frustration exists alongside real opportunities. Many Americans have a latent willingness to engage that can be activated. Again, frustration should not be read as apathy — it is a response to unmet democratic expectations. Meaningful exchanges are possible; disengagement is more about a lack of credible channels for communication.

When profound changes occur in communication technologies, what is communicated and how it is communicated should evolve as well. Adopting new digital tools can transform how congressional offices operate, increasing access and streamlining responses. However, adoption without adaptation to two-way, authentic dialogue risks perpetuating the disconnect it seeks to resolve. Without design choices that emphasize listening, learning, and collaboration, both the public and officials stay caught in a cycle of frustration, each seeing the other as inattentive or unresponsive. Gains in efficiency cannot replace the relational work of representation.

Citizens Want Two-Way Communication

Our survey asked respondents to evaluate various potential engagement methods. Most report that town halls are the most effective. A majority also believes online platforms with public commenting or Q&A sessions on social media can work well. These formats prioritize two-way communication, direct questions, and genuine dialogue.



Related research in the U.S. and abroad shows that citizens who participate in democratic innovations like Deliberative Town Halls, they report higher trust in representatives and institutions (Minozzi et al., 2015; Neblo et al., 2010, 2018). This supports established findings that citizens want meaningful opportunities to be heard and to know their input matters (Fung, 2006; Neblo et al., 2010). In Nigeria, for instance, Deliberative Town Halls shifted participants' priorities toward democratic reforms and strengthened trust in MPs. Participants felt a renewed sense of civic belonging with one participant saying, "This was the first time I've ever felt like a real citizen instead of a pauper going to the Big Man."

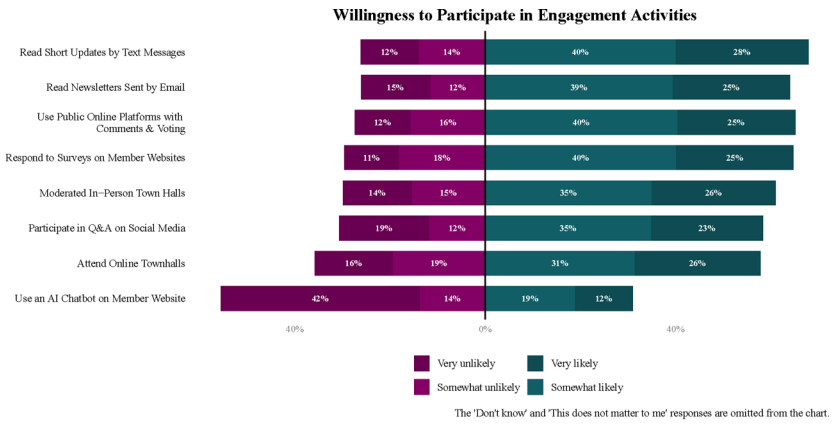
Respondents are skeptical about some adaptations. Only 21 percent think AI chatbots would be somewhat or very effective. Customer service centers are increasingly deploying chatbots to streamline interactions, provide 24/7 support, and efficiently handle routine inquiries. However, recent research shows that half of Americans are skeptical, citing issues like misinformation, bias, lack of accountability, and reduced human oversight (Bateyko, 2023; Choi, 2024; Ovide, 2025). To foster trust, transparent communication about the purpose, ethical safeguards, and data privacy is essential.

Legitimacy and Willingness to Participate

Many congressional offices have experimented with town halls, interactive online platforms, and social media-based dialogues. Most citizens are willing to consider participating in new forms of exchange. We find that a majority would be very or somewhat likely to participate in all proposed activities except using AI chatbots.

Although most say they would consider participating in more robust innovations, social desirability bias causes respondents to over report civic engagement compared to their actual actions (Ansolabehere & Hersh, 2012; Hanmer et al., 2014). Latent interest does not ensure follow-through. This highlights the importance of institutional designs that turn intentions into action.

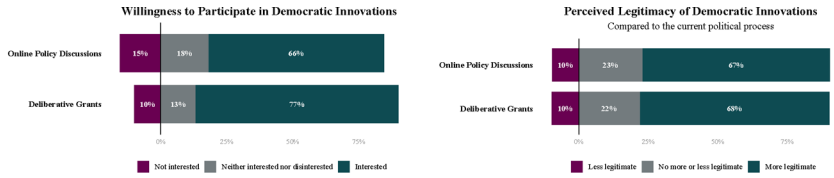
Respondents are much less likely to want engagement through AI chatbots. This highlights broader skepticism toward automation in governance, even as citizens express interest in more convenient or accessible contact options (Dreksler et al., 2025). While digital tools can increase capacity and



lessen administrative burdens, perceived authenticity and human reciprocity are key to building and maintaining trust (OECD, 2021, 2024). Improving systems that focus on casework, and responses to constituent communications may reduce staff burden and boost responsiveness. Reluctance to engage with AI suggests a need for reassurance that communication with Congress is meaningful, mutual, and impactful. Successful innovation requires not only accessible tools but also thoughtful design, transparency, and facilitation to make participation feel impactful.

Beyond asking about engagement modalities, we asked about more innovative types of citizen engagement. Respondents expressed enthusiasm for participatory and deliberative modes when the process was clearly organized and accessible. Over 70 percent expressed interest in giving input on which local programs should be eligible for federal funding. Support for involvement in policy discussions also garnered strong interest, with more than half expressing interest. Respondents also believed that these processes were more legitimate and genuinely representative than the existing system.

Our results echo studies suggesting that while the public is often unfamiliar with deliberative processes, they tend to view them favorably when participants are regular people and the process is transparent (Gastil, 2016; Goldberg et al., 2025; OECD, 2021). Overall, these results suggest willingness to participate exists but must be activated through clear communication, institutional legitimacy, and visible responsiveness. Research on political legitimacy demonstrates that when people perceive governing processes as transparent, responsive, and respectful, they are much more likely to see authority as rightful and binding, even amid disagreement (Levine, 2013). Respondents in our survey expressed higher interest in opportunities involving dialogue, reflection, and feedback connected to genuine decision-making.



Our analysis of open-ended questions surfaced four themes about what Americans think Congress should consider so that people like them feel heard:

- **Authentic communication:** Respondents expect communication to be like "talking to a neighbor" or "actual conversations." There is also a desire for direct dialogue. Constituents feel their voices are often overlooked or ignored. Respondents want Members to genuinely listen and interact meaningfully. One suggests "Have an open forum for the public to voice and share their voices." Another states, "Hold town halls and have email and phone hotlines."
- **Respectful and inclusive discourse:** Citizens perceive a deficit of respect in political communication. Respondents express a desire for dialogue that acknowledges differing viewpoints without condescension or hostility. They are frustrated with the current political climate, where many feel such respect is not extended to them as constituents. Respondents also emphasize the importance of truly representative decision-making that includes input from the general public, not just major stakeholders or affluent groups. One noted that members should "represent all the people and not just their political party."
- **Accessible communications:** Respondents think communication with representatives should be straightforward, open, and easily achievable for all constituents. There was consensus that there should be more opportunities to provide input on issues that matter to them.
- **Accountability:** Citizens expect representatives to clarify their positions, actions, and the consequences of their policies while being accountable to the public. As one stated, communications should be "a place where constituents can voice their concerns." Another stated that members "could hold meetings to discuss the people's needs and concerns." If members not only respond to inquiries but also explain the reasons for their actions, even citizens who continue to disagree with a decision will grant them more trust.

Citizens as Partners

Findings from our survey and past research converge on a central tenet: citizens care deeply about the process of democratic engagement, not just outcomes (Busby et al., 2025; Neblo & Minozzi, 2025). They want respect and recognition, not just results.

Consider what customer service implies about representative government — Members own the company, and citizens can take or leave what they are selling. An office might deliver excellent customer service, but constituents will still find that problematic. *Lobbyists* might be clients of Congress, but *citizens* want to be partners in self-government.

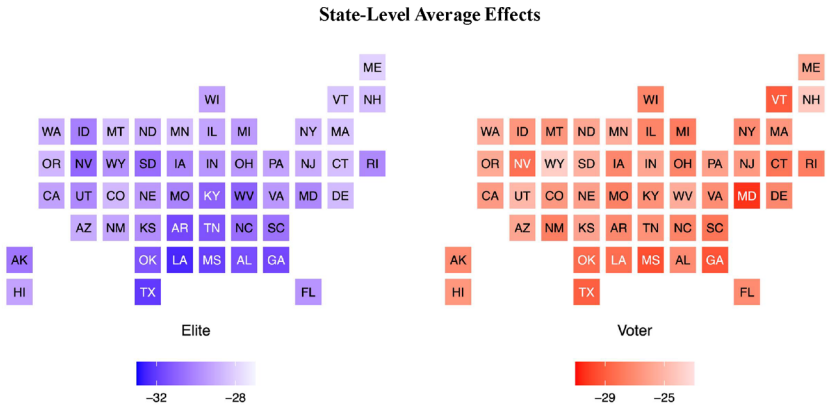
Meaningful, two-way communication opportunities — such as Deliberative Town Halls or a participatory process for input into the Congressionally Direction Spending process — demonstrate this potential. The themes and responses from our survey suggest Americans are interested in reclaiming

agency in their representation. They desire communication that is not only easy and direct but also respectful, personal, and reflective of community needs. Respondents' attitudes reveal a longing for change in political communication dynamics toward a more engaged, equitable, and accessible system where their needs are prominently recognized and addressed. This aligns with our international evidence from the United Kingdom, Nigeria, and Chile, where Deliberative Town Halls have successfully bridged the gap between citizens and officials, resulting in higher trust and more substantive citizen input on policy.

Building on two decades of research, this work points to two-way communications where citizens encounter diverse perspectives in structured settings, producing more reflective, reasoned, and cooperative judgments than self-deliberation or isolated opinion. Such engagement helps individuals recognize policy tradeoffs, understand opposing viewpoints, and appreciate institutional constraints under which representatives operate. When citizens understand issues better, it becomes easier to persuade them on "hard-sell" policies—those experts broadly endorse but are easy to demagogue at the surface level. Deliberative events in Chile around their constitution demonstrated that structured, two-way engagement can rebuild confidence even in highly polarized environments. Specifically, these events led to a 10–15 percentage point drop in distrust toward the Constitutional Council and increased support for a common pension fund by seven percent, prompting legislators to pursue policy based on the findings despite the broader draft's failure in the referendum.

Improved communication also enhances legitimacy by making collective reasoning visible. Our research shows that when we invite ordinary constituents to online Deliberative Town Halls, previously disengaged citizens prepare, show up, and contribute more than those who already call your office. They find the forums so transformative that 94 percent say they are "very valuable for our democracy" and would do another. Think about that: in an era when only 13 percent of citizens trust Congress, you can create spaces where 94 percent say the experience is so worthwhile they would do it again. That gap says a lot about what is possible.

Participating Members and staff have also found the forums valuable; offices simply lack the time and resources for ongoing deliberative consultation. Yet in our 2025 survey, citizens rated such forums among the most effective way to communicate. Engagement that treats citizens like partners produces lasting gains in their political knowledge, trust, voting rates, civility, and willingness to work together across differences. This holds in forums with over 7,000 citizens. Representatives Kilmer and Timmons' national forum resulted in the largest decline in affective polarization ever documented, effectively rolling back 38 years of rising partisan animosity. The reductions in polarization toward fellow voters were especially large in states (and districts) that were most skewed in their support or opposition to President Trump:



AI as Subsidy, Not Substitute

Ultimately, the goal is not technological modernization for its own sake — it is institutional renewal. Efforts to strengthen Congress must begin with structural changes that enhance transparency, improve constituent engagement mechanisms, and increase responsiveness to diverse perspectives that citizens bring forward.

Our findings about AI chatbots for engagement and recent research on AI underscores this point. AI may help transform how staff manage the deluge of routine requests — from finding Social Security checks to scheduling Capitol tours and tallying issue sentiments from correspondence. A customer service model makes sense for many important constituent service tasks. But unless we use the freed-up time the right way, AI will not dent the core problems undermining constituent engagement, and ultimately, democracy.

Emerging technologies, particularly AI, can help make responsive democracy feasible at scale when integrated strategically. AI should serve as a subsidy for human attention, not a substitute. AI driven text analysis can surface trends across thousands of constituent messages, but only two-way communications between elected officials and constituents can reliably translate into normatively legitimate action. These tools may reduce administrative burdens and free staff time for deeper forms of engagement, including Deliberative Town Halls and follow-up communication. However, absent thoughtful design, the same systems risk amplifying motivated reasoning or distorting representation by privileging the loudest or most automated voices.

Recent research on AI for public opinion suggests that AI tools can substantially enhance the quality and depth of articulated reasoning and improve the identification of respondents' underlying reflective opinions. However, AI can elicit different responses than traditional methods. Increased engagement may induce cognitive shifts, evidenced by changes in subsequent closed-ended responses, including signs of opinion polarization (Kennedy et al., 2025). In this sense, AI may act as an intervening stimulus, amplifying the salience of considerations and exacerbating confirmation bias. AI will help us learn even more from forums, faster and more efficiently. But the technology must serve democratic

values, not replace them.

Constituent Engagement Reform for Congressional Capacity

Legislative dysfunction produces distrust, distrust leads to disengagement, and disengagement further reinforces dysfunction. If so, then reforms that re-engage citizens can reverse the cycle and contribute to better legislative functioning. Re-engagement gives representatives a better read on their entire constituency rather than just interest groups and partisan activists, who tend to be more extreme, thus reducing polarization. It also surfaces constituents' *considered* opinions, better approximating what people will think about congressional action *after* they have had to live under it. Such responsiveness also increases trust and legitimacy. Increased trust allows representatives to invest in longer-term policies. And when citizens understand issues better, it becomes easier to persuade them on "hard-sell" policies — those experts broadly endorse but are unpopular at the surface level. We have also shown that national Deliberative Town Halls reward policy expertise at the constituency level and help build national constituencies that can compete with grandstanding, bomb-throwing extremism, and entertainment-oriented politics in the social media era (An et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Citizens are so frustrated with representative democracy that they're prepared to work around it through referenda and the like. An alarming number are now willing to consider alternatives to democracy itself. But like our Founders, the vast majority would rather work with and through their representatives — *if* we reimagine what that entails.

By capitalizing on democratic innovations in constituent engagement, using AI tools strategically, and bolstering institutional design to expand meaningful two-way communication between legislators and the public, we can rebuild trust. Profound changes in communications technologies require corresponding changes to the system so that information faithfully circulates, and Congress listens, learns, and responds in ways citizens can see and believe.

The future of American democracy depends — more than we realize — on the future of constituent engagement. The technology exists. The models are proven. Your constituents are ready. The question is whether Congress is ready to meet them.

Biography for Michael Neblo

Michael Neblo is Director of the Institute for Democratic Engagement & Accountability and Arts & Sciences Alumni Endowed Professor of Political Science, Philosophy, Communication, and Public Affairs at The Ohio State University. A scholar of political deliberation and evidence-based democratic reform, he is the author of *Deliberative Democracy Between Theory & Practice* and co-author of *Politics with the People*. Professor Neblo has designed Deliberative Town Halls for the U.S. Congress, the reassessment of the Northern Ireland Good Friday Accords, the Chilean Constitutional Convention, and the Australian, Nigerian, and United Kingdom legislatures. He has further projects planned in Malawi, Korea, and the European Parliament and Commission.

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Chairwoman BICE. Thank you, Dr. Neblo.

I now recognize Ms. Wilson for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF AUBREY WILSON

Ms. WILSON. Chairwoman Bice, Ranking Member Torres, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to be part of today's hearing. I am Aubrey Wilson, director of global initiatives at POPVOX Foundation and, as previously stated, a former House staffer, had the immense pleasure of working for the Committee on House Administration during the 117th and 118th Congresses.

At POPVOX, our mission is to help democratic institutions keep pace in a rapidly changing world. The majority of our team are prior congressional staffers, but our love for legislative institutions has expanded, leading us to work directly with parliaments around the world to transform their internal operations, helping them leapfrog from paper to cutting edge.

Over the last 2 years, much of our work has focused on legislatures' adoption of AI, specifically as it relates to improving internal operations. I have been asked to share international examples of how emerging technologies improving constituent engagement in ways that could benefit Congress.

Chatbots represent one of the lowest hanging fruit. They are familiar to users, quickly deployable, and capable of providing 24/7 assistance regardless of users' age, language, or education level. Estonia has developed two AI legislative systems for MPs and staff that search through parliamentary legislative data bases to find information about current laws, legislative proposals, and amendments. While not currently public facing, these chatbots are a model for how constituents might one day be able to interact with data on Congress.gov to understand which bills have been introduced and how those laws may affect them.

Estonia has also launched a public-facing chat interface through which citizens are able to access services across 18 agencies. Through this one point of service they can file consumer complaints, apply for permits, renew ID cards, report car accidents, and even borrow library books.

This vision of constituent engagement transcends the legislative branch by imagining Government as an integrated service provider that could support individuals in navigating our complex ecosystem of Federal agencies in any language at any time.

Beyond streamlining access to information is enabling two-way interaction. Brazil's Ulysses Suite empowers constituents to leave detailed remarks about legislation via online poll. AI then groups and analyzes this broad public input and presents it back to policymakers, giving constituents meaningful participation while equipping legislators with actionable insights.

AI can also foster quality constituent interactions at scale. In 2024, Remesh, which is a U.S.-based company, facilitated an AI-assisted community dialog between the major social groups in Gaza. The insights from this were aggregated into informative data for international negotiators and went in the ongoing peace process.

These examples, along with the additional ones included in my written testimony, show what is possible. They also demonstrate

that legislatures do not have to accept the all too common public perception that they are slow to innovate. With 441 lawmakers with diverse backgrounds and expertise, the House is already witnessing the deployment of technology in new ways by Members and staff to engage with their constituents. The Congressional Hackathon, House Digital Service, modernization initiatives account, and Congressional Data Task Force exemplify the resources available that institutionalize innovation.

The House has all the inspirational components it needs, but it must go beyond one-off initiatives by adopting a new way of doing things that allows ongoing experimentation, learning, and refinement. As the Subcommittee evaluates next steps for institutional modernization, we encourage you to partner with the CAO to reform House IT procurement and introduce transparency.

While few tools are built specifically for legislative use, a vibrant marketplace of tools that can be used in Congress exists. If other institutions share open-sourced models, the selection of customizable legislative tools will also expand. Members who identify promising tools need a clear pathway for institutional approval. This Subcommittee in partnership with the CAO has a wide spectrum of potential approaches to support responsible innovation.

For instance, the Subcommittee can support the CAO in exploring new contracting vehicles. It can work with CAO to establish rapid-pilot authorities and provide guardrails on low-risk, no- or low-code experiments. It can champion innovative projects like House Digital Services' amazing data lake and innovation sandboxes where Members can test new tools before institution-wide deployment.

Together, additionally, the Subcommittee and CAO must prioritize the establishment of robust but expedient cybersecurity review processes. A 1-year authorization timelines for new tools is incompatible with 2-year election cycles.

Finally, building off of Catherine Szpindor's legacy, the next CAO needs to be ready to work hand-in-hand with the Subcommittee to usher in the next era of House innovation by identifying actionable solutions that empower Members to pilot, experiment, and reimagine how new tools can serve constituents.

Around the world, legislatures are experimenting with emerging technologies, deploying new tools, and learning from each other about new approaches for the future of constituent engagement. The House can benefit from this innovation but only when it has adopted the internal processes to institutionalize new ways of doing things.

Thank you for being leaders in this conversation, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Wilson follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF AUBREY WILSON

Testimony for the Committee on House Administration's Subcommittee on Modernization and Innovation Hearing, "The Future of Constituent Engagement." December 17, 2025

Submitted by: Aubrey Wilson, Director of Global Initiatives, POPVOX Foundation

Chairwoman Bice, Ranking Member Torres, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this hearing and for hosting this exciting and proactive discussion on the future of constituent engagement. My name is Aubrey Wilson and I'm Director of Global Initiatives at the nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, POPVOX Foundation.[1] I'm also a true believer in Congress and a prior House staffer, having had the immense pleasure of working for the Committee on House Administration during the 117th and 118th Congresses. My extended biography is attached as Appendix 1.

At POPVOX Foundation, our mission is to help democratic institutions keep pace in a rapidly changing world both by raising awareness to emerging trends and challenges, and also by proposing solutions, sharing best practices, and celebrating smart, responsible innovation. This effort includes working with legislatures around the world to build solutions, partnering with international organizations to develop resources, participating in conferences to share lessons learned, and building networks for knowledge exchange. Yet this important work began here—in the Halls of Congress.

The majority of the POPVOX Foundation team, myself included, are prior Congressional staffers who have made the commitment to support our First Branch. Since its founding in 2021, POPVOX Foundation has been on the forefront of the bipartisan effort to broadly modernize the Legislative branch, providing research and ideas to policymakers and staff. Our approach to advancing progress is practical and collaborative. Beyond making recommendations, we test the ideas we put forth through piloting initiatives, hosting workshops where we actively solicit feedback, and prototyping beta versions of tools utilizing cutting edge technologies. This approach informs the best practices that we hone and share, and has built our reputation as a reliable resource beyond the United States Capitol.

Over the last two years, much of our work both domestically and abroad has focused on legislatures' response and adoption of artificial intelligence, specifically as it relates to improving internal, day-to-day operations. Constituent engagement falls under this umbrella, and it comes as no surprise that you're not the only representative body beginning to realize that we're in a time of rapid change that requires intentionality.

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[1] https://www.popvox.org/

I've been asked to contribute an international element to this discussion by sharing examples of innovation we're witnessing abroad that improve or fully reimagine constituent engagement.

In its rules, this Subcommittee adopted an important directive to "evaluate and advance new and emerging innovations to ensure that congressional modernization efforts are ongoing."[2] In pursuit of that aim, there is much to learn from legislatures around the globe, as Members and staffers have discovered through numerous CODELs and engaging in international conversations. There is also much to celebrate in the strong technical foundation that the US Congress has established over the past decade, such as Congress.gov, HouseNet, the House Digital Services and the websites and Constituent Management Systems that every office uses to communicate with constituents. For many legislatures, these are aspirational tools that are only becoming possible with the new capabilities that generative AI (GenAI) makes possible (such as rapid transcription, enhanced document scanning, and automatic summarization) . We are seeing some legislatures seize these opportunities and leapfrog previous limitations while others are paralyzed by legacy systems and ossified review processes not suited for rapidly changing constituent expectations and standards.

Today's hearing is the continuation of a conversation that began with the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, an effort that exceeded all expectations and broke through partisan defaults. This committee has overseen the implementation of numerous Select Committee recommendations and is now in the position to set new goals to ensure that the institution continues its move forward. Fulfilling the Subcommittee's directive requires recognizing that "modernization" and innovation can never be one point in time or set destination but a way of responding to new challenges and opportunities.

With that perspective set, let me share a couple inspiring technology case studies from abroad where emerging technology is being used in ways that could improve constituent engagement with Congress.

Chatbots

Constituents shouldn't need a law degree to understand their government or be left to navigate complex, inflexible systems to engage with their elected officials. Chatbots represent one of the most accessible entry points for AI-enabled constituent engagement — familiar to users, quickly deployable, and capable of providing 24/7 assistance regardless of a constituent's age, language, or education level.

Estonia is often recognized as a leader in e-parliament operations, and in recent years it has undertaken two notable chatbot initiatives. One is a pilot project that began in late 2023 to develop two AI legislative search assistants for use by Members of Parliament and staff. They are specially trained chatbots (built on the OpenAI API) that have the ability to

[2] https://cha.house.gov/modernization

search through the parliament's legislative databases and official gazette.[3] The tools "allow users to discover details about current Estonian laws as published in the official gazette, offer information on documents processed in the legislative database, answer questions in both Estonian and English, help users find specific legislative texts or details about legal provisions, and clarify the status and content of legislative proposals and amendments."[4] While these tools are not public facing, they are an inspiring model for how constituents — and Congressional Members and staff — might one day interact with data on Congress.gov to understand what bills have been introduced, which have become laws, and how those laws affect them.

Estonia's second chatbot initiative, Bürokratt, demonstrates the public-facing potential of this technology. Unlike the legislative search assistants built specifically as a means of accessing parliamentary information, the vision for Bürokratt is a network of interoperable chatbots deployed across more than thirty government agencies, accessible to any citizen 24/7.[5] Today, through a single chat interface, Estonians are able to access integrated services across eighteen agencies, enabling them to file consumer complaints, apply for permits, renew identification cards, report car accidents, or borrow library books[6,7]— tasks that traditionally required navigating multiple agency websites or making phone calls during business hours. Notably, Estonia has made Bürokratt's code open source and available for free on Github,[8] actively encouraging other governments to adopt the platform.[9] This is an exciting prospect. A similar tool implemented in America could not only streamline individuals' interactions across the complex ecosystem of federal agencies, but also assist Congressional caseworkers in being able to find information to help constituents requesting assistance. This vision of constituent engagement transcends the Legislative branch — it reimagines government as an integrated service accessible from any device, in any language, for any constituent, at any time.

The **European Parliament** has implemented a tool called Archibot leveraging the Anthropic Claude API to allow anyone (policymakers, citizens, researchers, students, etc.) to access over two million legislative documents in multiple languages. Anthropic's analysis of the tool reports an 80% reduction in document search and analysis time for users.[10]

These chatbots demonstrate how barriers to legislative information and government services can be overcome in ways not previously possible. Imagine a chatbot on a Member's website that answers "What do I do if I lost my passport?" by connecting the constituent to

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[3] https://www.ipu.org/innovation-tracker/story/estonian-parliament-trains-mps-and-staff-in-using-ai-tools
[4] Ibid.
[5] https://interoperable-europe.ec.europa.eu/collection/open-source-observatory-osor/government-virtual-assistant-burokratt
[6] https://e-estonia.com/estonias-new-virtual-assistant-aims-to-rewrite-the-way-people-interact-with-public-services/
[7] https://govinsider.asia/intl-en/article/estonia-eyes-cross-border-interoperability-for-burokratt-its-siri-of-public-services
[8] https://koodivaramu.eesti.ee/buerokratt
[9] https://e-estonia.com/estonias-new-virtual-assistant-aims-to-rewrite-the-way-people-interact-with-public-services/
[10] https://claude.com/customers/european-parliament

the appropriate caseworker while also providing links to the online forms that will be required to be submitted. Or, place yourself in the shoes of a concerned constituent who is intimidated by the thought of calling their Representative, but through a chatbot can submit an opinion that can be taken into consideration. When designed with intentionality, AI-enabled chatbots can transform how constituents navigate government and engage with their elected officials.

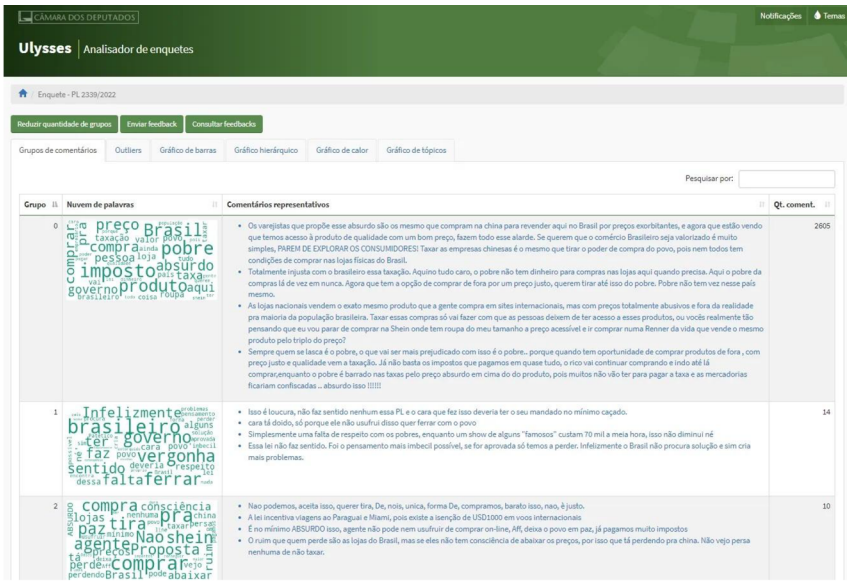
Public Participation Platforms

Beyond streamlining constituent access to information, AI enables meaningful two-way dialogue at scale. Virtual convenings powered by AI can capture detailed constituent input — the kind of nuanced feedback that builds trust and demonstrates that voices are heard — without creating impossible data processing burdens for policymakers and staff. Where traditional methods force a trade-off between depth and breadth, AI tools make both possible.

Brazil's Chamber of Deputies' Ulysses Suite is a laudable collection of eight innovative tools, custom built to support Members, staff, and parliamentary operations. One tool in this collection, Ulysses 6, is a module that processes the data collected from public polls on legislation. Brazil's e-Democracia portal creates electronic polls on legislative drafts that are open for public engagement. Instead of a binary poll of "for" or "against," these polls empower constituents with the ability to leave detailed remarks. Some legislative items receive tens of thousands of remarks — an untenable amount of data for legislative staff to adequately consume. To address this challenge, Ulysses 6 is used to group, analyze, and present findings to policymakers including sentiment analysis.[11] As described by the Director of Bússola Tech, Luís Kimaid,

> "The module's ability to cluster similar arguments is particularly noteworthy. Despite the diversity of expressions and language used by different individuals, U6 can group comments that share common themes or sentiments. This clustering is vital for parliamentarians, as it brings a wide array of opinions into comprehensible thematic categories, highlighting the main arguments for and against a bill."[12]

[11] https://library.bussola-tech.co/p/ulysses-chamber-deputies-brazil
[12] Ibid.



Screen capture of Ulysses 6 module, source: LegisTech Library, Bússola Tech

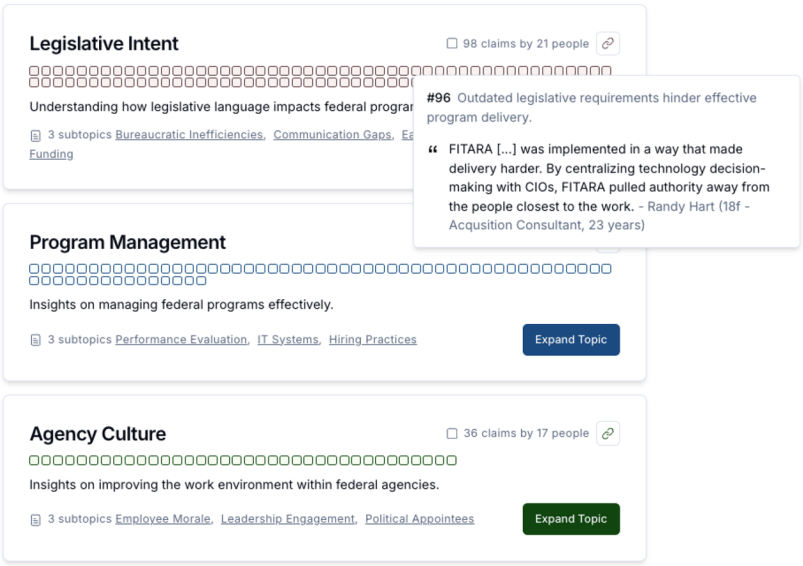
Ulysses 6 exemplifies how AI can bridge the gap between constituent voice and legislative action. Instead of choosing between gathering broad input and actually being able to process it, Brazilian legislators can now do both — giving constituents meaningful participation while equipping policymakers with actionable insights.

Emerging technologies are beginning to unlock the ability for elected officials to foster quality interactions with constituents at scale, and in ways that can promote both civility and safety.

Perhaps the most compelling example of this approach originates not within a legislature, but from an international dialogue designed to build consensus across diverse stakeholders. Remesh, a US-based company, has created a platform that can be used to host AI-assisted community conversations to identify key points of agreement and uncover key ideological differences. In 2024, Remesh partnered with the Alliance for Middle East Peace to hold four online dialogues focused on uncovering consensus between Israeli Jews, Palestinians living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and Palestinian citizens of Israel. Through that exercise, participants shared values and thoughts on their desired future outcomes, which Remesh aggregated into insights for policymakers.[13] This information was shared with international negotiators and contributed to the ultimate contours of a final agreement.

[13] https://www.allmep.org/allmep-resources/allmep-hosts-ai-assisted-community-dialogues-with-peacebuilders-in-groundbreaking-new-ai-pulse-research/

Another example of how AI-assisted platforms can help scale meaningful conversations between individuals and policymakers is the Departure Dialogues Project.[14] Launched in 2025 by POPVOX Foundation, Niskanen Center, Civil Service Strong, Partnership for Public Service, and the Foundation for American Innovation, Departure Dialogues is a project to capture the institutional knowledge of prior federal civil servants regarding improvements to federal law or regulation implementation they wish to share with Congress. Using the platform, TheirStory,[15] participants submit personal insights via video recording or by completing a written survey. All submissions are processed through the platform Talk to the City,[16] an open-source AI tool that helps transform large amounts of input into digestible insights. Initial findings of Departure Dialogues, are now available on POPVOX Foundation's website, demonstrating the interactive nature of this type of information collection approach.



A sample view of the Departure Dialogues Initial Findings. Source: POPVOX Foundation

Members or committees could launch similar initiatives, leveraging platforms like TheirStory and Talk to the City to engage stakeholders on specific legislation or gather constituent experiences with federal programs and services — at a scale previously unimaginable.

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[14] https://www.popvox.org/departure
[15] https://www.theirstory.io/
[16] https://talktothe.city/

Recommendations

The projects and tools I just described show what is possible. And they also demonstrate that legislatures and lawmakers do not have to accept the all-too-common public perception that they are slow to innovate or do not understand emerging technologies. This Subcommittee and its Select Committee predecessor have shown what is possible, and the House is rich with innovation already, but the problem it faces is encountered in the 'last mile.'

This institution has every component needed to usher in a new era of constituent engagement except a few key elements that are required to materialize the innovation. Members and their staff are reimagining traditional constituent engagement models in creative ways. The House's greatest asset is its diversity of membership and Members' autonomy to serve their unique constituency. With 441 lawmakers with diverse backgrounds, approaches, and expertise, the House is already witnessing the deployment of technology in new ways to engage with constituents, from reinventing the telephone town hall to employing technology on-the-go in support of mobile district offices. The now institutionalized Congressional Hackathon is an annual celebration of the vibrant ecosystem of individuals — including lawmakers, institutional staff, policy staff, civic technologists, students, journalists, scholars, and civil society members — who spend a day showcasing new ideas, beta-versions of tools, and brainstorming technology solutions for Congress. The House Digital Service, Legislative Branch Appropriations Modernization Initiatives Account, and Congressional Data Task Force exemplify the institutional resources and support available to foster innovation within the House.

Yet, in this era of rapid technological change caused by the emergence of GenAI, the House has fallen behind because it has failed to grasp these individual points of innovation and systematize them as institutional progress. The House has all the components needed to foster in the future of constituent engagement — and legislative processes more broadly — but still stands to overcome institutional barriers that are preventing progress.

The rapid, continual evolution of technology requires the US Congress — and all legislatures — to go beyond one-off initiatives or projects by adopting a new way of doing things: one that allows ongoing experimentation, learning, and refinement. To enable this, I offer the following recommendations.

Reform House IT procurement and introduce transparency.

While few tools are built specifically for legislative use, a vibrant marketplace of platforms and tools that can be used for Congressional purposes exists - Remesh, TheirStory, and Talk to the City are just the beginning. As other governing institutions and legislative bodies around the world create and share open source models, the selection of customizable legislative tools will also expand. Members who identify promising tools need a clear pathway for institutional approval, and innovators who build these tools need access to information about House procurement and authorization processes. Currently, both of these avenues for Member and staff use of new technologies are a black box to those

looking to navigate them. The institution's technology and cybersecurity requirements, procurement guidelines and processes, and additional qualifications — administered by the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) — should be publicly posted and easily accessible. Additionally, Members should be provided with and encouraged to participate in a transparent process through which the CAO can be made aware of tools that might fit their needs in performing their official duties and serving their constituents in new impactful and efficient ways.

Beyond enhancing transparency around the House's procurement processes, the Subcommittee should direct the CAO to explore new, agile procurement reforms. It is time for Congressional procurement to break away from multi-year contracts to explore new contracting vehicles, establish rapid-pilot authorities for low-risk experiments, and create innovation sandboxes where offices can test before institution-wide deployment.

Streamline the cybersecurity review process.
Thorough, rigorous cybersecurity review of technology approved for official use by Members and staff is critical to institutional health and continuity. At the same time, a one-year authorization timeline for new tools is incompatible with two-year election cycles. At the beginning of the 119th Congress, POPVOX Foundation undertook the creation of an a narrow-scope, open-source AI-powered chatbot (accessed via website) designed with newly hired Hill staff and interns in mind, but publicly available to also benefit constituents and students wishing to learn more about Congress.[17] Through a congressional sponsor, the chatbot was submitted for consideration to become approved for congressional use in February 2025. At this time, this request has neither been approved or denied. In conversations with Members who have submitted additional tools for consideration, consistent with the process outlined in the September 2024 House AI Policy, we've received similar reports regarding delays in new tool approval.

In addition to the increased transparency of procurement processes and technological requirements, a robust but expedited cybersecurity review process should be implemented. I encourage the Subcommittee to explore what resources and organizational updates are needed to support the CAO's cybersecurity office to reduce cybersecurity review delays. Addressing this timeline-related barrier to technology approval will result in new, exciting tools being put in the hands of all Members, unlocking new possibilities for constituent engagement.

Encourage House Leadership to select a Chief Administrative Officer who prioritizes innovation.
The future of constituent engagement for the House depends on the health of the House's IT infrastructure and its adaptability to keep pace in our rapidly changing world. As shown in the two prior recommendations, the CAO holds the critical responsibility of adopting processes that foster an environment of innovation throughout the institution. In a recent post, POPVOX Foundation Program Associate Caitlin McNally and I describe the

[17] https://www.popvox.org/blog/stafflink-beta-takeaways

importance of the upcoming CAO appointment for the future of the House.[18] In addition to building off of Catherine Szpindor's legacy of innovation, the next individual to fill that role must work hand-in-hand with the Subcommittee to identify actionable solutions that empower Members to pilot new tools, experiment with new technology, and reimagine how best to serve their constituents.

Conclusion

Around the world, legislatures are watching Congress. They are not waiting for the House to move first — they are experimenting, deploying, and learning. We can benefit from this innovation but also, recognize that the future of constituent engagement is not something Congress needs to imagine from scratch — the foundation is already here. You have the technical infrastructure. You have Members pioneering new approaches across 441 distinct districts. You have institutional resources dedicated to innovation. What stands between the House and the next era of constituent engagement is not capability, but process.

The recommendations I've offered today are changes that could allow the innovation already happening in Member offices to flourish across the institution: transparent procurement processes, expedited cybersecurity review, and leadership committed to agility. The future of constituent engagement is the US Congress's to design. I urge this Subcommittee to ensure it has the tools to build it.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this vital conversation.

[18] https://www.popvox.org/blog/continuing-the-caos-legacy-of-leadership

APPENDIX I:

Aubrey Wilson, Extended Biography

Aubrey Wilson is Director of Global Initiatives at POPVOX Foundation, where she works directly with parliamentary staff worldwide to improve internal operations, harness emerging technology, and share best practices on legislative modernization. Since 2024, her work has focused on how institutions are adapting to generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Aubrey leads POPVOX Foundation's efforts to educate Members and staff of the US Congress and parliamentarians worldwide on how responsible AI adoption can augment capacity and inform policymaking.

In 2025, POPVOX Foundation launched the Digital Parliaments Project (DPP), a first-of-its-kind technological support initiative working hand-in-hand with legislative institutions in the Global South to adopt emerging technologies and improve parliamentary operations. As manager of the DPP, Aubrey actively engages with parliamentarians on a continual basis to assist with their most pressing modernization priorities to foster rapid legislative digital transformation.

As Deputy Staff Director for the Committee on House Administration (CHA) during the 118th Congress, she played a lead role in making the House work more effectively - directing the committee's oversight agenda, organizing hearings, and liaising with Members to align institutional support with their offices' needs. With a driving belief that bipartisan agreement results in long-lasting implementation success, Aubrey worked to build bridges across the aisle. In this role, Aubrey also served as the Staff Director of the Joint Committee on Printing, the longest running joint committee of Congress, and oversaw the inaugural session of CHA's Subcommittee on Modernization, the successor of the impactful House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.

Previously, Aubrey served as Director of Oversight and Modernization for CHA during the 117th Congress, witnessing firsthand the House's institutional response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the events of January 6, 2021. In January 2020, she was appointed as a Congressional Fellow and assigned to CHA to track implementation of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress's initial package of Member-driven recommendations across the Legislative branch.

To welcome the 119th Congress, Aubrey hosted POPVOX Foundation's Gavel In podcast for new Members of Congress, sharing institutional knowledge to support those new to Capitol Hill.[19] Her expertise and insights have been featured in *Roll Call*, *FedScoop*, *Washington Examiner*, *Bloomberg Law*, and *Tech Policy Press* furthering the conversation on Congressional reform and governance. In 2024, Aubrey was selected as a Bertelsmann Foundation Fellow, where she focused on the future of democracy, bringing her Congressional experience to broader discussions about democratic institutions.

Aubrey graduated from Hillsdale College with a BA in Political Economics, is a former House legislative assistant, and a former member of the R Street Institute Governance Policy and federal affairs team. Originally from northern Idaho, Aubrey lives in the DC area with her husband and twin daughters.

[19] https://www.popvox.org/gavel

Chairwoman BICE. Thank you, Ms. Wilson.

I now recognize Dr. Beth Noveck for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF BETH SIMONE NOVECK

Ms. NOVECK. Chairwoman Bice, Ranking Member Torres, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

It is precisely at this moment when Congress is most overworked, when the issues are getting ever more complex. The Committee staff are roughly 40 percent smaller than they were in 1980, when the support agencies, CRS and GAO and CBO, they have shrunk 45 percent in the last generation. Public engagement at this point really can sound like an unreasonable burden. Frankly, it is hard enough to field more than 81 million calls coming into Congress every year from constituents.

Historically—let us be realistic—meaningful participation has been too expensive. It has been too time-consuming, and it has really lacked the structure that has made public contributions useful for institutions. The web has made it easier for everybody to talk, but that does not mean it has made it easier for our institutions in our democracy to listen.

In the State of New Jersey, what we have learned is that pairing the right artificial intelligence tools today with a disciplined process with the right design can actually make it possible for Government institutions both to serve residents better, to deliver services, but also to listen and to govern, not only faster and more efficiently, but also more inclusively, even at scale.

There are two recommendations that are outstanding, 176 and 174, from this Subcommittee that provide a practical starting point for what we might do and for that transformation.

176 calls for exploring ways to solicit public input for Committee hearings. Long before Generative AI, Brazil's Senate, larger than our own, began inviting residents to submit questions for Committee hearings both by phone and on the web. Today, the Brazilian Senate has been integrating AI tools that are helping staff de-duplicate comments, cluster similar questions, and highlight those that directly are relevant to a Committee's oversight goals. Participation has been substantial: 46,000 questions across 546 hearings in 2023, and 69,000 questions across 440 hearings in 2024. Public input has become so routine that the staff report to me that when they do not get it in fast enough, the senators call them and say, Where is my list of questions?

This Subcommittee could begin testing recommendation 176 through a simple, low-risk pilot conducted over the course of a few hearings that invite the public to submit questions. But, look, until recently, the idea of putting up an open text box on the web and say "comment here," this was really an impractical idea. AI now makes it straightforward to gather that feedback, not just by text but by voice, to remove duplicates, to filter off-topic comments, to cluster questions into themes, and to synthesize learnings.

I outline the specifics of this process in the written remarks. Let me just add that my students in a program we call "AI for Impact" that we teach through Northeastern University and our community college system in New Jersey, they are embedded full time with

Government partners, they just built a tool, a free open-source tool called Open Feedback, which is being deployed at scale by the city of Boston. Residents can submit feedback in natural language, and the AI assistant responds with clarifying questions to improve the submission. The tool allows staff to organize comments by topic, to analyze patterns, and to route issues to the right department for faster feedback.

The next AI for Impact co-op starts—cohort—excuse me—begins in January, and we would be happy to adapt this tool for your use and to be of use.

Through InnovateUS, the free, nonpartisan, nonprofit, peer-to-peer training program that I founded, where Government professionals teach one another how to use AI and where we have trained 150,000 people around the country now in using AI to serve the public, we are learning from jurisdictions around the country, from the Engaged California project, from the Bowling Green engagement project, from work we have done in New Jersey and around the world, about how different jurisdictions are using AI to do engagement at scale. We are turning those learnings into a training which we will be happy to provide on how to effectively use AI for public engagement.

Of course, there are risks, and Congress must guard against hallucinations by ensuring that we are using AI to sort and to organize and not to make decisions. The greater risk is, of course, that we engage in ineffective or performative engagement that is disconnected from real decision-making. These pilots, they create an opportunity, a practical and immediate way to tap the expertise and the lived and credentialed experience of the American public to strengthen lawmaking, to strengthen oversight. To quote Michael, we all stand at the ready to assist.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Noveck follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF BETH SIMONE NOVECK

Written Testimony

of

Dr. Beth Simone Noveck

Chief AI Strategist, The State of New Jersey

before

The United States

"The Future of Constituent Engagement with Congress."

United States House of Representatives

Longworth House Office Building

Statement before the House Subcommittee on Modernization and Innovation

Introduction

Chairwoman Bice, Ranking Member Torres, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Beth Simone Noveck. I am the Chief AI Strategist for the State of New Jersey, having previously served as the State's Chief Innovation Officer.[i] I founded InnovateUS, a nonpartisan, nonprofit that has trained over 125,000 public servants in AI, innovation and engagement skills over the last year. Through our partnership with 40+ states and cities, we expect that number to increase dramatically. I also direct The Governance Lab, a research center that works with governments around the world to design more participatory and effective democratic institutions. In my work, I have spent the last twenty years helping governments—from small municipalities to national parliaments and presidents—use technology to strengthen and modernize how they engage with their publics.

I am grateful for your leadership in holding this hearing and for the Subcommittee's commitment to modernization. You have correctly recognized that Congress requires new tools and better approaches to tapping the collective intelligence and expertise of the American people to enhance our lawmaking processes.

Today, I want to offer both a sense of what is possible and concrete steps that the Subcommittee can take in the coming year to make constituent engagement in lawmaking—what scholars and activists dub "crowdlaw" —more effective and more efficient.[ii]

At precisely the moment when Congress is most overworked addressing myriad complex and interdependent challenges, we can use the right artificial intelligence tools to enable Congress to listen better, learn faster, and govern more effectively.

Two recommendations from this Subcommittee (Recommendation 174 to study and present options for developing a public-facing interactive platform for constituents to offer their opinions and feedback on pending legislation and Recommendation 176 to study and present options for developing a platform for committees that want to solicit public comment and evidence) provide the perfect place to begin that transformation.

I. Engagement Must Evolve

Shrinking Staff, Increasing Volume of Communications

Each year, Americans send Congress more than 81 million communications—emails, calls, demands for information, tour requests, feedback on legislation, and pleas for help.[iii] Yet Congress is trying to respond with a staff that is dramatically less than it once was. Committee staff are roughly 40 percent smaller than they were in 1980. Congress's in-house expertise—at CRS, GAO, and CBO—has shrunk by 45 percent since the mid-1970s. Funding for the legislative branch has grown only 8 percent over the last decade, while 27 percent of the budget now goes to the Capitol Police and to building renovation.[iv]

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court's 2024 *Loper Bright* decision curtailing agency deference has shifted responsibility for regulating some of the most complex areas of our economy from career specialists in federal agencies to congressional offices that are already stretched thin. Finally, Americans spend far more on the elections selecting our members of Congress than taxpayers spend supporting the work of making laws.[v] Congress simply does not have the staff, time, or analytical capacity to adequately fulfill its constitutional role.

Against that backdrop, "public engagement" can sound like an unreasonable burden. When you can barely staff your offices or answer the phone, how can you invite thousands of people to participate in the legislative process?

On the Web, More Talking Means Less Listening

Indeed, past efforts have shown why such caution has been justified. My colleagues and I who served on the presidential transition team in 2007 invited Americans to propose ideas for the first hundred days of the incoming presidential administration. We received over 125,000 participants and 44,000 ideas. Buried somewhere in that flood were brilliant proposals—but we had no way to find them, let alone act on them.

With the explosion of Internet technologies and social media, the more people participated, the harder it became for institutions to listen. This is why so much public engagement has been in the form of pilots, tried once and rarely repeated.

Other governments have experienced the same bottleneck that depresses public engagement.

- The UK Cabinet Office estimates that a consultation receiving 30,000 responses required 25 analysts working three months to process.[vi]

- Before the German city of Hamburg modernized its digital participation system, just one public engagement could consume five full-time employees for more than a week.[vii]

- Singapore Together, launched with great promise in 2019, held a handful of deliberative, 50-person mini-publics before abandoning even these small exercises.[viii]

Processes Have Been Designed to Increase Inputs Rather than Outcomes

Historically, meaningful participation has been too expensive and too time-consuming. But poor design also impedes institutionalization. Too many processes lack structures that make public input usable for decision-makers. *Decide Madrid* illustrates this challenge. More than 460,000 residents created accounts and submitted over 28,000 proposals in the first seven years of the city's engagement platform. The design of the process, however, included the requirement to secure support from 1% of the population, and over a year of waiting from submission to final consideration. As a result, only one proposal has ever been enacted, leading to wasted time and squandered trust.[ix]

Taking Public Expertise Seriously

Compounding these design flaws is a long-standing skepticism about whether ordinary people have meaningful expertise to contribute. As a result, too many engagement exercises are built around conversation without consequences—inviting people to talk, deliberate, or "have a voice" without creating any pathway for their knowledge to shape decisions. These processes may generate goodwill or headlines, but they rarely generate usable intelligence for institutions. The implicit assumption is that public input is either frivolous, polarized, or uninformed, and therefore must be kept at a safe distance from actual policymaking.

Yet every successful example shows the opposite: when institutions ask clear, purposeful questions and create structured ways for people to share their expertise or lived experience, the public produces high-quality insight that decision-makers can use.

I learned this lesson firsthand when we built one of the first expert-intake systems in the federal government for the Patent Office: Peer-to-Patent. Patent examiners needed targeted technical information — not general opinions. By structuring public input around a specific question ("Is there relevant prior art?"), the public contributed high-quality, actionable know-how. After the US, we rolled out the program in the UK, Japan, South Korea and Australia.[x] The success across

multiple countries demonstrated that ordinary people can meaningfully contribute to complex decision processes — when the engagement is designed well.

When institutions ask, "What do you think?", they receive broad sentiment. When they ask, "What evidence should we consider?" or "Which provision affects your community and how?", people supply knowledge that improves decision-making.

Now AI makes it possible to process large volumes of input, but designing the process to elicit citizen know-how is what makes that input useful. The problem has never been a lack of public expertise; it has been a lack of processes designed to take that expertise seriously.

II. AI Makes It Possible to Listen at Scale—and to Learn from What We Hear

AI Can Make Engagement More Efficient and Effective

Because these next-generation word processors have ingested trillions of words, they can spot patterns in language, making it possible to turn even unstructured input into actionable knowledge.

AI tools make it possible to:

- Synthesize thousands of comments in minutes
- Eliminate identical submissions
- Cluster and categorize input
- Sort and organize spoken as well as written words
- Detect points of consensus and disagreement and other patterns
- Extract and distinguish ideas from opinions

I should note here that the New Jersey State Office of Innovation just won one of only eight grants (out of more than 400) from the Center for Civic Futures to expand our development of AI tools, one of which specifically focuses on summarizing feedback.[xi]

Around the world, we are seeing governments use AI to tackle information overload at a scale and speed that were unimaginable even five years ago.

- The City of Hamburg's open-source engagement platform uses AI to cluster comments, extract core ideas, and link input to geospatial maps.[xii]

- Brazil's Ulysses legislative AI platform helps staff analyze bills, match them to relevant subject matter experts and prior analyses, flag conflicting amendments, and generate clear briefings for a legislature larger than the U.S. Congress.[xiii]
- Chile's CAMINAR legislative system automatically digitizes, compares, and analyzes legislative proposals for constitutional compliance.[xiv]
- The European Parliament's Archibot, built on modern large-language models, enables citizens, students, and staff to explore legislative history with unprecedented ease, increasing both transparency and comprehension.[xv]

III. Implementing Recommendation 176: Soliciting Public Input for Committee Hearings

One of the most achievable, low-risk, and high-impact places for Congress to begin using AI to enhance public engagement is Recommendation 176, which asks the House to study ways for committees to solicit public comment and evidence on matters before them. Congress does not need to invent the process or platforms from scratch. There are well-tested models and open-source, AI-enabled tools that make this kind of engagement both manageable and genuinely useful for Members and staff.

Brazil's e-Cidadania: A Model for Public Participation in Committee Hearings

Brazil's Federal Senate offers the strongest real-world model for how congressional committees can meaningfully solicit public questions for hearings. Since 2015, the Senate has invited citizens across the country to submit questions for witnesses through its e-Cidadania portal. For each committee hearing, staff open an "Interactive Event" on the Senate website where citizens submit questions both in advance and during the livestream. A toll-free phone line enables participation from those without internet access. Staff review submissions, categorize them by topic, and relay the most relevant questions to the committee chair, who retains complete discretion over which questions to use and how to integrate them into the hearing.

To improve the quality and diversity of input, staff engage in targeted outreach. They notify individuals who previously participated on related topics—teachers, scientists, farmers, small-business owners, civil society groups—inviting them to submit questions for hearings aligned with their expertise or lived experience. This targeted notification strategy increases participation three- to four-fold and dramatically improves the relevance of questions received. It ensures that committees hear not only from the most mobilized constituencies but also from people with direct knowledge of the issues under consideration.

Brazil's Improvements with AI

Processing thousands of questions per hearing requires curation and judgment. Brazilian Senate staff must filter inappropriate content, avoid redundancy, ensure that selected questions reflect diverse viewpoints, and surface those most useful to the committee's oversight goals.

To support this work, the Senate has begun integrating AI tools that help staff triage submissions more quickly and effectively. AI software summarize and cluster similar questions, highlight novel or underrepresented perspectives, and flag submissions that directly address the central issues under discussion. These tools do not automate decision-making—they accelerate sense-making. Staff retain full control, but AI reduces the manual burden of sorting, enabling them to identify the most constructive questions in time for them to shape a hearing's flow.

Participation has been substantial—46,000 questions across 546 hearings in 2023, and 69,000 questions across 440 hearings in 2024—and remarkably, senators responded to roughly 90 percent of them. Public input is now so routine that, as the head of the e-Citizenship office notes, "If we are late, Committee chairs ask, 'Where's the list of questions?'"[xvi]

Looking ahead, the Senate is developing additional AI-enabled features: chatbots to guide first-time participants through the submission process, multilingual support, and the ability to process voice and video submissions. Together, these improvements lower barriers to participation while giving staff better tools to manage input at scale.

US Precedents

Prior to generative AI, Congress experimented with public engagement in committee proceedings. The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) and its Congressional Science Policy Initiative (CSPI) invited subject-matter experts including scientists, public health officials, technologists and epidemiologists to submit questions for congressional hearings. CSPI recruited more than 600 volunteer scientists from across the United States who, collectively, contributed information and questions to more than 40 Congressional hearings on topics ranging from clean energy technology to Facebook's digital currency to testing for COVID-19.[xvii]

In March 2020, the FAS, in partnership with the New Jersey State Office of Innovation and The GovLab, also called upon its community of scientists as part of Ask A Scientist. Ask A Scientist aimed to counter public misinformation about COVID-19 by offering scientist-led advice to the public about the disease and seeks to ease the burden on government agencies fielding large volumes of generic public enquiries. Members of the public could ask questions via the Ask a Scientist website and Alexa app, such as "How can I prevent myself from getting the virus?" or "If I get infected when do symptoms appear?" and the tool would serve them answers prepared

and reviewed by FAS scientists, the network of volunteers from the National Science Policy Network and then edited and translated by the NJ Office of Innovation. Where the tool could not serve a pre-prepared answer to a question, we shared the questions with the network who researched, wrote and returned an answer a day later. Ask A Scientist provided evidence-based responses to more than 1,000 questions during the early days of the pandemic.[xviii]

What Congress Can Do Now

This subcommittee can begin testing the use of AI to implement Recommendation 176 through a simple, low-risk pilot conducted over the course of a few hearings. The goal would be to develop a manageable workflow that allows Members to benefit from public insight without adding burdens to staff.

Prior to each hearing, the Subcommittee would open a short engagement window via its website inviting the public to propose witness questions.

The website should explain the hearing topic and the goals, specify what makes a constructive question and invite the public to write a question. The form can ask three questions: 1) the proposed witness question, 2) an explanation of the question's importance, and 3) any evidence to support and inform the question.

Until recently, free-text public submissions were nearly impossible to process at scale. Today, AI makes it straightforward to de-duplicate repeated questions, remove off-topic or inappropriate submissions, cluster questions into major themes, and flag those from individuals with relevant expertise or lived experience. Communities across the United States are already doing this:

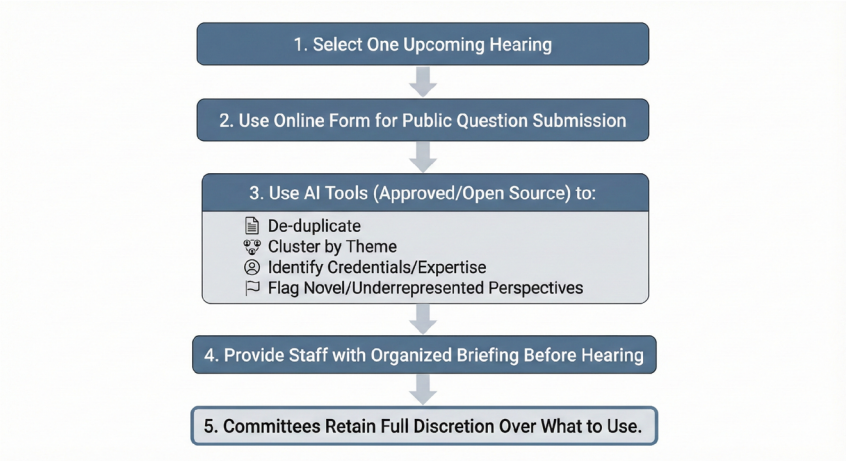
- **Bowling Green, Kentucky** used a free, open-source AI tool to cluster and analyze more than 8,000 comments during an online engagement about the city's future growth. AI grouped and labeled ideas, identified areas of agreement and disagreement, and produced a concise summary that local leaders said helped them "more accurately represent the community."[xix]
- After the **Los Angeles wildfires**, the State of California used AI-assisted analysis to process thousands of narrative submissions from affected residents as part of its Engaged California project. AI identified major themes and tensions—such as rebuilding quickly versus rebuilding resiliently. Organizers used AI to rewrite responses into consistently-formatted and actionable policy recommendations.[xx]

Using existing, free, open-source, fine-tuned AI tested in the similar contexts, subcommittee staff can cluster, organize and sort questions to present to Chair, Ranking Member, and other Members.

In addition to selecting individual questions, staff can use AI to prepare a short briefing memo summarizing themes across all submissions: the major concerns raised by the public, a thematic breakdown of questions, expert or technically informed submissions, and outlier or innovative perspectives.

Importantly, committees retain full discretion over which public questions—if any—to use. Nothing in this process obligates Members to ask a public-submitted question. The pilot simply expands the pool of high-quality, evidence-informed questions available for oversight and examination, while giving staff a manageable, structured workflow for handling input.

With clear directions, time-boxed engagement, AI-supported clustering and summarization, and some help getting the word out, this or another subcommittee can test what works.

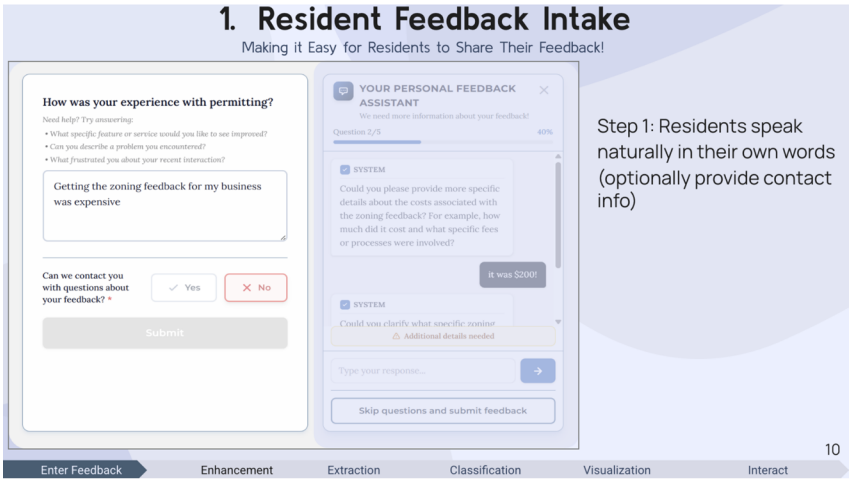


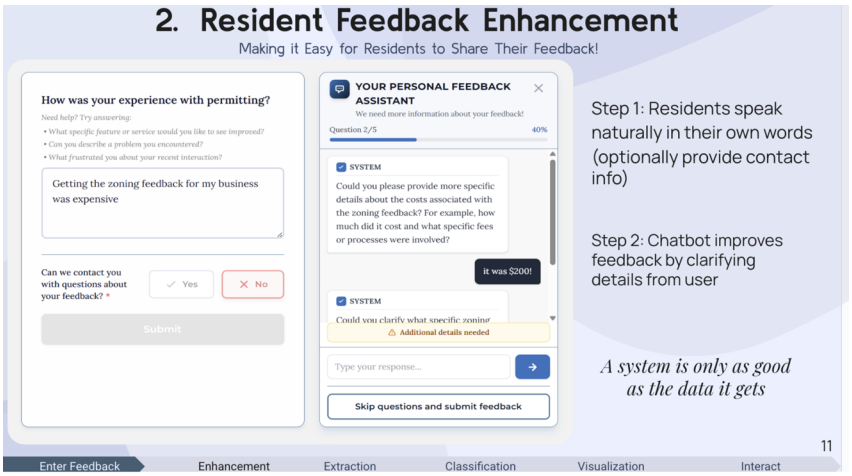
Support from AI for Impact

The "AI for Impact" students I teach from Northeastern University and the New Jersey Council of Community Colleges – who spend six months embedded with government partners like the State of New Jersey, State of Massachusetts and the City of Boston – recently built a free, open-source tool called Open Feedback for the City of Boston to sort, organize, and label citizen feedback submitted through Boston.gov.[xxi]

Developed this fall, the tool has been deployed publicly by the City. Residents can type in their feedback in natural language. The AI assistant responds with clarifying questions to improve the submission.

On the "back end," the tool allows staff to sort and organize the comments, extract and analyze sentiment and topic. Boston customized the tool for use in connection with feedback on permitting and it can distinguish between operational, regulatory, communications and other issues and route the comment to the right place. Past comments can be uploaded in bulk for later sorting. The tool also allows staff to create visualizations of all submissions to see patterns.





The next AI for Impact cohort starts in January and we would be happy to adapt and fine-tune such a free AI tool for you to use this spring in connection with piloting the use of AI to implement Recommendation 176.

This pilot can be launched within weeks and at little to no cost, enabling the House to evaluate its usefulness and refine the process before scaling it across committees.

IV. Implementing Recommendation 174: A Public-Facing Platform for Feedback on Legislation

Recommendation 174 directs the House to explore ways to gather public input on draft legislation after introduction but before passage. The goal is not mass polling or an open comment box. It is to design a structured, targeted, and time-limited process that allows Members and staff to benefit from public expertise—both credentialed and lived experience—without creating unmanageable workloads.

Structured Participation: The Peer-to-Patent Lesson

When we created the Peer-to-Patent project to help overloaded patent examiners we did not ask the public whether they liked a patent; we asked whether there was prior art that the examiner should consider, and we anchored contributions to specific claims. That request for evidence

produced clear, actionable input with minimal spam that improved the quality of government decision-making. We repeated this process when I joined the White House (and later in New Jersey) and we crafted our Open Government (and other) policies with large-scale public input.

Congress can apply the same principle to legislative drafts: Ask clear, specific questions tied to particular sections of a bill, and provide an easy way for people to supply relevant information. When the contribution pathway is clear, the public will provide exactly the kind of expertise that staff need.

AI Enables Sorting of Comments on Drafts

Several countries have already shown how to gather public expertise during the drafting process efficiently.

Germany has experimented with inviting experts and civil society organizations to annotate draft laws directly, tying each suggestion to a specific clause.[xxii] Because contributions are anchored to the text, staff can quickly review where language may be unclear, where unintended consequences may arise, and what evidence supports proposed changes. The structured nature of the contribution—not the number of participants—is what makes the input usable.

Iceland's Better Reykjavik platform offers another instructive model. Residents propose and refine policy ideas, improving one another's suggestions and articulating the evidence behind them. City officials receive a set of workable, well-developed proposals, rather than thousands of disjointed comments.[xxiii] The value lies in the refinement and structure of contributions, which is exactly what legislative offices need when reviewing bill language.

Around the world, parliaments, legislatures as well as executive branch agencies are turning to AI-enabled platforms to guide contributors through structured prompts ("Which section are you commenting on?" "What evidence supports your point?") and to synthesize public input into formats staff can use quickly. The AI helps to provide clarity, structure, and a defined pathway for how public input will be used.

What Congress Can Do Now

Congress can test Recommendation 174 through a simple, low-cost pilot built around a single bill.

A Committee or a Member can begin by selecting a draft bill—or even a single subsection—and inviting the public to provide input through an online form by text or even by voice. Rather than asking, "What do you think?", the form would pose targeted questions such as: "Where is this

language unclear? What impacts should the committee anticipate? What evidence supports your suggestion? What alternative wording would improve clarity or accuracy?" These prompts elicit expertise rather than general sentiment.

AI can then assist staff by organizing and synthesizing the submissions. Modern tools can turn speech into text, de-duplicate repeated comments, cluster feedback around themes or specific provisions, identify submissions supported by evidence or experience, and flag potential conflicts or unintended consequences. The result is a concise briefing that staff can review in minutes rather than hours.

To close the loop, the committee can publish a short "What We Heard" summary explaining which suggestions were incorporated, which were not, and why. This transparency builds trust and demonstrates that participation is meaningful, not performative.

A pilot of this kind could be launched within weeks using open-source or lightly customized tools. If successful, it would create a scalable model for structured legislative feedback that strengthens drafting, broadens the range of expertise informing Congress, and reduces—not increases—staff workload.

V. Asking Americans What Problems Matter Most—Before Drafting

Long before a draft bill is written, congressional committees must decide which problems merit attention. That upstream moment — the agenda-setting phase — is where Congress currently has the least structured way to hear directly from the public. Paradoxically, even though Congress receives millions of communications each year, it lacks a practical method for converting those interactions into a clear picture of national priorities.

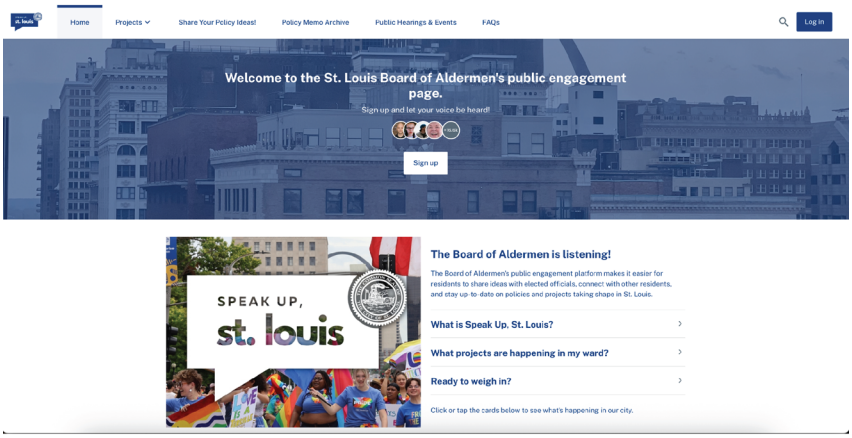
Other governments are beginning to fill this gap by inviting residents to help define priorities before policy is drafted, turning to AI to make this kind of large-scale listening feasible.

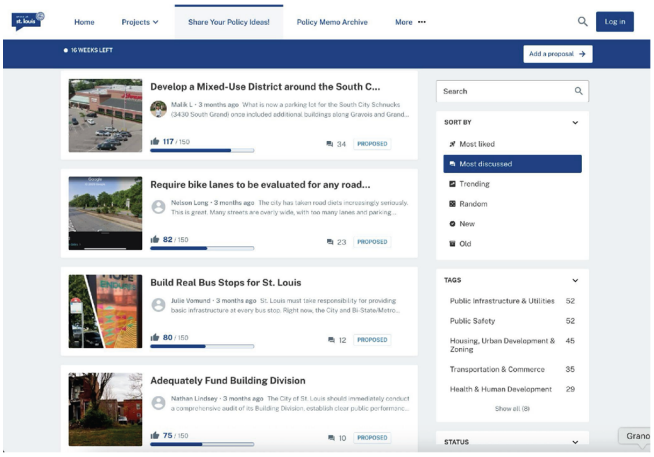
Precedents: How Others Are Doing Early-Stage Engagement at Scale

Across contexts — local, state, national, and international — early-stage engagement succeeds when it asks clear questions, provides structure, and uses AI to turn narrative input into usable intelligence.

St. Louis (United States): From ideas → priorities → a bill

When St. Louis needed to decide how to allocate a $250 million settlement from the Rams football team, the Board of Aldermen turned to residents before drafting any legislation or making policy (much as Bowling Green is doing). More than 16,000 residents participated in a process run using the open source Go Vocal platform. Go Vocal is used by more than 500 governments worldwide. Residents submitted over 1,000 ideas, identified the city's most pressing challenges, and ranked their priorities.[xxiv]





To make sense of that volume, the city used an AI-supported sensemaking tool that clustered ideas, surfaced common themes, and highlighted where different demographic groups diverged. Each AI-generated insight linked back to original resident comments for verification.

Departments then refined the proposals; residents reviewed them again; and the final bill — previously contentious — passed with broad legitimacy. St. Louis has now institutionalized this approach as an ongoing pipeline for bottom-up policymaking.

California (United States): Post-wildfire agenda-setting and prioritization

California used a similar two-phase structure following the Los Angeles wildfires. The public and especially survivors were invited to identify which recovery challenges mattered most — the issues they believed should shape state and local action. Participants first prioritized among potential focus areas, then reviewed and ranked concrete policy options developed from their earlier input.

They used a tool called Othello to engage more than 2,500 narrative comments, mapped proposals to major themes, and identified both consensus and key tensions — such as speed of rebuilding versus long-term resilience. The resulting community-driven action plan elevated five priority needs, from undergrounding power lines to strengthening water systems and streamlining permitting. Agencies have already begun implementing many of these recommendations.[xxv] The structured process enabled residents to set the agenda and see their input translated into concrete policy recommendations.

Brazil (National strategic planning): Millions engaged with AI-enabled synthesis

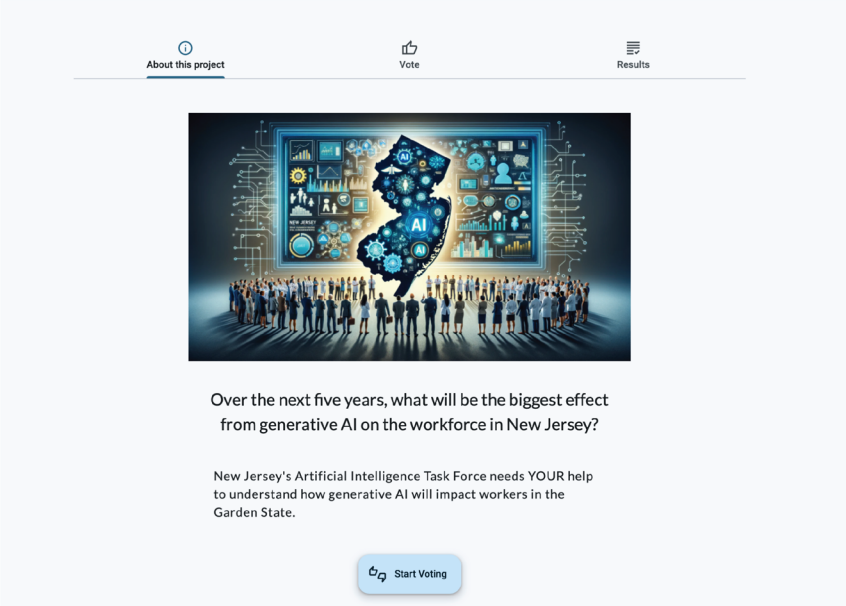
Brazil has taken early-stage engagement to the national scale. As part of its constitutionally mandated four-year Pluriannual Plan, the federal government in Brazil invited the public to help identify national priorities. The response was extraordinary: 1.4 million participants, over 1.5 million votes, and more than 8,200 proposals.

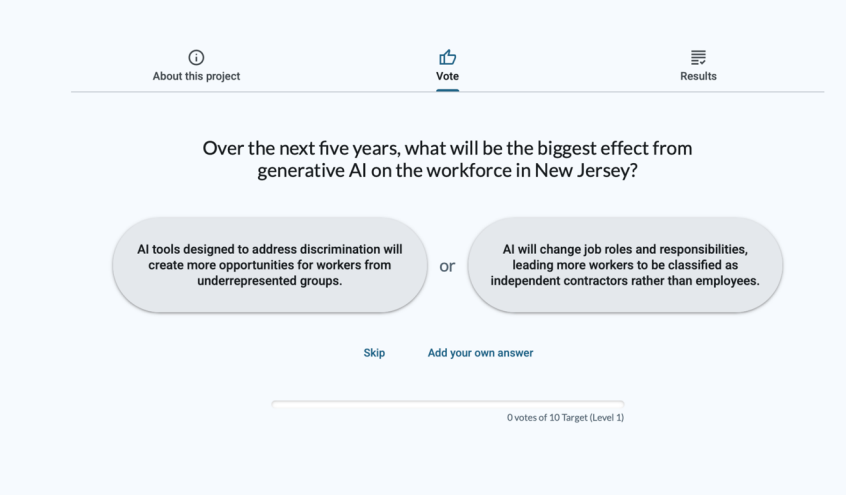
Because no institution can manually analyze input at that scale, Brazil built an AI-enabled process—now part of its permanent *Participatory Brazil* platform—to support structured feedback on draft plans and laws. Public comments are tied to specific provisions, and the AI pipeline automatically clusters submissions, extracts evidence, identifies major themes, and generates clear reports for staff.[xxvi] Crucially, the system also shows contributors how their input was incorporated, closing the feedback loop and reinforcing trust. The power comes from structure; AI simply makes the process faster, more scalable, and more transparent.

New Jersey (United States): Pairwise priority ranking

New Jersey has repeatedly used the open-source tool All Our Ideas, developed at Princeton and hosted by the nonprofit Citizens Foundation, to run large-scale engagements to identify the most urgent challenges residents believe the state should address. We used it to hear from more than 4,000 people to help us set priorities for our Future of Work Task Force and from over 2,200 workers in connection with our AI Task Force.[xxvii]

Instead of long free-text comments, residents compare pairs of ideas and "vote" between them, resulting in a ranked list of priorities. AI-supported translation produced multilingual, plain-language content, enabling broad participation. The resulting priority maps guided subsequent policy work.





What Congress Can Do Now

Congress could begin with a simple, low-risk pilot that helps a single committee understand what Americans view as the most urgent problems in a particular policy area — before drafting legislation, holding hearings or launching formal oversight.

A pilot might work as follows:

1. Pose one clear, well-defined question.
A committee selects a policy area — such as rural health care, wildfire resilience, cybersecurity, veterans' reintegration or public engagement in lawmaking — and invites the public to identify the most urgent challenges they experience.

2. Invite short narrative submissions.
Residents briefly describe the problem as they see it. These are not comments on a bill, but accounts of real-world barriers, harms, or needs. Alternatively, provide pre-written statements as we did in New Jersey and invite people to rank the issues.

3. Use AI for synthesis, not decision-making.
AI clusters similar submissions, identifies recurring themes and lesser-known concerns, highlights demographic or regional variation, and generates a concise, human-verifiable summary. All Our Ideas produces a rank-ordered list of issues.

4. Publish a short "What We Learned" summary.
A public memo — even one page — signals that input was taken seriously and shows which themes will shape the committee's work.

5. Repeat only if useful.
If effective, the model can be reused for other topics, committees, or bipartisan initiatives.

This pilot does not require new offices, new rules, or major procurement. It can be launched in weeks using open-source or lightly customized tools. What it offers is something Congress does not currently have: a clear, structured, and scalable way to understand what problems Americans believe deserve attention before drafting legislation.

VI. Risks and How to Mitigate Them

As Congress experiments with AI-enabled public engagement, it should proceed with clear eyes about the risks. None of these risks argue against using AI; they simply underscore that design and oversight matter as much as the technology itself.

1. The Risk of Hallucination

AI models can generate plausible but incorrect statements — the risk commonly known as hallucination. Fortunately, this risk is easiest to manage in the context of public engagement. When AI is used only to summarize and cluster text that the public actually submitted, rather than to generate new content, hallucination risk drops dramatically.

Modern tools allow Congress to:

- **Constrain the model to a defined corpus** (e.g., "summarize only the words provided in these submissions").
- **Require citations to the underlying text**, ensuring summaries link back to original comments.

- **Keep humans in the loop**, with staff reviewing and validating outputs before anything is used.

In other words: AI becomes a synthesis tool, not a content creator.

2. The Risk of Ineffective or Performative Engagement

The larger risk is not that engagement goes wrong — but that it goes nowhere.

Across the world, we have seen well-intentioned participatory exercises yield little value for either the public or policymakers. People invest their time, contribute ideas, and hear nothing back. Staff receive floods of input with no structure. Both sides walk away frustrated.

People want to participate in ways that are relevant, respectful of their time, and actually used. Policymakers need input that is structured, actionable, and tied to real decisions.

Poorly designed processes — however exciting in theory — create cynicism and undermine trust.

That is why every example in this testimony was designed around the needs of both the institution and the participants: Each one:

- asked clear and specific questions,
- designed structured pathways to contribute, and
- provided visible outcomes, including "what we heard" summaries.

These guardrails ensure engagement helps rather than distracts from the work of governing.

3. The Risk of "One-Platform Thinking"

Lawmaking and oversight are not single events; they are multi-stage processes — agenda setting, drafting, hearings, amendments, implementation. Each stage benefits from different forms of public expertise.

There is no single platform that can serve all of these functions, and adopting any one tool or single process as a silver bullet would be a mistake.

Instead, Congress should view this work as building a **portfolio** of engagement mechanisms:

- brief question solicitation for hearings,
- structured feedback on draft text,
- early-stage prioritization exercises,
- targeted outreach to experts or affected communities, after-action review once laws are implemented.

AI makes this *combinatorial* approach possible by reducing the burden of analyzing input from each stage. The goal is not one platform, but a set of processes that together help Congress collect expertise and intelligence from both representative and non-representative groups — always with human judgment guiding every decision.

These are far from the only risks, which also include the danger of spam, security breaches, AI-talking-to-AI but, with thoughtful design and outreach, these risks are manageable and outweighed by the opportunity to improve how Congress listens and learns.

VII. Beyond the Pilots: What Congress Must Build Next

The pilots outlined in Recommendations 174 and 176 are essential first steps.

We stand at the ready through our AI for Impact program to help with building free, open source, tested platforms for running these engagement processes; with advice and design from the New Jersey Office of Innovation based on our longstanding experience doing engagement at scale and with free training via the InnovateUS initiative, where we teach how to use AI for public engagement.[xxviii]

Going forward, if Congress wants to keep pace with the rising complexity of governing, it must treat these pilots as the beginning of a systematic effort to forge a more participatory institution that leverages new technology to elicit collective intelligence from the American people.

Other countries have already begun this shift. Brazil built an in-house innovation lab for public engagement in lawmaking. The US Congress needs the same: a dedicated, ongoing capability for innovation in participation to complement the AI and digital work in the Library of Congress and the CAO.

Establish a Participation Innovation Lab for Congress

Congress should create a small, permanent, interdisciplinary team modeled on the innovation labs in Brazil and Chile. This unit would:

- Run and refine ongoing public engagement processes for committees and Member offices.
- Work with outside experts on uses of AI for public engagement.
- Ensure processes are designed around decision-maker needs, not symbolic participation.
- Help committees choose the right engagement method at the right stage — from early-stage priority-setting to structured input on draft text to hearing-question collection.
- Develop templates, workflows, moderation standards, and evaluation metrics so engagement becomes easier, not harder, for staff.
- Coordinate with the CAO Coaches Program, House Digital Service, CRS, LOC and GAO to ensure engagement outputs feed into analysis and drafting work.

In New Jersey, the Office of Innovation was explicitly tasked with developing tools and processes for public engagement so that we could help agencies increase their uptake of public engagement practices. Congress needs the analog: an in-house team devoted to designing, running, and evaluating participatory processes that serve real legislative needs.

Build Congress.ai — A Publicly Governed Legislative AI Model

Congress is behind other legislatures in developing AI designed for the public interest. Without its own capabilities, Congress risks being outmatched by well-funded special interests using advanced AI to shape narratives, craft amendments, and lobby at unprecedented scale. The choice is no longer whether AI will be used in lawmaking but whose interests the technology will serve.

Congress needs a publicly governed, open, transparent congress.ai model trained on legislative data to use for building AI tools optimized for lawmaking.

- The 22 million words of the U.S. Code, nearly 4,000 pages of tax code, and the vast corpus of debates, transcripts, CRS reports, GAO analyses, amendments, committee prints, and historical legislative text form a world-class training corpus for a specialized model.

- Such a model could support drafting, help staff understand complex language, flag inconsistencies, forecast impacts across communities, and detect patterns in lobbying and amendment influence — strengthening both transparency and accountability.
- With AI fine-tuned on congressional data, it will become easier to build both public engagement and other legislative innovation tools.[xxix]

Invest in People: Systematic AI Training for Congress

Congress currently has no institution-wide AI training for staff or members; many rely on free, insecure tools because approved ones are unavailable or limited. In New Jersey, we have trained and provisioned almost 15K public professionals with AI and the knowledge to understand how to use AI to serve the public.

Congress needs:

- Mandatory AI literacy and safety training for all staff.
- Specialized drafting, analysis, and participation modules for committee counsels, CRS analysts, and legislative directors.

Congress is stretched thinner today than at any moment in modern history. Yet we now have, for the first time, technologies capable of restoring Congress's ability to listen at scale, learn from the expertise of the American people, and make laws and conduct oversight both more efficiently and effectively.

By implementing Recommendations 174 and 176 through small, thoughtful pilots, this Subcommittee can help Congress engage the public in ways that strengthen lawmaking, increase transparency, and rebuild trust right away.

Thank you for your leadership and for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.

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[i] For a complete bio, please see Beth Simone Noveck, https://thegovlab.org/beth-simone-noveck.html, accessed December 12, 2025.

[ii] CrowdLaw for Congress, https://congress.crowd.law/. See also Beth Simone Noveck, "Crowdlaw: Collective Intelligence and Lawmaking," *Analyse & Kritik* 40, no. 2 (2018): 359–380, https://www.analyse-und-kritik.net/Dateien/5be9b083bc696_noveck.pdf.

[iii] In the State of New Jersey, we are using AI to streamline how the government handles calls.. The team I founded at the Office of Innovation in New Jersey has modernized 13 call centers, enabling them to efficiently handle over

10 million calls in 2024. These upgraded systems increased the number of callers who successfully reach a live agent by 6 to 15 percent, while cutting operational costs roughly in half. **Average wait times have fallen from over 40 minutes to under two minutes across several agencies**. AI now analyzes call transcripts so menus reflect what people actually need, supports self-service tools in English and Spanish, and enables "warm callbacks" so residents aren't stuck on hold and do not need to call at all. Callers can receive helpful links and information through text message, and managers now receive real-time insights into emerging issues so they can proactively adjust menu options. This is what AI can do when paired with good process design: it transforms millions of unstructured, high-stakes interactions into a manageable, efficient workflow. We are happy to share our playbook to help Member and committee offices manage constituent communications.

[iv] Congressional Research Service, *House of Representatives Staff Levels, 1977-2023* (Nov. 28, 2023), https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R43947/R43947.9.pdf; LegBranch.org, "Legislative Branch Support Staffing Down 45 Percent Since 1975," May 30, 2017, https://www.legbranch.org/2017-5-25-legislative-branch-staffing-down-45-percent-since-1975/; and Congressional Research Service, *Legislative Branch Appropriations: Frequently Asked Questions* (Report R43397, updated August 8, 2024), https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43397 (see Tables 1-2 on appropriation shares).

[v] OpenSecrets, "Total Cost of Election (1990–2024)," accessed December 10, 2025, https://www.opensecrets.org/elections-overview/cost-of-election; Congressional Research Service, *Legislative Branch Appropriations: Frequently Asked Questions*, R43397, updated August 8, 2024, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43397; and OpenSecrets, "Trends in Spending, 2008–2024," federal lobbying data, accessed December 10, 2025, https://www.opensecrets.org/federal-lobbying/trends-in-spending; Zeller, "Congress Is Good at Shrinking One Part of Government." *Roll Call*, January 20, 2015, https://rollcall.com/2015/01/20/congress-is-good-at-shrinking-one-part-of-government/"

[vi] UK Cabinet Office, Incubator for Artificial Intelligence, "Consult," accessed December 10, 2025, https://ai.gov.uk/projects/consult/.

[vii] Beth Simone Noveck, "How Hamburg is Turning Resident Comments into Actionable Insight," Reboot Democracy, October 22, 2025, https://rebootdemocracy.ai/blog/how-hamburg-is-turning-resident-comments-into-actionable-insight.

[viii] Government of Singapore, About Singapore Together, accessed December 12, 2025, https://www.sg/about.

[ix] Beth Simone Noveck, Dane Gambrell, Valeria Gomez Palacios, and Anna Ibru, *Expanding and Strengthening Engagement on Decide Madrid: A Data-Driven Evaluation,* The GovLab, March 2022, https://files.thegovlab.org/madrid-report-english.pdf.

[x] Beth Simone Noveck, Wiki Government (Brookings Press 2009). See also "Peer-to-Parent: Better Information for Better Patents," White House Open Government Initiative, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/open/innovations/Peer-to-Patent.

[xi] Center for Civic Futures, "Center for Civic Futures and partners commit $8.5M for AI solutions that improve safety net program delivery December 9, 2025," https://www.centerforcivicfutures.org/resources/center-for-civic-futures-and-partners-commit-8-5m-for-ai-solutions-that-improve-safety-net-program-delivery.

[xii] Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, "DIPAS - Digital Participation System for Hamburg," accessed December 10, 2025, https://www.dipas.org/en.

[xiii] Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Brazil: A Digitally Mature Parliament," June 1, 2022, https://www.ipu.org/news/case-studies/2022-06/brazil-digitally-mature-parliament.

[xiv] Luís Kimaid, "From Paper to Tokens: Transforming Legislative Services in the Chamber of Deputies of Chile," Bússola Tech, June 11, 2025, https://library.bussola-tech.co/p/caminar-camara-diputadas-diputados-chile.

[xv] Pascale Davies, "An AI Tool is Making the European Parliament's History Easier to Understand in All EU Languages," *Euronews Next,* October 22, 2024, https://www.euronews.com/next/2024/10/22/an-ai-tool-is-making-the-european-parliaments-history-easier-to-understand-in-all-eu-langu.

[xvi] Beth Simone Noveck et al., *From Citizen to Senator: Artificial Intelligence and the Reinvention of Citizen Lawmaking in Brazil,* The GovLab, April 2025, https://files.thegovlab.org/from-citizen-to-senator.pdf.

[xvii] For example, in shaping the conversation around foreign researchers during the Senate Finance Committee's June 2019 hearing on foreign threats to taxpayer-funded research, the CSPI provided committee members with evidence of the importance of global collaboration and the free and open exchange of information for academic research. This helped to balance out a perspective that foreign born students and researchers were possible threats to national security - a view that had seeped into discussion in political circles. In his opening statement, Senator Ron Wyden read from the testimony of a foreign researcher, provided by a CSPI contributor, and pointed to the many contributions to scientific research made by foreign researchers, taking a strong stance in favor of academic freedom and setting the tone for the rest of the hearing.

[xviii] Dane Gambrell, "Congressional Science Policy Initiative," The GovLab, October 2020, https://collective-intelligence.thegovlab.org/case/congressional-science-policy-initiative.

[xix] Warren County, Kentucky, and Jigsaw, "What Could BG Be?", April 2025, https://www.whatcouldbgbe.com/.

[xx] State of California, "Engaged California," accessed December 10, 2025, https://engaged.ca.gov/.

[xxi] For more about AI for Impact, visit https://burnes.northeastern.edu/ai-for-impact-coop and Open Feedback, https://ai4impact.ai/projects, accessed Dec 12, 2025.

[xxii] With the help of the Berkman Center at Harvard Law School and the Governance Lab, the German government crowdsourced input into its AI policy "Key points for a Federal Government Strategy on Artificial Intelligence," Federal Government of Germany, July 7, 2018, https://www.bmas.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/Topics/Labour-Market/key-points-ai-strategy.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=1. See also Beth S. Noveck, Rose Harvey, Anirudh Dinesh, The Open Policymaking Playbook, The GovLab, April 2019, https://thegovlab.org/static/files/publications/openpolicymaking-april29.pdf.

[xxiii] Róbert Bjarnason, Gunnar Grimsson, and Gina Joerger, *Better Reykjavik: Municipal Open Innovation*, The GovLab, April 2019, https://thegovlab.org/static/files/better-reykjavik.pdf

[xxiv] Sarah Horton, "St. Louis Involves 16,000+ Residents in the Allocation of Settlement Fund," GoVocal, January 22, 2024, https://www.govocal.com/case-studies/st-louis-collects-ideas-from-7000-residents-online

[xxv] Micah Weinberg, "The Promise and Potential of Engaged California: Lessons from the Los Angeles Wildfires," Carnegie California, November 24, 2025. https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2025/09/engaged-california-la-wildfires-lessons?lang=en.

[xxvi]Christiana Freitas and Ricardo Poppi, "Global AI Watch: Brazil's Experiment in AI-Powered Participation," Reboot Democracy, November 5, 2025. https://rebootdemocracy.ai/blog/global-ai-watch-brazils-experiment-in-ai-powered-participation.

[xxvii] Dane Gambrell, "Your Future of Work: What the New Jersey Future of Work Task Force learned from 4,000 workers in the Garden State," New Jersey Office of Innovation, September 2020, https://fowtf.innovation.nj.gov/downloads/resources/YourFutureOfWork.pdf; and Dane Gambrell, "AI for Egovernance: Combining Artificial Intelligence and Collective Intelligence to Develop Evidence-Based AI Policy," in *2025 Eleventh International Conference on eDecmoracy & eGovernment (ICEDEG), 317-324 (IEEE, 2025)*, July 2025, https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/11081634.

[xxviii] See Reboot Democracy: Designing Democratic Engagement for the AI Era, InnovateUS, https://innovate-us.org/workshop-series/democratic-engagement, accessed Dec 12, 2025. We are turning the live workshops into an asynchronous course, which will be ready in spring 2026.

[xxix] For more on Congress and the use of AI to enhance lawmaking, see Beth Simone Noveck. *Reboot: The Race to Save Democracy with AI* (Yale Press 2026) (forthcoming).

Chairwoman BICE. Thank you, Dr. Noveck.

Just a bit of housekeeping. You probably heard the bells. House votes have been called. We will go ahead and finish opening statements, along with the opening statement from Ranking Member Morelle of the full Committee. Then we will take a brief pause for Members to go vote, and then we will return.

At this time, I recognize—Mr. Ward, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF KEN WARD

Mr. WARD. Good morning. Thank you for inviting the Chief Administrative Office to participate in today's hearing. I am joined by our CAO, Catherine Szpindor; our chief information officer, Jamie Crotts; our chief digital officer, Bob Barrett; and our deputy chief information security officer, Addie Adeniji.

Personally, I have spent my entire career in and around the legislative branch. I worked in a Member office. I founded the citizen engagement software company Fireside 21, and I served as CEO for 10 years. I have spent the last 5 years here at the CAO and lead our House Digital Service. I have had a front row seat to see how technology has changed and impacted Member offices.

The era dominated by landlines and letters is certainly over, and today, citizens and advocacy groups are already leveraging AI to reach and influence Congress. Here in the House, the CAO has been bringing new methodologies and technologies online: human-centered design practices, business automation, cloud integration, and responsible AI, just to name a few.

These innovations bring new possibilities for our products and services, and today, we are sharing a new vision to help Members and their staff improve constituent engagement while continuing to ensure the privacy and security of the sensitive data.

In the unique environment of the House, the nonpartisan CAO plays the role of both innovator and host when it comes to innovation. As an innovator, we build and maintain custom applications, like the Communicating with Congress API, e-Dear Colleague System, House Cal, LegiDex, and Quill. Over the past several years, in large part because of this Subcommittee and the previous Select Committee on Modernization, the House has advanced constituent-focused technology as well. We launched FlagTrack, which helps offices manage flag requests from constituents, and we are piloting Case Compass, an initiative to aggregate and analyze casework to help Members better understand trends and conduct oversight of the executive branch.

In our other role as host to innovation, the CAO facilitates access to commercial technologies, like office productivity suites, photo and video editing software, collaboration tools, and correspondence management systems, the CMS systems your offices use daily.

The current contract structure for CMS is designed so every Member's constituent data resides within one of a few proprietary systems, and now this design is limiting our innovation because other vendors cannot access your data to provide new or improved services. To be clear, we are not blaming CMS vendors. They are all operating within the framework that the House has required for several decades that ensures the protection of your data. However,

with recent advancements in secure storage and computing technologies, the House can and should explore making changes that could spur Members' access to more innovation, most notably, by changing the way constituent data is stored and accessed.

As you know, we have proposed creating a secure, House-controlled constituent data lake for each Member that can be leveraged by multiple House and vendor applications if and as authorized by each Member.

In short, your constituent data would be hosted in a way that gives you control over who can securely access your office's data, and that shared access will allow you to pick from a variety of vendors, offering a range of constituent engagement services. This concept will open the door to new technologies and greater interoperability with existing House applications.

Just this past September, over 20 innovators pitched new Congress-specific applications at the Congressional Hackathon. Presenters shared tools that use AI to identify constituent sentiment, automate sorting, and show real-time analytics. A data lake would help bring these new innovations to Congress and provide opportunities to enhance numerous other internal applications. For example, you can imagine receiving an eDear Colleague and that invitation to cosponsor a new bill already having data from your citizens who support and oppose that bill.

We think our issue is not a lack of innovation. It is just an access to this innovation. Migrating to a House-controlled data lake will require a multiyear investment. However, our iterative approach will not only validate ongoing investment but also deliver new capabilities along the way, new capabilities that will be available to all Member offices without the need to switch your CMS.

If done correctly, building a data platform that focuses on security, governance, users, and constituents, the House will spur both internal and external innovation in constituent engagement. It is a future where Members are more empowered with a wider range of options to best serve and interact with the American public.

Again, thank you for today's invitation, and happy to answer your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Ward follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF KEN WARD



Office of the
CHIEF
ADMINISTRATIVE
OFFICER

The Future of Constituent Engagement

Ken Ward
Senior Director, House Digital Service
Office of the Chief Administrative Officer
December 17, 2025

The Office of the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of the U.S. House of Representatives, specifically its House Digital Service (HDS) team, appreciates the Committee on House Administration Subcommittee on Modernization and Innovation's invitation to participate in its hearing on the future of constituent engagement. Subcommittee Chairwoman Bice, Ranking Member Torres, and members of the Subcommittee have been both instrumental and supportive of the CAO's endeavor to help House offices achieve greater efficiency through innovation, including its efforts to harness new technologies that improve Member constituent services while simultaneously protecting Members' data.

Bottomline upfront; the House should securely expand access to constituent data so Members can reap the benefit of new constituent engagement innovation.

The CAO plays the unique role of both innovator and host to vendor innovation. Under the Committee's leadership, it has facilitated access to commercial off-the-shelf generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools that can improve constituent engagement and oversight capabilities and capacity (e.g., correspondence, speeches, report summaries, etc.). It has also successfully leveraged AI internally to develop and deploy custom applications specifically aimed at assisting Members with constituent engagement activities. With the evolution of our on-premises and secure cloud storage and computing technologies with AI integration, the CAO believes more can be done to provide Members with greater access to emerging AI technology solutions that will help Members further engage with their constituencies.

The CAO believes the House should consider restructuring the current IT infrastructure and technical environment that hosts Members' constituent data, explore ways to securely provide greater access to that constituent data, and improve the flow of information to vendors about security requirements and contract protocols required to do business with the House. Combined, the CAO believes these improvements will increase the development of and access to new, innovative applications that will yield more meaningful constituent engagement.

This testimony will explore the current state of constituent engagement and vendor services and propose a potential solution to increase access to both in-house and vendor innovative solutions.

Current State: Congressional Constituent Engagement Landscape
Since the era dominated by landlines and letters, congressional communications between Members and their constituents have grown and evolved along with technological advancements in communications and the proliferation of social networking. Today, Members can send e-newsletters, host tele-town halls, and reach tens of thousands with merely a few clicks of a button. What remains a challenge is conducting meaningful, two-way constituent engagement with ever-growing constituencies and finite resources.

AI tools offer potential solutions to make inbound constituent sentiment more manageable. GenAI Is already assisting offices with tasks such as drafting form letters without replacing human involvement. Future AI-enabled applications could enhance email and digital mail handling through categorization,

sorting, and advanced analytics. The technology is there; the barrier is securely accessing the underlying data for these new tools.

There are numerous modern methods for conducting constituent engagement beyond traditional email and mail, such as deliberative town halls, text messaging, and other innovative approaches. Organizations across the country are exploring new ways to make it easier for constituents to conduct outreach, but they have no easy way to plug into the existing Correspondence Management Systems (CMS) that offices use to manage constituent data.

With so many potential avenues to pursue, what should the future of constituent engagement with Congress entail? The role of the CAO, as a nonpartisan institutional office, is not to prescribe how offices should conduct constituent services, but rather to empower Members to deploy their most effective strategies using the best tools and resources available.

Current State: Existing Channels for Vendor Services and Associated Challenges to Integrating New Applications

As it currently exists, excluding major enterprise technologies and web services (e.g., email, data storage, web, web conferencing, financial systems, etc.), the House has two primary "avenues" for vendors interested in doing business with House offices.

First, there is the House's cloud review and approval process prescribed by House information security policy designed to protect House data.[1] This process evaluates multiple application criteria (e.g., product fitness, security risks, technical specifications, legal terms and conditions, etc.) and applies to all cloud applications and technical services "not developed, owned, or under contract by the House." There are currently over 90 approved applications for Member office use.

Second, is the House Technology Services Contract (TSC), which governs the CMS products, Maintenance Services, and System Administration Services. Per the TSC, each vendor must meet and maintain specific functional, security, financial, and infrastructure standards. CMS vendors, for example, are required to provide approximately 115 platform features and are responsible for collecting, updating, storing and transferring Members' constituent data. Through its regular collaboration with House CMS vendors, the CAO understands the demands placed on CMS vendors under the current TSC structure can be complicated and strict.

The Committee has approved rigorous standards for all House vendors and has assigned to the CAO the role of vetting vendor compliance. The CAO reviews vendor proposals against these standards and makes recommendations to the Committee for consideration. The Committee only authorizes vendors that have met House standards as validated by the CAO.

The reviews of and requirements on vendors that do business are thorough and strict for good reasons and based on past experiences. Over the past two decades, there have been vendors who have experienced financial hardships that disrupted service to Member offices. Multiple vendor

[1] The United States House of Representatives Information Security Policy for Protecting House Data in Cloud and Non-House Services (HISPOL 017.0)

platforms have experienced severe technical limitations and repeated cybersecurity failures that placed constituent data at risk. One instance involving a vendor's technical limitations resulted in a Member permanently losing all constituent records – an unacceptable outcome that highlights the need for thorough review of vendors performing work at the House.

The current IT structure and vendor review, approval, and contracting protocols are required to mitigate risks and safeguard Members' data to the maximum extent possible. The current structure and processes, however, have created a system where all Members' constituent data resides within the proprietary platforms controlled by a very small pool of vendors. Thus, emerging innovators can't access constituent data without coordination with these vendors. This limits innovation.

Potential Solution to Increase Constituent Engagement Innovation: Data Lake
The evolution of AI technologies coupled with growth in secure storage and computing technologies makes now the perfect time to consider revamping how Members' constituent data is securely controlled, updated, transferred and made available to applications.

Instead of the current structure, where a small pool of vendors are responsible for collecting, updating, storing and transferring Members' constituent data, the House should consider creating a secure, House-controlled constituent data environment that can be leveraged by various House and vendor applications as authorized by each Member. The proposed data environment is commonly referred to as a "data lake" within the tech industry.

Migrating to a House-controlled data lake model would require a multi-year phased-approach to ensure a seamless, secure transition for both Members and current CMS vendors. It would also require additional resources to develop and sustain year-over-year. The CAO has worked with the Subcommittee to develop and submit a formal modernization funding request to explore this model.

The CAO's proposed plan would iteratively bring these capabilities online without disrupting the existing CMS vendors or office workflows. The benefits of this platform would also be realized in phases, with new services coming online from both the institution and commercial technology providers, not to mention relief from many of the pains felt by offices and vendors due to Congressional transitions and redistricting.

By building a data platform and vetting processes that focus on data, governance, security, users, and constituents first, the House can spur both internal and external innovation in constituent engagement.

Internal Opportunities: House AI Integration & Customized Constituent Engagement Innovation
Advancement and adoption of GenAI technology is already being deployed to engage and target Congress through advocacy efforts and nefarious cyber-criminal activity. Congress, in turn, must also leverage GenAI to its advantage, which is exactly what the CAO is working towards in collaboration with the Committee on House Administration and its Subcommittee on Modernization and Innovation.

Since 2022, when OpenAI released ChatGPT, the CAO has worked with the Committee to review and authorize multiple GenAI products for House use. There have been advisory groups, use case adoption, guidance, and guardrails for the House community. In September of 2024, the House became the first legislative body in the world to establish a formal AI policy.

Today, multiple platforms are approved for use by House offices, and the House is preparing to roll out an AI platform integrated with offices' Outlook and OneDrive data. It is also actively reviewing additional tools for integrated deployment.

In addition to assisting with the authorization and deployment of commercial AI platforms, the CAO is leveraging AI to build and deploy customized applications for the House. For example, the CAO is currently working on an important pilot project with the Subcommittee, known as "CaseCompass," that leverages AI to anonymize, aggregate, and analyze casework data from 14 participating Member offices. The pilot application, still in its infancy, is already capable of automatically categorizing casework based on executive branch agency and constituent-reported problems, thus allowing offices to see chronological and geographical trends in agency challenges. If rolled out House-wide, this application could positively impact Members' ability to assist constituents with casework, conduct oversight of executive branch agencies, as well as contemplate legislative policy changes to improve outcomes.

The data lake model could have expedited existing projects like CaseCompass. Because all CMS providers collect and store data differently, the CAO had to invest time and money into building and maintaining infrastructure to access and retrieve casework data for each participating Member office across multiple vendors. The proposed data lake would have vastly accelerated development and can still enhance scalability, grow functionality, and improve data governance with varied tiers and permissions.

The data lake solution also opens the door to new opportunities. The CAO is uniquely positioned to provide value in areas where the private sector is unlikely to fill the need, and data aggregation across the entire House is a great example. In addition to chamber-wide casework analytics via CaseCompass, the House could explore the same concept for constituent correspondence. Each office is manually performing trends analysis on their own data and only in the context of their individual office, but there is a wealth of valuable insights to be gained from high level trends from the public as a whole across the country.

Finally, the data lake model could also facilitate greater interoperability and data sharing with existing House applications (e.g., e-Dear Colleagues, HouseCal, etc.) to produce constituent sentiment analyses and provide Members with greater insight into constituent sentiment on pending legislation and House activity. Imagine a Legislative Assistant receiving an e-Dear Colleague requesting co-sponsorship of a new bill, and the email already includes that over 500 constituents have written in about the topic and links to a breakdown of their sentiment analysis.

External Opportunities: Private Sector Innovation and Member Office Freedom of Choice

The roadblock to greater innovation is not a lack of innovative ideas; it's the complexities associated with doing business with the House. There are numerous examples of innovative applications that have potential to help Congress. In fact, over 20 innovators pitched new Congress-specific applications in September during the Seventh Annual Congressional Hackathon hosted by House Speaker Mike Johnson, Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries, and House CAO Catherine Szpindor. Multiple new AI-powered CMS providers have garnered interest from House offices, but they have no easy path to sell to the House. Under the data model, these tools could come to market and offices would not face the risk of losing constituent data if a company fails.

The new system would reduce the many requirements on existing House vendors, including the often-cumbersome requirement on current CMS vendors to transfer data between Members when authorized. It would encourage vendors (old, new, full-service, and niche) to experiment with new innovative solutions to augment CMS**.** More importantly, it would enable offices to leverage new services without having to transition to a new CMS. For vendors, that opens the opportunity to offer a new service to every House office without having to convince them to change their primary CMS provider.

Conclusion

Again, the House plays two critical roles when it comes to advancing constituent engagement technologies – innovator and host.

As an innovator, the CAO is proud of the work it has done to deliver customized services that leverage the power of AI and improve House office operations. It strongly believes that it must continue its important work to constantly assess Members' needs and develop innovative solutions that help offices interact with and assist growing constituencies.

As host, the CAO recognizes the inherent value of private-sector innovation and must do everything within its power to facilitate greater access to cutting-edge technologies. This includes exploring a new constituent data lake that promotes and facilitates vendor innovation. Success in this role will be measured by secure and competitive constituent service application options.

With the advancement of AI and secure cloud storage and computing technology, coupled with the improved flow of information to potential vendors, the CAO believes there exists great potential to increase constituent engagement innovation.

The CAO appreciates the opportunity to participate in this important discussion and looks forward to its continued partnership with the Subcommittee and House stakeholders as it continues its work on this important and impactful initiative.

Chairwoman BICE. Thank you, Mr. Ward.

Thank you to all the panelists for those opening statements.

At this time, I am going to recognize Ranking Member of the full Committee on House Administration, Mr. Morelle, for an opening statement.

Mr. Morelle.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JOSEPH MORELLE, RANKING MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION, A U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FROM NEW YORK

Mr. MORELLE. Thank you. I will be very brief given that we have votes. I appreciate the witnesses for being here on a really important subject, and certainly to you, Madam Chair, for your continued good work in helping to modernize Congress, and certainly to my friend, Ranking Member Torres, as well for your leadership.

I do want to acknowledge Catherine Szpindor who is retiring in the next few days and thank her for her long service to the Congress. We are very, very grateful. Wish her the very best as she transitions to the next phase of her life.

I also just want to acknowledge Mike Carey who keeps adding layers of clothing because it is so damn cold on that side of the room, and the House Administration Committee ought to do something about it.

In a serious mode, I think of, as I was thinking about this in my head, how constituents engage with Congress. I am sure there are many different buckets, but the four that I am particularly interested in—one is just access to information about Congress, what bills are happening, making it easy to access that so it is not as bewildering as it may seem to people.

The second is sort of the interaction with Members, engaging us in terms of providing perspective on issues before the House, issues before the country, what they think we ought to be doing, and for us to be able to engage with constituents. That interaction is very important.

Then the last two are related. One is access to Government services. How do people know how to connect with all the things that we offer, both Federal, State, local?

Then the final, which is related and adjacent, but it is access to community services. How do I know—if I am suddenly in crisis, how do I know to engage? I think many times when we do constituent services, people reaching out because they are entering into a system that is, to them, bewildering.

At a time when we have clearly lost the faith and confidence of the American people institutionally as Government, that last—those last two buckets may be, in some ways, the most important just because as people are in crisis, our family members are in crisis, how do they engage? I have some real thoughts on that.

The introduction of AI clearly is critical, and I would love to learn more about it. I will admit, many websites I go to where I am doing a chatbot, and it is clearly a chat assistance, I find incredibly frustrating. I do not feel like—I feel like I might as well read the frequently asked questions because there is no other engagement other than the frequently asked questions being regurgitated to me. That will get better. Clearly, having humans engaged

in this is going to be a big deal. I appreciate all of what you have to say, and I am looking forward to, after votes, coming back and engaging again.

Madam Chair, thanks for giving me the opportunity to say a few words.

[The prepared statement of Ranking Member Morelle follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION JOSEPH MORELLE

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Chairwoman BICE. Thank you, Ranking Member Morelle.

I want to second the comments that you made about Catherine Szpindor and her departure from the CAO. It has been a joy and pleasure working with the entire CAO staff but particularly Catherine on these endeavors. Your presence will be noted as you depart for greener pastures potentially.

With that, we are going to take a recess of the Subcommittee, and we will return upon the conclusion of votes.

The Subcommittee will now come to order.

We will now move to questions for the witnesses, beginning with me, followed by the Ranking Member Torres, Mr. Carey, and Mr. Morelle. Each Member will have 5 minutes to ask questions, so I ask to please keep your responses concise. I now recognize myself for the purpose of questioning the witnesses.

First of all, thank you for the very insightful testimony. I think that we can agree that AI is certainly becoming a useable tool as we look to improve constituent engagement across the House.

My first question, though—and this may be more for Dr. Noveck or Mr. Ward—is, how do you build a platform that would be useful as an AI tool, for example, using a chatbot, that could actually give

responses that are going to be accurate and/or make sense? Are you looking at building some sort of customized element to actually interact with the House website?

Second, how could you ensure that the responses that are being given are going to be customized to each office? Because, for example, Mrs. Torres and I may have a different perspective on an ag issue. Can you talk a little bit about how you might do that?

Ms. NOVECK. No red light on my end.

I—thank you for the question. I think one of the things that we have done in New Jersey, first of all, and that we have done through our work building tools for other States as well is to start with internal-facing chatbots. I think it is really important to recognize that these tools are extremely good for synthesizing information and that is what has made it possible to do things like train an AI tool on a specific corpus of documents.

That would mean a Member could—and it is something, by the way, that together with POPVOX, the AI for Impact program built the first and tested the first chatbot for a Member, where we loaded it with all of that Member's position statements, bill drafts, et cetera. Then—the tools are getting much better at restricting responses only to what is on—what is in that corpus of knowledge. That is one way to avoid the hallucination problem, No. 1.

No. 2, internal-facing tools, so that what you are doing is giving staff a tool that they can use to quickly give answers to people. In New Jersey, for example, we are not using chatbots to answer constituent calls. You are not getting, you know, a machine. What you are getting is a human who in turn has a good lookup tool on their end that is allowing them to synthesize a lot of information. I think the best place to start is with those tools for the people answering the phone, to make their jobs easier. The tools are allowing us to get better, especially when you train them to restrict their answers to a specific corpus of knowledge. That is also what has allowed us in New Jersey to bring down the time it takes to answer a call from 40 minutes to now 3 minutes and modernize all of our call centers using some of these practices.

Chairwoman BICE. Fantastic. Would you like to add anything, Mr. Ward?

Mr. WARD. I would just echo that. I think we have a lot of opportunities here internally for those chatbots. There is a use case where staff is trying to find House operational information; that could be on HouseNet. There is the data that is private to your office; that could be a different chatbot. There is data in your CMS; that could be a separate chatbot. It is just about structuring data the right way to enable those services.

Chairwoman BICE. Perfect. Thank you.

Dr. Neblo, I want to pivot to you. Your testimony highlighted the mismatch between public frustration and Congress' current engagement methods. What specific institutional reforms would help bridge this gap and make constituent input more actionable for Members?

Mr. NEBLO. Thank you. That is a—that is a great question.

At the Institute so far, we have had a relatively small set that we have implemented and have hard evidence on. I try to follow a kind of political science Hippocratic oath, so I will separate a lit-

tle bit between what I have firsthand, you know, scientific evidence about and then some other ideas that we do not have as much backing on.

Deliberative town halls, we have done, I forget how many now, and none have gone badly. There is some——

Chairwoman BICE. Define "gone badly."

Mr. NEBLO. OK. Define—that is a great question. In no—in no case has a Member not gained trust approval, voting rates, voting for the Member rates. Now, in some cases it is small. In other cases it is eye-popping. Gone wrong would be the Member stuck their neck out, tried something new, and it hurt them in the eyes of their constituents. That is how I would define it. That has not happened once.

Chairwoman BICE. How do you ensure—with a particular platform that you are utilizing, is it—are you able to ensure that the individuals that you are connecting with are constituents of that particular Member?

Mr. NEBLO. Yes. That is one of the really nice things about doing the online town halls and doing them by invitation. In principle, somebody that we give the invitation to and have the verified link could give it to somebody else but not be on at the same time themselves, right. There is a little shadow of a possibility once in a while, but we have reason to think that we are talking about tiny numbers, maybe no one, on that.

The results are really quite large. Your predecessors on the Select Committee did a joint bipartisan town hall, and 2 weeks after it, affective polarization, dislike of the out party relative to the in party, was as if 38 years ago. Thirty-eight—I mean, that—over 100 studies have been published trying to lower affective polarization. This is the largest one. Most of the other large ones, you cannot talk about politics. We need to learn how to talk about politics.

Chairwoman BICE. Thank you very much, Dr. Neblo. I appreciate that.

I will now recognize the Ranking Member, Mrs. Torres, for 5 minutes.

Mrs. TORRES. Thank you again. I am really excited to hear more about this developing technology. Certainly, you know, the in-person town halls have caused a lot of security concerns. They require law enforcement presence, security presence, not just for the Member but for the attendees. To be able to have a conversation with constituents, for me it has been a lot more work because that means that we have to limit information to maybe 120 people in a smaller setting or we do a lot more roundtable discussions with 30, 40 people versus doing a town hall that can bring in, you know, 4-, 600 people. I look forward to continue and to hear more about that.

On the issue of securing data, I think we—you and I talked a little bit, Mr. Ward, about some of my concerns that I have. We have a lot of casework that is open. Some of it is 10 years old. It takes that long to get some of the cases completed. I want to be able to, when a constituent calls my office, for anyone in the office to be able to respond to that constituent so that constituent do not have to wait for the caseworker assigned to their individual case to get a response. You know, we are still researching your information.

We are still waiting for the agency to reply to us. We cannot check back in for another 3 or 4 days.

How do I ensure that anyone who answers the call in my office, in any one of my offices—and many times, they are interns answering the phone—has some data available that they can immediately respond to that caller but not be able to see specific data, such as a Social Security or identifiable information for that constituent?

Mr. WARD. OK. Well, a couple things. I think, you know, with what we are proposing, one of the benefits of what we are proposing is to be able to have governance that is specific to different parts of that data. We are not certainly proposing taking all this data and putting it in a large language model, for example. With a data lake, you can have different settings and different governance on different segments of data and sharing, similarly, you know, what people can see. Now, that will require some integration with the service providers, make sure that there is integration there. That is very feasible.

There is also potential to have more self-service capabilities for citizens. They can go to a portal and access the status as well.

Mrs. TORRES. The constituent——

Mr. WARD. Correct.

Mrs. TORRES [continuing]. themselves. OK. Where they would be able to input their personal data so the bot or the computer—the system knows that it is responding to the correct person.

Mr. WARD. That is right. They would have to authenticate into the system. But, you know, for example, with our FlagTrack product, a little—much different, but we are proposing expanding that so citizens can, you know, self-service checking the status of those orders. Something similar could exist for casework.

Mrs. TORRES. Right. Nearly one in three working Americans have very little digital skills. We learned the hard way about this when the VA made a change requiring digital IDs instead of ID cards. My office had created a system that we could go to any location and be able to get a constituent a real ID that they can carry in their pocket, that they can show for their benefits and other public benefits—public and private benefits that are available to them. You know, we have to create systems that do not shut them out completely.

Outside of going out and training our constituents on how to create a screen name or, you know, an email address, how do you propose that we jump through some of these hoops that are also challenges?

Ms. Noveck, you seem to really be involved in the constituency part of this.

Ms. NOVECK. We have rolled out a program that we call our Civic AI training program. It works via WhatsApp in multiple languages that was designed to teach people what AI is but how to use it to engage and interact with Government. It is specifically for that purpose. We designed it, actually, with families in California, in fact, as part of a program where we co-designed together with those families tools using AI to help understand their child's individualized education program, the document you get from Government, the 100-page PDF you get about the services to which you are entitled when your child has a—is differently-abled.

We believe that citizens are smart. They want to learn. They are capable of not just understanding what these tools are but helping to build them. That is why we are rolling out via the mobile phone multilingual support in—free—in how to use AI to interact with——

Mrs. TORRES. What is the program called?

Ms. NOVECK. Sorry. Civic AI.

Mrs. TORRES. Civic AI. Thank you.

I yield back.

Chairwoman BICE. Thank you, Ranking Member.

At this time, I recognize Representative Carey for 5 minutes for questions.

Mr. CAREY. Thank you. I want to thank the Chair and the Ranking Member.

Doctor, I am going to start with you. Of course, knowing where you are from, I have to start off with OH. All right. We all know that the public trust in Congress is much lower than we would like it to be, and that continues to be a cause of concern. I was struck by the survey finding that 70 percent of respondents are willing to engage more directly with elected officials on important issues. Now, to me, that is a positive sign.

Now, you mentioned deliberative town halls as an effective form of two-way engagement. At this time, could you talk maybe a little bit more how those might work?

Mr. NEBLO. Sure. Thank you for the opportunity.

The real difference in—there are a few differences in deliberative town halls. One of them is that, as if we were doing a survey, we try to get a real random sample of the entire constituency and affirmatively and personally invite them. It turns out that it could seem like there is a contradiction, citizens saying they do not think Members care what they think and yet, you know, they want to engage, right. The distinction is that when the Member affirmatively reaches out and says, No, really, I want to hear what you have to say, how does Tuesday at 7 sound? The citizen says, Oh, OK, they are one of the good ones.

It is very, very fragile, very, very easy to get them to believe that you do care. That is where the apathy/frustration difference is really important. Affirmatively inviting a very broad sample.

The broad sample also tremendously alters the dynamics. Your average constituent does not want to yell at you. Your average constituent has not even necessarily made up his or her mind on the issue. They are not there to necessarily give you a piece of their mind. They want to hear what you have to say before making up their mind, which is why this interactive dialog is so valuable. You get to hear from them about their concerns, their values, their questions. They actually want to hear from you too, right.

We do a survey beforehand. These are real field experiments. There is also a control group that we survey. People attend. Then there is a survey usually about 2 weeks later of everybody again. The forums are online on a secure platform. We are building a bespoke platform. It is very, very easy to use, will be linked to the 14 most spoken languages in the United States. My grandfather was illiterate. You know, we have oral versions. We have real-time captioning for the hearing impaired. We are very serious about try-

ing to really—any enfranchised citizen should be able to talk to their Member of Congress.

Mr. CAREY. I appreciate that. I am going to be cutting short on time here.

Now, there is, of course—I mean, you have seen this, you have all seen this in the press, there is a real concern about Member safety. You know, I think that we on this Committee on House Admin work very hard to increase the security budget of most of our Members. Like many Members, we have had death threats. We now have to have a security detail, which we never thought we would have to have before.

In the two-way communication forums, are there effective ways—I know you only have a minute—to take down the temperature from the onset of those forums?

Mr. NEBLO. That is really one of the most extraordinary things that we found, is that when you get a random sample—as I said, your average constituent does not want to yell at you. They do not want to throw bombs.

Very quickly. We had a provision in the first very study we did, an NSF-funded project built these. If a question or comment was considered abusive, inciting, or vulgar, we had to pull it out. Over 1,400 questions submitted in the first round that we did. Zero. Not once did we have to pull it out. That tells you the difference of the—of the people who are the frequent flyers—and some of them are great. They are active citizens. We have got to represent them too—or you have to represent them too.

The random sampling helps a lot. Online helps a lot. Moderation helps a lot. They look around—even people who might be inclined look around, and their fellow citizens are being civil and behaving, or the Members are treating each other with dignity.

Mr. CAREY. Doctor, I want to thank you for your time.

Chair, with that, I yield back.

Chairwoman BICE. Thank you, Mr. Carey.

At this time, we do have time for a second round of questions. I will recognize myself for an additional 5 minutes of questions.

Ms. Wilson, I want to direct this to you. You have worked with legislatures around the world. What lessons from global experiments with AI do you think that Congress can uniquely position—is uniquely positioned to maybe adopt?

Ms. WILSON. Thank you so much for these questions.

I will start by saying that our work with international legislatures has actually been an extremely eye-opening experience, especially as a prior congressional staffer. I think that I took for granted the incredibly robust IT infrastructure and all of the benefits that this body has. I think that that is in itself a lesson to learn from.

A lot of the legislatures that we work with, the way that they are implementing AI is to rapidly modernize their internal processes in the practice, which is digitizing documents, making data accessible, getting up-to-date websites, things that we really do take for granted, I think, as a U.S. Congress. That really, I think, showcases that the fact that the U.S. Congress already has such a strong IT foundation lets you kind of build on top of that.

While other countries are using AI to kind of build that foundation, we actually have the ability to experiment and to be the people who do design the future of constituent engagement. I would say that that is kind of the first—the first element.

The second element is one of the biggest kind of difference makers with international institutions that I have been able to kind of move more agilely is having internal processes that allow them to test and experiment and adopt new tools. A lot of that comes back down to kind of your internal authorization and security protocols. With that, having kind of a tiered system has really helped kind of expedite the ability for new tools to be tested that are low risk and be more quickly adopted so that then they can be implemented and staff and Members can start benefiting from them.

Chairwoman BICE. That was an incredible segue into my next question to the panelists, so thank you for that.

There is a couple things that we think about when we are trying to launch new technology within the House. Specifically, cybersecurity becomes a big topic of conversation. I think the—for the panel, I would ask you all, you know, there are rigorous standards to become a vendor for the House. Some of the individuals that want to partner with us may have their particular platform rejected for a variety of reasons.

This is going to be a couple of—maybe parts of a question. One, is there a way for us to speed up that approval process? Two, are the individuals, the vendors that are wanting to partner with us, are they able to know and learn why they may have been denied? What should we be thinking about as a Committee to try to help improve the process and/or the recruitment of vendors that potentially have innovative technologies that the House could be utilizing? It is a lot, but I will throw it open to anyone who wishes to answer.

Mr. Ward and Dr. Noveck seem to be looking at each other.

Mr. WARD. We have a number of different processes that depend a little bit on what the technology is. For example, with CMS, there is a specific process for that, and there is other processes for other cloud services.

Chairwoman BICE. Can I ask a question on that? How often is the process reviewed, would you say?

Mr. WARD. Well, the CMS contract is, you know, typically issued for like a 6-year term with option years, but every option period, every 2-year option period it is reviewed. The cloud approval process we are always kind of looking at. That is a House information security policy of the Committee. There is work underway now, I think you are aware of, in collaboration with your staff to look at that.

You mentioned two things that I think will be realized in the new year, which is more information on House.gov for vendors, more information on HouseNet for staff to understand those processes. What we propose with the CMS modernization is a part of a larger puzzle of doing business with the House that we want to improve.

Chairwoman BICE. Dr. Noveck.

Ms. NOVECK. I am happy to take offline the question of how we streamline that process in New Jersey for making it faster for vendors.

Let me just speak to the public engagement pilot idea. This is not something that needs to integrate with core systems, and therefore it should be something that is easy to try effectively tomorrow——

Chairwoman BICE. A standalone.

Ms. NOVECK. Sorry?

Chairwoman BICE. It is a standalone.

Ms. NOVECK. One can do something in a sandboxed environment that is a standalone that allows you to test processes while you work in parallel to figure out then how would you integrate technologies. It could stand alone. Because you are talking about public comments, not something that involves private information—and, by the way, you can use AI to filter out any private information or Social Security numbers that someone does accidentally type in. That is something fairly easy to do. That would be something relatively quickly to stand up as a pilot without worrying about integration with back-end systems.

Chairwoman BICE. I think that is the end of the questions that I have at the moment.

Mrs. Torres, would you like to——

Mrs. TORRES. Yes, just——

Chairwoman BICE. I recognize Mrs. Torres——

Mrs. TORRES. Thank you. I just want to do a follow-up.

Is 6 years too long to give someone an opportunity to improve their systems? How do we get feedback from the actual users? Are we constantly requesting that input from the users so that we are improving systems or ensuring that our vendors are meeting the moment or the contract?

Mr. WARD. Yes, absolutely. I think that with this—what the CAO is doing is trying to be more and more engaged with staff and users of these services to constantly learn. What we are proposing is a response to that, to bring more options and more flexibility and more capability.

Mrs. TORRES. Yes. I just want to ensure that we are constantly asking for input from the users to ensure that we are utilizing the best applications out there for our needs.

Everything that was said today sounds wonderful. We are really moving into a new digital world that would help us be a bit more responsive to our constituents. All of that is only as good as the internet services that service our communities could withstand. I can tell you that I chose the location of my district office to be directly across from an international airport thinking, you know, it would be a great place to have the best WiFi and the best internet services in this suburb. Unfortunately, that is not the case and, you know, we are constantly having to deal with a 3- or 4-minute delay just to send an email from one—from the D.C. office to the district office.

I just want to remind my colleagues that investing in the infrastructure across America, especially for, you know, to meet that—to close that digital divide is so critically important. Suburbs as

well as, you know, States that are very rural I think deserve to have an opportunity to also hear from their Representatives.

With that, I yield back to the Chair. Thank you.

Chairwoman BICE. Thank you, Ranking Member Torres.

I want to thank the panelists for joining us, for having this important conversation. I think you have given us a lot to think about as we are looking to continue to innovate within the House infrastructure and provide the best possible constituent engagement that we can, keeping in mind that technology changes rapidly. There are certain limitations and challenges that we have, including the cybersecurity piece of this. There is a lot of innovation happening right now and incredible opportunity for us to be able to leverage and utilize that because, after all, this is the people's House.

With that, this Subcommittee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:30 a.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD

Committee on House Administration - Subcommittee on Modernization
Hearing on the Future of Constituent Engagement
Minority Questions for the Record
January 9, 2026

Responses embedded below from:
Ken Ward
Senior Director, House Digital Service (HDS)
Office of the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO)

Enhancing Staff Capacity and Constituent Experience

Staffing levels for congressional offices haven't increased in over 40 years. But the population of Congressional districts and new methods for reaching constituents have only proliferated over time. This paradigm challenges every Member's core need to be accessible to the people they represent.

1. **How can Members leverage AI and other advanced technologies to help constituents solve problems faster and access critical resources more easily?**

   Member offices can utilize House-authorized AI technologies (e.g., Microsoft Copilot, paid versions of OpenAI's ChatGPT, and Anthropic's Claude) to improve constituent engagement and request fulfillment capabilities in several ways. With permission from their employing Member, staff can use it to transcribe, translate, review, and summarize inbound inquiries or calls to action; conduct research; and draft policy papers and responses. Staff can use it to perform analyses and detect anomalies or fraud associated with constituent service trends. Even if it is not used for direct constituent engagement activities, AI can reduce the administrative burden of general office tasks giving already overloaded staff more time to dedicate to constituent services.

   From an institutional perspective, there are House-wide initiatives underway that leverage AI to improve Member office constituent capabilities. For example, the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) has recently made Microsoft CoPilot available for each office to have an AI tool available to support their individual use cases. Additionally, the CAO has begun piloting a custom-built AI application called "CaseCompass," which uses AI to anonymize, aggregate, and analyze casework data from participating Member offices. The pilot application, still in its infancy, is already capable of automatically categorizing casework based on constituent-reported problems, with the goal of allowing offices to see chronological and geographical trends in challenges associated with executive branch agencies.

   As described in the CAO's December 17, 2025, testimony before the Subcommittee, another institutional example of AI integration that could yield constituent service improvements is the CAO "data lake" proposal currently under review. If approved, the data lake project would migrate Members' constituent data from individual proprietary Constituent Management Systems (CMS) platforms to a House-developed and secured

storage platform. Under the data lake model, with the express permission of each Member, all or certain categories of each Member's constituent data could be securely accessed by new technology vendors offering innovative constituent solutions.

The data lake model could also facilitate greater interoperability and data sharing with existing House applications (e.g., e-Dear Colleagues, HouseCal, etc.) to produce constituent sentiment analyses and provide Members with greater insight into constituent sentiment on pending legislation and House activity. Imagine a Legislative Assistant receiving an e-Dear Colleague requesting co-sponsorship of a new bill, and the email already includes that over 500 constituents have written in about the topic and links to a breakdown of their sentiment analysis.

2. **How can Congress ensure that AI tools used for engagement preserve nuance and diversity of opinion, rather than flattening or oversimplifying constituent input?**

Considering staff workloads, AI can actually help detect and distinguish nuances in constituent sentiment compared to current manual processes. AI can parse through large quantities of detailed constituent correspondence that staff do not have the capacity to read through in sufficient detail. When left to rely on manual review, offices are often losing nuance and specificity when reporting inbound sentiment. For example, mail reports now may show that "500 people wrote in about animals this week." AI can be prompted to include sentiment analyses like, "how many people who wrote in were for or against this piece of legislation and what are the primary reasons people oppose it?"

Individual staffers and Member offices can reflect their priorities in their prompting when utilizing AI tools with specific instructions. For example, "provide a table breakdown by topic that includes every email in this list" so none are excluded, "reference specific quotes from constituents with diverse opinions," or "explain the reasons cited why some constituents say they support X while others say they oppose it."

Furthermore, AI can be trained on custom data to better understand nuance. For instance, the CaseCompass project is essentially training AI to distinguish between different types of casework across federal agencies at a granular level. While offices typically only tag casework with the relevant executive branch agency, AI is facilitating more detailed tagging based on the over 400 specific constituent issues identified alongside caseworkers in the CaseCompass taxonomy. AI can be similarly trained to better parse constituent input on specific legislative and oversight topics. Many offices are manually performing constituent correspondence trend analyses on their own data, often with general issue area tags such as "health care" or "transportation." Thoughtfully utilized AI can enable *greater* specificity, rather than oversimplification.

AI is certainly not a substitute for human review, but it can expedite the analysis process without sacrificing detail. Human review is a major component of the House AI Policy, and offices and staff will need to stay vigilant and regularly sample and closely review AI outputs to ensure quality, including updating prompts based on reviews.

3. **How can Members rethink deployment and training of staff to serve constituents better?**

   How Members prioritize staff resources to maximize constituent services depends on the unique composition of each congressional district, constituent priorities, and Member prerogative – all subject to change. The CAO's mission is to provide administrative, technical, and operational solutions so Members can perform their constitutional duties, which centers around serving constituents. Many of the solutions, including those hosted and developed by the CAO, are specifically built to help offices with constituent services.

   Though there is no one-size-fits-all solution to constituent services, there are technical and operational solutions offices can, and should, consider. For example, there are House-approved AI platforms and vendor tools as well as custom House tools developed by the CAO to improve constituent services and general office operations (e.g., Copilot, FlagTrack, HouseCal, Quill, etc.). There are also ample training and development opportunities made available by the CAO for both D.C. and district staff aimed at assisting with constituent services, including regional conferences specifically tailored for caseworkers and field representatives.

   As part of its mission, the CAO is constantly seeking ways offices can realize greater efficiencies in every aspect of their operations – especially constituent services. Constant feedback and guidance from the House community is critical to its ability to deliver new and improved tools and training. As a result of feedback and guidance provided by the Modernization and Innovation Subcommittee and its predecessor Committee in the House, the CAO has rolled out multiple popular vendor-provided and in-house office solutions over the past several years. The CAO has greatly appreciated that coordination and would like to identify opportunities to enhance and standardize the CAO/House community feedback loop.

4. **What investments can Member offices make today to maximize the impact of constituent services staff?**

   While the CAO does not believe there is a one-size-fits-all approach for Members when it comes to their respective constituent services, it does believe there are multiple tools and resources offices can and should leverage to improve both the quality and capacity of their services. In addition to the tools and resources referenced above, offices could consider participating in the development of new custom services like the CaseCompass pilot and other forthcoming constituent service-oriented initiatives. They should work closely with their respective CMS vendor to ensure they are fully utilizing all that they offer and to share feedback – successes and pain points – with the CAO to inform future initiatives.

5. **What approaches to constituent engagement would you recommend we avoid, based on your research or experience?**

The CAO believes that offices should explore a variety of solutions when it comes to enhancing constituent engagement. The CAO offers a wide range of technology options that offices can utilize and a comprehensive review process to ensure new technologies that offices want can be evaluated for security and fitness for use by the House. That said, the CAO strongly cautions against relying solely on technology (e.g., AI) to facilitate constituent exchanges. Public surveys have shown that constituents do not want to interact directly with AI from their representatives, and doing so would eliminate the office's ability to provide human oversight over any AI-assisted outputs. Human oversight is also vital for maintaining constituent confidentiality and privacy, which is particularly important as technology advances and offices derive more insights from constituent data.

6. **Are there any privacy-related best practices we should keep in mind as we develop new constituent service tools?**

   Constituent service tools sometimes require handling and/or storage of sensitive constituent information, which requires vigilant adherence to House security protocols and IT architectural requirements. As the House identifies and deploys new tools – both vendor and House-developed – it must continue to prioritize and ensure the security and privacy of constituent data. It is important that privacy-by-design principles are adopted, including ensuring that any system has a clearly defined purpose and only collects data necessary to perform its functions prior to deployment – known as data minimization. Implementing data minimization helps limit risks in the event of data exposure. Additionally, constituent systems must incorporate end-to-end security from the moment the data is collected until it is destroyed. Additional best practices include providing visibility and transparency, making constituents aware of the tools collecting their data, and empowering constituents to play an active role in the management of their own data (consent, accuracy, and access) to address potential abuse and misuse. Specific to AI-assisted tools, as discussed above, offices must also ensure human oversight, testing, and review of outputs to ensure constituent privacy.

Strategic Considerations

Many of our most impactful modernization projects require long-term support and development. But securing this support is increasingly difficult as funding for the legislative branch lags behind the executive branch.

1. **What is the most effective way to allocate funding to new initiatives when modernization dollars are scarce?**

   Incrementally and with constant client engagement. In her January 2024 testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, Jennifer Pahlka, the former U.S. Deputy Chief Technology Officer, astutely outlined the benefits of incremental funding (the "product" model) versus one-time allocations (the "project" model) when deploying technology solutions. In her testimony, she explains that, despite

the government's tendency to take the "project" approach, the "product" approach ultimately yields greater success by ensuring the product aligns directly with client needs and better enables organizations to routinely enhance/modernize products as needed at lower costs.[1]

When modernization dollars are scarce, in addition to carefully prioritizing projects that are most advantageous to the House of Representatives and Legislative Branch, the House could consider adopting a "product" approach to funding technology development and deployment projects. This includes modern development methods like rapid prototyping, building a minimum viable product (MVP), user-focused design, and incremental scoping and funding. The "product" approach also addresses the reality that, once deployed, costs associated with sustainment rarely flatlines.

2. **Should projects be funded iteratively from research to planning to execution or all at once?**

As noted above, incremental funding and constant client engagement can yield better product deployment and sustainment outcomes. Committing large amounts of funding up front for complicated or multi-year projects does not have a good track record of success. That funding approach, based on waterfall project management methods, assumes project managers can capture all user needs up front and have firm requirements and sound cost estimates. This is rarely the case except for the simplest of projects.

Instead, funding projects in phases, with early stages focused on user discovery, prototyping, and other agile methods before committing additional funding in subsequent stages is much more likely to be successful. Early phases can be used to both better understand the needs of users and, at the same time, significantly improve cost estimates for later product stages.

The Modernization Initiatives Account provides a good source for iterative funding. As the funds in the account do not expire, decisions makers can focus on the results of project phases before allocating additional funds and not need to worry about expiring funds or missing the next fiscal year funding cycle. However, iterative funding can also be accomplished with different mixes of funding from the Modernization Initiative Account and annual funds – it just adds complexity to the planning and execution processes.

Regardless of funding approach, the CAO is committed to user focused design and agile project management methodologies as they yield better results.

3. **Is it better to spread resources across multiple projects for phased evaluation or concentrate on one major initiative?**

Whether resources are allocated to fund multiple projects versus one major initiative

[1] January 10, 2024, Testimony of Jennifer Pahlka, former U.S. Deputy Chief Technology Officer before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs on Harnessing AI to Improve Government Services and Customer Experience.

should be determined by the prospective benefits to the House. Some major initiatives are top priorities and require significant funding to even begin. However, the principles of user-focused "product" design and iterative development with rapid prototyping allow for exploring a wider range of modernization initiatives without fully committing to each. Often, the viability of modernization projects becomes better understood after initial discovery and rapid prototyping phases. Ideally, the House should explore as many promising modernization initiatives as possible, which will help determine which receive additional or sustained investment.

4. **Given the uncertain funding environment, how do you decide which types of projects to prioritize?**

   Regardless of fiscal environment, the CAO employs a rigorous project evaluation and prioritization process that weighs benefits and risks to the House community. Projects and initiatives are prioritized based on many factors, including security, resource availability, mission criticality, and viability as part of the entire House IT architecture, among others. A critical part of that evaluation and prioritization process is performing and documenting thorough discovery for potential projects in advance of any funding or execution decisions, so that all pre-work knowledge can be collected and considered to the extent possible.

Committee on House Administration
Subcommittee on Modernization and Innovation

Hearing on the Future of Constituent Engagement

Minority Questions for the Record

January 9, 2026

Answers Submitted by:
Aubrey Wilson, Director of Global Initiatives, POPVOX Foundation on January 30, 2026

Enhancing Staff Capacity and Constituent Experience

Staffing levels for congressional offices haven't increased in over 40 years, while district populations and communication methods have proliferated. This paradigm challenges every Member's core function to be accessible to constituents.

1. How can Members leverage AI and other advanced technologies to help constituents solve problems faster and access critical resources more easily?

AI can give constituents more effective and timely information through Retrieval Augmented Generation (RAG) chatbots that access publicly available information with links to resources cited.

RAG chatbots combine an LLM with semantic search—instead of relying only on the model's internal knowledge, they retrieve relevant documents and use that information to generate accurate, grounded answers. For more information, see this presentation (https://apolitical.co/events/july-2025-how-to-build-an-ai-chatbot-that-users-actually-like) delivered by POPVOX Foundation Executive Director Marci Harris in July 2025 to government technologists coordinated by Apolitical.

RAG chatbots are simple to design and build, making them an easy way for offices to provide constituent information. However, the House has not released guidance for their development or hosting, and several developed tools remain in CAO review after many months. In April 2025, POPVOX Foundation released StaffLink, a demonstration chatbot showing how RAG tools could be developed with trusted Congressional information. We requested CAO approval in February 2025 but as of January 28, 2026, have received no response. Representative Seth Moulton's office also has a RAG chatbot under review.

Without clear guidelines, projects languish or become outdated during review. This impedes individual offices' ability to experiment and exercise judgment about using new technologies for constituent interaction, and diminishes tech-forward Members' ability to try new approaches and share lessons with colleagues.

Recommended action: Given the considerable potential benefit of allowing Members to experiment with simple RAG chatbots on their websites, CHA should instruct CAO to clarify policies and review processes for these tools and prioritize low-risk pilots where Members understand potential risks and decide to proceed based on their determination that tools will help them better serve constituents.

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2. How can Congress ensure that AI tools used for engagement preserve nuance and diversity of opinion, rather than flattening or oversimplifying constituent input?

Modern AI tools excel at analyzing constituent input at scale while preserving individual nuance and unique insights. The barrier is not technical capability—it's the House approval process preventing offices from accessing these tools.

Traditional Constituent Management Systems batch and categorize input for efficient response processing, flattening diverse voices into summary statistics and pre-defined categories. This was necessary when the only way to handle volume was through categorization. Large Language Models have fundamentally changed this trade-off. LLMs can identify patterns across thousands of inputs while simultaneously preserving access to individual stories, unique perspectives, and granular detail.

POPVOX Foundation's Departure Dialogues project demonstrates this capability. In 2025-2026, we interviewed federal employees leaving government service and used AI-powered analysis to process input preserving both scale and depth. The resulting interface shows:

- **High-level themes**: Major topics like "Legislative Intent" (98 claims by 21 people), "Program Management" (64 claims by 18 people)
- **Mid-level subtopics**: Each theme breaks into specific areas—Legislative Intent includes "Bureaucratic Compliance," "Political Dynamics," "Communication Gaps"
- **Individual insights preserved**: Users drill down to specific claims like "#107: Internal political influence within the IRS obstructs practical decision-making" with full quote: "the IRS's Internal Revenue Manual (IRM) is a big barrier because it codifies internal politics..." - April Harding (IRS Director, User Experience Services)

This structure allows policymakers to understand patterns while maintaining access to specific details that inform good policy decisions.

Other tools demonstrating this capability include:

- **Pol.is**: Creates visual consensus maps while preserving individual statements

- **Remesh**: Facilitates live conversations with thousands of participants, using AI to identify consensus and divergence while preserving individual responses
- **Direct LLM analysis**: Offices could download constituent input (removing PII), upload to approved LLM interfaces, and ask "What specific concerns are rural constituents raising about healthcare access?" The LLM identifies patterns while surfacing relevant individual stories.

The difference: Traditional CMS reports "Healthcare: 847 form letters supporting, 234 opposing, 45 unique comments." AI-enabled analysis reports "Healthcare input shows three distinct concern clusters: (1) rural access issues from 127 constituents with specific hospital closure examples, (2) cost concerns from 89 small business owners detailing 15-40% premium increases, (3) prescription drug access problems affecting seniors with medication rationing stories. Additionally, 12 constituents raised an unanticipated concern: [specific issue with quote]."

What's needed: The House cannot access these capabilities without clear CAO guidance on developer requirements, approval pathways for iterative tools, expedited review for constituent engagement tools, and transparency about approval criteria.

Recommended action: CHA should direct CAO to: (1) publish within 60 days a framework for evaluating constituent engagement tools, (2) establish expedited approval (maximum 45 days) for tools analyzing only de-identified input or public information, (3) create iterative approval processes for tool updates, and (4) designate a single CAO point of contact for constituent engagement tool approvals.

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3. How can Members rethink deployment and training of staff to serve constituents better?

Members should leverage AI-enabled knowledge management systems to preserve institutional knowledge despite high staff turnover, while investing in cross-functional training and flexible staff deployment responding to constituent needs.

Congressional staff turnover is at historic highs. LegiStorm data shows House staff turnover in 2023 remained at the third-worst rate since 2001, with Republican offices averaging a 0.59 turnover index in 2025—meaning more than half of GOP office staff are projected to turn over within a year.

When experienced caseworkers leave, they take accumulated knowledge: which agency contacts respond quickly, how to navigate complex cases, what district resources exist. Traditional solutions—detailed manuals—don't work because staff lack time to read hundred-page documents that become outdated quickly.

AI as institutional memory: Large Language Models can transform how offices preserve and access knowledge. Instead of knowledge walking out the door, offices can create AI-enabled knowledge bases that any staff member can query conversationally.

Practical examples:

- **Casework knowledge bases**: The House's casework Teams groups contain thousands of messages about agency contacts, case strategies, and best practices, but they are locked in chat format—searchable only with exact keywords, buried in threads. An LLM tool could allow any caseworker to ask "How do other offices handle Social Security cases when constituents lack documents?" and receive synthesized answers with links to relevant discussions.
- **District resource databases**: AI interfaces could allow staff to ask "What resources are available for a senior citizen in [zip code] struggling with medical bills?" and instantly receive relevant local options.

These tools are straightforward to build, but without clear CAO guidance on development requirements and approval processes, most offices cannot move forward.

Immediate actions offices can take:

1. Conduct knowledge audits documenting top questions staff ask each other and information they wish they'd known when starting
2. Start documenting institutional knowledge in shared documents where staff capture key learnings
3. Experiment with approved tools like Microsoft Copilot for knowledge management use cases
4. Cross-train staff through monthly sessions where casework staff brief policy/comms staff on trends and policy staff explain upcoming legislation
5. Participate actively in Casework Teams channel and Casework Navigator webinars

What the House needs to enable:

1. Clear guidance for knowledge base development with security standards, approval timeline commitments (maximum 45 days for low-risk tools), and processes for updating approved tools
2. House Digital Services could build shared knowledge bases synthesizing Casework Teams channels, agency liaison directories, and legislative process information
3. Deliver delayed training on approved tools within 60 days
4. Support cross-office knowledge sharing through dedicated staff time and official platforms

Recommended action: CHA should direct CAO to: publish a framework for developing and approving office knowledge management tools, deliver training on currently approved AI tools, enable HDS to develop shared knowledge bases, and establish formal knowledge-sharing programs.

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4. What investments can Member offices make today to maximize the impact of constituent services staff?

Member offices can significantly improve constituent services capacity through immediate, low-cost or no-cost investments in workflow optimization, knowledge capture, cross-training, and strategic tool adoption.

Staffing levels unchanged for 40 years while district populations and communication channels exploded mean constituent services teams must work smarter, not harder. Many impactful investments require a minimal budget.

No-cost investments:

1. **Adopt office AI use policy**: Offices cannot access tools like Microsoft Copilot without an AI policy. POPVOX Foundation's template at popvox.org/s/Template_Congressional_Office_Generative_AI_Use_Policy.pdf can be customized quickly, immediately unlocking tool access.
2. **Conduct workflow audit**: Document which tasks consume most staff time. Common targets: manually entering constituent information from web forms into CRM systems, searching repeatedly for agency contact information, drafting similar responses to FAQs, tracking status across multiple systems. The audit provides the roadmap for where investments will have greatest impact.
3. **Optimize CRM usage**: The three major CRMs—Fireside, IQ, Indigov—serve as office backbones but are often underutilized. Schedule free vendor training, review reporting capabilities, standardize data entry, set up automated workflows, connect CRMs with website contact forms. Better usage saves time and provides data for agency oversight.
4. **Start capturing institutional knowledge**: Create shared documents where staff add entries like "Things I Wish I'd Known When I Started," conduct exit interviews capturing departing staff knowledge, take 15 minutes at weekly meetings for someone to share learnings.
5. **Cross-train staff**: Monthly sessions where casework staff brief policy/comms staff on trends and policy staff explain upcoming legislation builds flexibility for crisis response.
6. **Participate in knowledge-sharing networks**: Designate a "network liaison" monitoring Casework Teams channel and both internal and civil society resources for constituent services, integrating learnings into office-specific training and support resources.
7. **Close the DC-district gap**: Caseworkers develop highly specialized subject-matter expertise on agency policy implementation in their portfolios — expertise that is often underutilized by their legislative counterparts. Consider regular all-staff meetings, encouraging relationship-building between legislative and casework staff, and integrate caseworker consultations into the policy process.
8. **Cross-train to plan ahead for casework crises:** For every Congressional office, the question is not whether they will experience a high-volume casework surge, but when. Consider cross-training DC staff and non-constituent service staff in basic casework processes to support casework teams in crises, and developing additional SOPs for handling extreme demand. These investments also pay off in making teams more flexible and resilient to staff turnover.
9. **Build inter-delegation relationships**: Set up or participate in regular delegation-wide trainings and discussions on casework and constituent demand, building relationships and groundwork for coordination and efficient deployment of resources.

Low-cost investments (if budget available):

- **The single greatest investment offices can make in supporting constituents is to pay to send constituent services staff to official trainings through the CAO and federal agencies in DC**,

supporting inter-office relationship building and collaboration and knowledge sharing, and staff familiarity with agency programs and policies.

- Paid AI tool subscriptions saving staff 30 minutes daily add 2.5 hours weekly capacity
- Improved constituent-facing tools: website accessibility features, translation services, teletownhall subscriptions, appointment scheduling tools
- Targeted specialized training: for example, immigration law updates, trauma-informed care, disaster recovery training, etc.

Strategic considerations: Don't add engagement channels without consolidating existing ones—offices already manage ~40 separate methods. Don't invest in tools not integrating with CRMs. Don't purchase tools without confirming CAO approval.

Track whether investments improve capacity: Did response times improve? Did staff stress decrease? Set concrete goals and review quarterly.

Recommended action: CHA should direct CAO to create capacity-building toolkit, establish capacity-building grants program, conduct quarterly office hours where staff can ask questions, and create clearinghouse for sharing office-developed resources.

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5. What approaches to constituent engagement would you recommend we avoid?

Congress should avoid engagement approaches that waste constituents' time through inauthentic participation opportunities, create false expectations about legislative impact, or add new channels without strategic consolidation.

The most fundamental principle is honesty about what participation can achieve. When offices solicit input where decisions are already made or constituent views won't genuinely influence outcomes, this breeds cynicism and erodes trust.

Approaches to avoid:

1. Inauthentic engagement creating false expectations

Don't hold town halls, listening sessions, or surveys on topics where the Member has already decided their position. POPVOX Foundation's CivX Metrics framework requires "closing the loop"—showing constituents how participation influenced outcomes. When no influence is possible, engagement should not occur.

Better approach: Target engagement to genuinely open questions. Be explicit: "I'm deciding how to vote on this bill and want to hear from you" versus "I want to explain my position."

2. Unclear legislative process and pathways to impact

When offices solicit input without clarifying what Members can actually influence, constituents may believe their Member can unilaterally accomplish things requiring broader legislative action.

Better approach: Clarify what the Member can influence and what process is required: "I'm gathering input to inform my floor vote" or "This requires legislation to change—I'm assessing whether to pursue that." Invest in developing channels for constituent engagement and input in areas where individual Members can have direct impact, like the annual appropriations process.

3. Channel proliferation without strategic consolidation

POPVOX Foundation research shows offices monitor ~40 separate engagement and communication channels. This spreads staff impossibly thin and fragments insights. As one Voice/Mail interviewee noted, "you're asking what is often a 26- or 27-year-old to manage all of this. Even as someone ten years older than that, I can't wrap my head around how you manage all of it."

Better approach: Before adding channels, conduct engagement audits, measure usage, identify consolidation opportunities, calculate net impact. Only add channels demonstrably reducing staff time or significantly improving constituent access.

4. Fragmented and opaque technology governance

When multiple House offices provide conflicting guidance about approved tools, staff adopt unapproved consumer tools because they cannot navigate official processes, creating "shadow IT" security risks.

Better approach: CAO should maintain a single, public-facing dashboard of approved tools, updated weekly, showing tool name, approval status, limitations, security requirements, and training resources.

5. Vendor-led training without House input

Vendors training staff without understanding House-specific policies often contradict institutional requirements, or are developed without specific understanding of the demands on Congressional staff. Staff leave with incorrect information, creating compliance risks.

Better approach: CAO should provide vendors "House requirements" briefing documents to incorporate into training, or House staff should deliver House-specific requirements sessions.

6. The transparency paradox: Disclosure without learning

The House mass communications database at masscommsdisclosure.house.gov is difficult to navigate and provides minimal context. Users can see communications were sent but cannot easily view examples, compare strategies, identify innovations, or learn from high-response communications.

In contrast, DCInbox (dcinbox.com), an open-source platform created by a professor/researcher, aggregates communications more usefully but still lacks contextual information helping offices learn from peers.

Members need examples—they need to see what's possible, not just what's prohibited.

Better approach: Transform the disclosure database into a learning resource: make it searchable and filterable, include visual examples, add context about innovative approaches, create quarterly "best practices" showcases, enable offices to voluntarily share metrics.

Recommended action: CHA should direct CAO to: redesign mass communications disclosure database as a learning resource for office, providing context on previously-issued communications decisions so that offices have additional context into what is approved.

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6. Are there any privacy-related best practices we should keep in mind as we develop new constituent service tools?

Privacy protection requires both sound policy and effective implementation through training, clear guidance, privacy-by-design principles, and constituent transparency about data practices.

Understanding the unique privacy landscape for Congress

The Privacy Act of 1974 does not apply to Congress. All information constituents provide to their Member is considered that Member's personal property. Constituents have no legal say in how information is handled and no legal rights to request copies. When Members retire or lose elections, they have full control over whether constituent information transfers, transfers partially, or is destroyed.

This creates an ethical obligation: offices must act as responsible stewards of highly sensitive personal, financial, medical, immigration, and criminal justice information constituents entrust to them.

Current state: Good policies, inadequate implementation

CAO has taken important steps—offices can access paid LLM services configured not to use interactions for training, and cybersecurity policy prohibits inputting constituent details into commercial LLM interfaces. However, to date, the House has not held any official LLM training. Staff report confusion about approved tools. Policies exist in documents many staff have never seen due to turnover and lack of training.

This gap creates risk. Well-intentioned staff may violate privacy protections simply because they don't know the rules.

Practical protections offices can implement immediately

POPVOX Foundation's Casework Basics manual on Safeguarding Constituent Information provides detailed guidance:

Physical document handling: (1) Minimize time documents spend in office—set goals like clearing all physical documents by end of business Friday, then shred or return to constituents; (2) Protect documents from casual access using designated intake folders and locked filing cabinets; (3) Keep detailed document logs tracking every incoming document. Train each intern class on these protocols.

Remote work: Staff should sit with backs to walls, log out of VPNs when stepping away, never share passwords, minimize sensitive calls outside the office, consider privacy screen filters, use portable scanners rather than accepting physical copies.

Digital security: Complete cybersecurity training on time, ensure interns complete training before handling constituent information, avoid uploading constituent documents to file-sharing services, never input constituent PII into commercial AI tools, use only approved tools.

Privacy by design: Building privacy into tools from the start

When building tools for congressional use, focus on:

- **Access controls**: Role-based permissions appropriate to staff functions
- **Secure defaults**: Most privacy-protective settings for data type being handled
- **Encryption**: Data encrypted in transit and at rest
- **Integration**: Work within House's existing security framework
- **Clear documentation**: Guidance on what data tools handle, how it's protected, what staff responsibilities are

CAO should require developers to document security architecture protecting constituent information from unauthorized access, loss, or breach.

Constituent expectations and transparency

Standard Privacy Act Release Form language doesn't explain that information provided becomes Member property. Offices could voluntarily add explanatory language or "more information" pages. POPVOX Foundation provides template language at popvox.org/casework-basics-manuals/safeguarding-constituent-information.

The capability gap: Congress can achieve what others have

If investment banks and hospitals handling sensitive data can deploy safe systems, Congress should achieve similar functionality. Financial institutions and healthcare providers comply with strict regulatory requirements while handling equally sensitive information.

What these industries have that Congress lacks: systematic training, clear accountability, regular audits, incident response plans, privacy officers. Congress should implement similar structures.

The evolving privacy landscape

Privacy best practices must keep pace with technology changes. This requires regular policy updates, ongoing training, mechanisms for questions, and sharing lessons learned.

Recommended action: CHA should direct CAO to: (1) deliver LLM and AI tool training within 60 days, (2) establish single authoritative source for privacy guidance, (3) provide annual privacy training, (4)

create privacy-by-design requirements for tool approval, (5) develop incident response protocols, (6) publish privacy practices guidance, and (7) designate privacy leads.

Strategic Considerations

Many impactful modernization projects require long-term support, but securing this support is increasingly difficult as Legislative branch funding lags behind Executive branch funding.

1. What is the most effective way to allocate funding to new initiatives when modernization dollars are scarce?

Recent AI advancements have fundamentally altered how the House should approach technology investment. Last year, a beta tool required three or more contractors, multiple months, and tens of thousands of dollars. Today, one individual can build a better version in days at a fraction of the cost.

The House must accept this new reality and adopt new approaches to technology development—breaking away from traditional procurement approaches and vendor/contractor relations.

2. Should projects be funded iteratively or all at once?

The House should fund projects iteratively with clear deadlines, milestones, and dedicated oversight. However, iterative funding requires steady, reliable financial support to maintain agile development cycles.

Legislative Branch appropriations should fund an Innovation Allotment to House Digital Service, providing steady funds for ongoing, iterative tool development.

3. Is it better to spread resources across multiple projects or concentrate on one major initiative?

To keep pace with rapid technological change, the House should invest in multiple projects simultaneously. Prioritizing a single modernization project would be a disservice to the institution.

House Digital Service is an internal team that is both trusted and knowledgeable about House operations. Enabling HDS to create new tools directly addressing Member and staff needs could unlock a new era of House technology modernization.

4. Given the uncertain funding environment, how do you decide which types of projects to prioritize?

The House is a Member-driven institution. Institutional offices exist to support elected officials in performing their official duties. Members and staff must remain at the center of setting modernization priorities and making investment decisions.

The Subcommittee could direct House Digital Service to create a dashboard where Members and staff raise awareness of inefficient workflows and propose technology solutions. Other staff and Members could upvote proposals matching their experience. HDS could submit top proposals to the Subcommittee for further exploration with appropriate institutional offices and Appropriations Committee.

Example proposals:

Workflow Issue	Proposed Solution	Support
I'm a Member very reliant upon my pocketcard schedule from my scheduler. I'm tired of losing it, setting it down, or having it be out of date the second it is printed due to calendar changes.	I want a simple app on my phone that looks like a pocketcard I can open at any time and reference that my scheduler can update remotely from their computer. It would be particularly useful if I could check off which events I've attended (check-in at an event so they know I've arrived) to minimize texts from them.	234
I manage all tour requests for my office (Capitol tour and LOC timed tickets). The intake process is via email through a webform on my website and I track requests through an excel sheet on my desktop. It is very tedious to keep up to date and there are no quality controls. When I'm sick or on vacation, the office loses access.	A tool (maybe a dashboard or application that is part of our CMS?) that anyone on the team can access that autofills from the website tour request form and acts as the complete management portal for tracking and addressing tour requests. It would be amazing if it has the ability to upload photos associated with tours (constituents with the Member) and export the list of tour attendees to upload into our CRM.	146

Investment in tools to improve Member offices' effectiveness and efficiency in serving constituents must remain nonpartisan, steady, and predictable. The committee should institutionalize the House's openness to hearing from Members and their offices about what they need.

Thank you for this opportunity to continue the important discussion that took place on December 17, 2025. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any further questions.

To: Subcommittee on Modernization & Innovation, Committee on House Administration

From: Michael Neblo & Laura Moses, OSU Institute for Democratic Engagement & Accountability

Subject: Response to the Minority Questions from the Hearing on the Future of Constituent Engagement

Date: January 30, 2026

Executive Summary

Constituent engagement is not merely about managing the influx of requests and communications; it is a critical component of a thriving democracy. The dominant "customer service" model applies specifically to constituent service, but it is no longer sufficient as a general framework given plummeting public trust in institutions and deepening polarization. This memo outlines how offices can plan to modernize their systems and offers specific options for cultivating robust, two-way communication and deliberation.

Recommendations:

- To enhance staff capacity and constituent experience, AI should subsidize the work of offices and expand capacity for information seeking, aggregating, and sharing—but not substitute for the two-way communication and interactions between elected officials and their constituents.
- To increase capacity for modernized communications with Members of Congress, offices can invest in tools that improve constituent engagement and responsiveness to the diverse perspectives citizens bring forward.
- By investing in two-way constituent communications through the pilots outlined here, Congress can build a suite of programs, develop familiarity with best practices, and lay the groundwork for long-term institutional innovation. This will maximize the impact of modernization funds.

Enhancing Staff Capacity and Constituent Experience

When offices consider constituent engagement, the stakes go far beyond managing routine communication and requests. Effective engagement can serve as a safety valve for democracy — a channel through which citizens can voice priorities and concerns, and elected officials can gauge public sentiment and stay ahead of potential crises. In an era of declining trust in institutions and weaponized political narratives, modernization is increasingly necessary to maintain democratic legitimacy. Inadequate communication between representatives and constituents creates a vacuum filled by misinformation flowing in both directions. Congress faces a choice about whether its communication infrastructure will shore up democratic accountability or allow it to erode further.

Members should leverage AI and other advanced technologies to supplement, rather than replace, constituent engagement beyond basic information sharing. Our research with this subcommittee, along with studies on AI chatbots for engagement, underscores this point. AI can and should help transform how staff manage the deluge of routine requests: from tracking Social Security inquiries to ordering flags, scheduling Capitol tours, and tallying issues raised in correspondence. AI can assist in modernizing many important "customer service" type tasks that constituents need. Current research in civic technology suggests that structured, rules-based interfaces can meaningfully lower transaction costs for constituents while improving institutional responsiveness. Empirical experience with platforms that translate public input into actionable legislative signals indicates that such models are especially effective when designed to complement, rather than replace, meaningful two-way communications between members and their constituents. The technology should serve democratic values, not replace them.

Chatbots cannot replace two-way communication with elected officials. Constituents want two-way communication, consider it the most effective form, and find it difficult to access.[1] While AI tools can efficiently disseminate information or handle routine requests, they lack the reciprocity, responsiveness, and genuine interaction that underpin legitimacy. Research on political participation shows that constituents value being heard, not merely processed or cataloged. Members build trust through interaction, not transaction. If Members position chatbots as replacements rather than supplements to two-way dialogue, they risk reinforcing perceptions of distance and elite insulation — dynamics that Deliberative Town Halls (DTH) and other meaningful constituent communication frameworks counteract. Well-designed AI systems can improve constituent satisfaction when paired with clear pathways to human interaction.

For example, DTHs are scalable and adaptable forums validated across multiple peer-reviewed studies. They engage citizens in agenda setting, policy decisions, implementation, and assessment. These modified town halls enable elected officials to engage a demographically representative group of constituents in structured online discussions, generating policy-relevant insights while strengthening civic trust. DTHs are one proven model among a broader toolkit, not a one-size-fits-all solution. Additional democratic tools—Citizens' Assemblies, Common Ground for Action forums, hybrid models, and participatory budgeting, collectively known as *democratic innovations*—can be organized based on issue complexity, policy stage, and institutional goals. All formats account for contextual political, cultural, and geographic variables and are compatible with innovations already in use globally. The utility of a DTH derives from the careful structuring of four elements: the selection of the policy topic, the recruitment of participants, the active involvement of elected officials, and the curation of balanced, accurate information. When these

[1] Moses, Laura, Michael A. Neblo and William Minozzi. "Constituent Engagement Survey Results Technical Report" December 12, 2025

components are synchronized, a town hall transitions from a venue for airing grievances into a productive engine for democratic legitimacy and effective governance.

Member offices can invest in tools that improve constituent engagement and responsiveness to the diverse perspectives citizens bring forward. By automating routine tasks with AI, member offices, congressional committees, and caucuses can redirect capacity toward institutional renewal through technological modernization — specifically, by making meaningful two-way engagement with representative groups of constituents viable.

To accomplish this, Members of Congress can plan strategically for:

- Allocating resources to enable sustained engagement with a genuinely representative cross-section of their constituencies, treating representativeness as a budgeted outcome.
- Dedicating resources to outreach methods that correct for participation bias, such as funding multilingual recruitment, compensating participants for their time, and ensuring digital access so that engagement is not limited to those with existing civic capacity.
- Investing in data-informed sampling and recruitment strategies, including partnerships with trusted local intermediaries and the use of stratified or randomized selection, and ensuring that these costs are included in multi-year office or committee budgets.
- Creating durable funding mechanisms that support inclusive, representative engagement over time rather than episodic consultation.

Strategic Considerations

Two-way communications that support meaningful constituent engagement in digital settings can be implemented with fewer time and financial resources than most alternative democratic innovations. However, bringing these activities to scale will require sustained support. Strategic planning and piloting now by this committee and individual offices can define the frameworks, infrastructure, and resource allocation that will support democratic function. Scaling these initiatives in the U.S. will likely require a hybrid of government funding and civil society support.[2]

Investing in two-way communication with constituents through pilots and diverse programming will build familiarity and establish best practices for implementation and long-term institutionalization. This will maximize the impact of scarce modernization funds. An effective strategy prioritizes high-leverage two-way communication models. Immediate investment should focus on planning and piloting implementation, which not only establishes the necessary infrastructure but also strengthens the evidence for adoption at scale. For example, data from DTH forums show that these two-way engagements can mitigate common participatory biases and lead to higher satisfaction with the participatory process.

Investments should be directed toward projects proven to build common ground, strengthen the institution, and reduce the time staff spend on routine information tasks. This targeted approach supports democratic renewal by fundamentally restructuring congressional workflows—enabling offices to prioritize meaningful engagement over administrative maintenance.

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[2] International models for implementation vary. For example, Germany and Ireland provide direct support, while Australia facilitates discretionary resource use.

Committees can promote the allocation of funds to recruit constituents to participate in deliberative, two-way communication events and publish district deliberation results that summarize findings and responses. This framework can be amended to meet various caucus or rule requirements for district consultations.

The following recommendations offer scalable options that can begin as pilot programs and evolve into regular, institutionalized practices within individual congressional offices, caucuses, and committees. These recommendations emphasize preliminary steps to inform implementation best practices while initiating meaningful two-way communication across multiple dimensions:

- *Enabling any member who wishes to run one deliberative event per quarter while Congress is in session,* with the end goal of enabling members to run deliberative events as often as once per week.
- *Members should develop rapid-response protocols for citizen consultation to address emergent issues.* Deliberative town halls can identify problems and set agendas throughout each stage of the legislative, implementation, and oversight processes. First, protocols should be developed and then piloted in the following year. A pilot can assess the process and make recommendations to the full House on ongoing emergency consultation protocols to be deployed upon agreement by the Speaker and Minority Leader. Such protocols should be non-binding, advisory, and opt-in for Members.
- *Committees can establish an annual bipartisan "national agenda" deliberative event* in which a large, representative group of citizens engages in discussions of issues with a bipartisan panel of elected officials.
- *Pilot the use of deliberative events to select the top choices for member-directed spending suggestions in an upcoming budget.* As a pilot, one Democrat and one Republican member of the subcommittee on the Modernization of Congress can issue a "call for proposals" within their districts next fiscal year, winnow the options, and engage in two-way communication with their constituents. The bipartisan pair from the subcommittee can then prepare a report with recommendations for their colleagues on how to prioritize locally supported MDS proposals.

The main challenge will be maintaining the quality and influence of two-way communication at scale. As these events become more common, organized interests that benefit from the status quo may mobilize against them by attempting to delegitimize the process or by running push-poll analogs to DTHs. We have developed training programs for moderators, standardized protocols for organizations, and evaluation frameworks for quality assurance to address quality challenges associated with scale. Piloting and a staged rollout of deliberative opportunities will help Congress and civil society partners develop best practices to ensure that the positive outcomes associated with meaningful two-way communication are sustained as adoption scales.

These considerations underscore that scaling two-way constituent communication for meaningful engagement is not a technical challenge but an institutional one. With deliberate piloting, clear standards, and sustained investment, Congress, individual offices, and partners can embed meaningful constituent communication into routine democratic practice while safeguarding its legitimacy and effectiveness. Strategic actions now will determine whether these tools remain isolated experiments or evolve into a durable democratic infrastructure that strengthens representation at scale.

To: Committee on House Administration - Subcommittee on Modernization
From: Prof. Beth Simone Noveck
Date: Feb 2, 2026
In Re: Hearing on the Future of Constituent Engagement, Minority Questions for the Record

Enhancing Staff Capacity and Constituent Experience

1. **How can Members leverage AI and other advanced technologies to help constituents solve problems faster and access critical resources more easily?**

The most immediate way Members can use AI to improve constituent services is by applying it to sorting and organizing incoming requests and improving outgoing messages. Offices receive large volumes of inquiries across multiple channels, many of them repetitive, misdirected, or incomplete, and this causes delays.

Staff can use existing or easily-developed AI tools to transcribe, group and categorize incoming emails, calls, and web submissions by type, issue area, agency, urgency, and geography; identify duplicate or near-duplicate requests; and flag time-sensitive cases for rapid human review. This would allow staff to work from organized queues rather than raw inboxes, reducing handoffs and enabling faster first responses.

We have seen the impact of this approach in operational settings. In New Jersey, the Office of Innovation modernized more than a dozen high-volume call centers by using AI to analyze call transcripts, identify common issues, and route inquiries more effectively. In practice, staff used AI to understand what callers were asking for, surface relevant information more quickly, and adjust menus and self-service options based on real demand. Across agencies, average wait times fell from more than forty minutes to under two minutes, the share of callers who successfully reached a live agent increased by between six and fifteen percent, and operational costs were reduced while keeping humans fully in control of outcomes.[1]

In Massachusetts' six health insurance exchange call centers, staff are required to consult hundreds of frequently changing and sometimes conflicting policy documents to answer resident questions, leading to delays. AI for Impact fellows built an internal, AI-assisted tool trained on those policy documents to search across them, extract relevant passages, and highlight the specific language that answered a caller's question. Built in under six months, the tool allowed staff to spend far less time searching for information and more time assisting residents, particularly in urgent situations, resulting in quicker, clearer answers.

[1] See New Jersey Innovation Authority Impact Report 2025, https://innovation.nj.gov/impact-report/2025/.

Members' offices can apply these same principles in a congressional context. AI can help identify the most common constituent questions, assist staff in drafting clear, plain-language responses, and support the creation of vetted FAQs that can be published on office websites or incorporated into chat tools. Importantly, staff write, review and approve all answers. AI is used to surface patterns, suggest drafts, and retrieve information, not to communicate with constituents autonomously or make determinations. This is the same model used in New Jersey for Business.NJ.gov, where AI supports both website content and internal call center staff.

When used this way, AI functions as back-office infrastructure that helps small teams manage volume, respond more consistently, and direct constituents to the right resources more quickly. It enables staff to focus their time on complex, sensitive, or urgent cases where human judgment and empathy are essential, while improving access to accurate information for everyone else.

Having access to data on past calls, emails, and constituent inquiries (or beginning to collect it in a consistent way) will accelerate the process of developing effective tools. AI can analyze historical communications to identify recurring questions, emerging issues, and points of confusion, enabling offices to improve routing rules, update FAQs, and refine guidance before backlogs form. In New Jersey, analyzing call transcripts allowed agencies to adjust menus, improve online information, and proactively publish clearer guidance, which in turn reduced repeat calls and shortened resolution times. For Member offices, even modest efforts to retain and analyze past inquiry data can create a virtuous cycle: better information leads to fewer misdirected requests, faster responses, and more staff time available for complex or urgent cases.

Finally, AI can be used at the point of intake to help constituents submit clearer, more actionable requests in the first place. Through the AI for Impact program, we built a feedback tool for the City of Boston that allows residents to provide feedback on city services while the AI analyzes submissions for relevance and clarity and asks follow-up questions to help constituents sharpen their input. This guided clarification reduces incomplete or misdirected requests and ensures staff receive the information they need to act quickly. This spring AI for Impact fellows are building a version of this that is voice based for another partner. The voice-based system asks a question and, if the response is incomplete or unclear, it asks follow up questions. Similar approaches could help Member offices improve the quality of incoming emails, voicemails, or web submissions, speeding resolution while reducing the need for back-and-forth follow-up by staff.

Undertaking a project to improve how constituent communications are managed does not need to be a large or risky undertaking. Early pilots can begin with existing tools and small amounts of historical data to help staff experiment, learn, and shape requirements before building anything custom. For example, AI for Impact, working with POPVOX, piloted an AI-enabled tool to help answer constituent questions in 2023; since then, the underlying tools have become significantly more capable. Congress can start small, learn quickly, and build iteratively—reducing risk while ensuring that any eventual tools are grounded in real workflows and staff needs.

2. **How can Congress ensure that AI tools used for engagement preserve nuance and diversity of opinion, rather than flattening or oversimplifying constituent input?**

Congress can preserve nuance and diversity of opinion by treating AI-enabled engagement as a portfolio of complementary methods, not a single platform or one-size-fits-all workflow. Different stages of lawmaking and oversight require different kinds of input. Agenda-setting, hearing questions, structured comments on draft text, and post-implementation feedback all surface different forms of expertise and lived experience.

In Brazil, for example, the legislature uses multiple distinct engagement pathways rather than relying on a single channel; similarly, in New Jersey we have consistently combined approaches rather than expecting one mechanism to capture the full range of public views. Using multiple engagement modes reduces the risk that any one tool's structure—or any one population's participation patterns—becomes the default "voice" of the public.[2]

Ultimately, however, we risk "flattening" public input when we ask the wrong question. To ensure we use AI to capture a broad range of public input, there are key design and governance requirements learned from effective engagements:

- **Do not rely on one-dimensional outputs**. Members should avoid relying on single sentiment scores, binary "for/against" labels, or volume-weighted summaries that privilege coordinated campaigns. Instead, AI outputs should surface distinct clusters of reasoning, points of agreement and disagreement, and underrepresented perspectives, including where views diverge by geography or lived experience.
- **Require traceability and auditability**. AI-generated summaries and clusters should link back to underlying submissions so staff can verify accuracy, review context, and ensure that minority viewpoints and outliers are not lost. AI should be constrained to organizing and summarizing the corpus of public input—not generating new claims.
- **Design prompts and tasks that elicit expertise and know-how**. Oversimplification often begins at intake. Engagement that asks "What do you think?" tends to produce flattened sentiment. Engagement that asks targeted questions tied to a specific decision—"Which provision affects you and how?", "What evidence or example supports your point?", "What tradeoff are you experiencing?"—produces more comparable, usable, and nuanced input.
- **Institutionalize human judgment in the workflow**. Staff should review and validate AI outputs before they inform briefs, memos, hearing preparation, or public summaries. This review should explicitly check for missing perspectives, mischaracterized clusters, and over-aggregation that obscures meaningful disagreement.
- **Close the loop publicly to reinforce accuracy**. Publishing "What We Heard" summaries that reflect multiple viewpoints—and explain how input was used or not used—discourages oversimplification and builds trust by demonstrating that Congress is

[2] Beth Noveck et al., From Citizen to Senator: Artificial Intelligence and the Reinvention of Citizen Lawmaking in Brazil, Reboot Blog, March 26, 2025, https://rebootdemocracy.ai/blog/ai-lawmaking-brazil-senate. See also CrowdLaw for Congress, https://congress.crowd.law/.

representing constituents' views faithfully rather than collapsing them into a simplistic headline.

Finally, Congress can strengthen its capacity to do this well by investing in staff skills and shared standards.

InnovateUS is developing a practitioner-focused course in spring 2026 on designing democratic engagement for the AI era. Developed with an advisory board of 50+ AI and engagement experts and informed by the discussions in a dozen workshops in fall 2025, the asynchronous, free course covers goal definition, participant selection and outreach beyond the "usual suspects," task design, workflow design from input to impact, evaluation, and closing the loop along with practical guidance on how AI can support each stage without replacing human accountability.

We would be happy to include congressional staff in the advisory board and make this training freely available to congressional staff so that the use of AI in engagement is guided by consistent design principles that preserve nuance rather than flatten it.

3. **How can Members rethink deployment and training of staff to serve constituents better?**

Training:

All staff need baseline AI literacy so they understand how to use AI safely in their day-to-day work. Used properly, staff can take advantage of generative AI to do many common tasks better, such as creating content (e.g., drafting emails, memos, reports, presentations, images, audio, or video drafts), editing content (e.g., revising text for clarity, tone, or length; editing images or presentation slides), synthesizing text (e.g., summarizing reports, meeting notes, public comments, or background materials), and sorting multiple texts (e.g., grouping public comments by theme or organizing notes from multiple documents) and more.

InnovateUS offers free, asynchronous AI literacy courses for public-sector employees that are in widespread use across more than forty states and cities, from Alabama to California, Ohio to North Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee.

In addition to foundational literacy, InnovateUS is developing a practitioner-focused, asynchronous course on designing effective public engagement with AI (see answer to Question 2). This course is grounded in the idea that many institutions would engage the public more often if they had clearer guidance on how to do it well and if the process were easier to run. AI creates an opportunity to lower time, cost, and complexity without sacrificing democratic integrity.

InnovateUS also offers frequent live, skills-based workshops designed to teach better ways of working in government.

Courses can be deployed through an organization's existing learning management system or accessed directly, making them easy to adopt across offices. For more information, see innovate-us.org and this brief presentation.

To accompany the public engagement course, AI for Impact is building a coaching tool that will provide staff with real-time, task-specific guidance as they plan and run engagement activities. This applied support is designed to help staff make better decisions about goals, prompts, workflows, and use of AI without requiring specialized technical expertise. The coaching tool will be freely available around the clock.

Deployment

With better use of responsible AI, Members can redeploy staff away from manual intake, sorting, and repetitive information retrieval toward higher-value work such as complex casework, escalation, and constituent follow-up. When staff use AI to triage and organize incoming inquiries, group similar requests, and surface relevant information quickly, staff no longer need to spend large portions of their day managing inboxes or searching for answers. Instead, offices can route routine questions efficiently while reserving experienced staff time for sensitive or urgent cases that require discretion and empathy.

Second, better deployment depends on giving staff access to shared, vetted knowledge rather than relying on individual staffers to answer the same questions repeatedly. AI can help identify the most common constituent questions, retrieve prior guidance, and assist with drafting clear, plain-language responses that staff review and approve. Maintaining shared FAQs and internal playbooks allows offices to respond more consistently and frees staff time for problem-solving rather than reinventing answers.

Finally, Members should view deployment and training as ongoing capabilities, not one-time fixes. As constituent needs, policies, and tools evolve, offices need the ability to adapt how work is organized and how staff are supported. Pairing modest workflow changes with practical, accessible learning opportunities enables offices to serve constituents more effectively, reduce staff burnout, and ensure that technology strengthens rather than complicates constituent service.

4. **What investments can Member offices make today to maximize the impact of constituent services staff?**

The most immediate and high-impact investment Member offices can make is to require workforce-wide AI literacy and AI and engagement training for staff and pair that training with access to secure, approved AI tools. Without both, staff either cannot use AI effectively or are pushed to rely on unsecured, ad hoc tools that create risk without delivering real productivity gains.

Experience from states and cities shows that training and access must go together. In New Jersey, we have trained and provisioned AI access for more than 16,000 public employees. The State of Ohio has done the same for more than 23,000 workers. The City of Boston has recently rolled out AI training and access for approximately 24,000 employees, and Washington, DC has done so for roughly 40,000. In each case, the focus has been on equipping staff with practical skills and safe tools they can use in their daily work, rather than treating AI as an optional or experimental add-on.

Training matters because the AI tools most staff currently have access to are not designed for public-sector use. Commercial, consumer-facing tools are not built with government data sensitivity, accountability, or workflow needs in mind. Without guidance, staff may underuse AI, misuse it, or avoid it altogether. Requiring training establishes shared norms around what AI should and should not be used for, how to protect constituent information, and how to integrate AI into real workflows such as triage, drafting, and information retrieval. Education will also help Members and staff become better educated customers, prepared to demand more and better from vendors and empower the institution to move toward public, purpose-built AI systems trained on its own data and designed for legislative and constituent service needs, rather than relying on tools optimized for private-sector or consumer use.

InnovateUS stands ready to support this near-term investment by providing online, asynchronous video courses and workshops. These offerings can be complemented by live learning and workshops that InnovateUS is happy to deliver in collaboration with other organizations. Together, required training and secure access represent a low-cost, immediately actionable way to increase staff effectiveness, reduce burnout, and improve constituent service outcomes.

5. **What approaches to constituent engagement would you recommend we avoid, based on your research or experience?**

The primary approach Congress should avoid is engagement that is not clearly relevant to a real decision or does not lead to an outcome. Engagement that invites people to participate without a defined purpose, a clear use of input, or visible follow-through consumes staff time, frustrates participants, and ultimately erodes trust.

In particular, committees and Members should avoid asking questions when they have no plans to use the answers received.

Asking "what do you think?" without specifying what kind of information is needed, how it will be evaluated, or how it will influence legislative or oversight decisions will only generate large volumes of unfocused input that are difficult to process and rarely usable, even with AI support.

Congress should also avoid symbolic engagement exercises that are launched for visibility but not integrated into regular workflows. When engagement is treated as an experiment rather than as part of how Congress does its work, staff lack the time and incentives to use the input, and participants quickly learn that their contributions do not matter. Pilots are helpful only when there is a plan to use the learnings to institutionalize engagement.

One reason Brazil's approaches to public engagement have worked over time is that they are fully integrated into legislative workflows that are useful to Congress and staff, not just visible to residents. Engagement there is treated as a form of intelligence gathering that supports hearings, oversight, and lawmaking, rather than as a symbolic exercise in participation. Questions, comments, and proposals are structured so they can be reviewed, categorized, and acted on within existing processes, and AI is increasingly used to make that sensemaking faster and more efficient without displacing human judgment. Because engagement improves the quality and efficiency of legislative work, it has been institutionalized rather than abandoned after a pilot phase.

Finally, Congress should avoid over-automated or black-box approaches that substitute technology for judgment. AI can help organize and summarize input, but when it is used to make decisions, generate responses without human review, or present oversimplified metrics such as single sentiment scores, it obscures nuance and undermines legitimacy.

Effective engagement requires clarity of purpose, structured tasks, human accountability, and a commitment to act—or to explain why action was not taken. Engagement without relevance or outcomes does more harm than good.

Taken together, these lessons suggest that preserving nuance is less about the sophistication of the AI model and more about how Congress designs engagement, structures input, and governs how AI outputs are used

6. **Are there any privacy-related best practices we should keep in mind as we develop new constituent service tools?**

As Congress develops new constituent service tools—especially those that use AI—it is essential to adopt privacy-by-design practices that minimize risk while preserving usefulness. The goal should be to collect and retain only the information necessary to resolve a constituent's issue and to protect that information throughout its lifecycle.

First, data minimization should be the default. Tools should be designed to limit the collection of sensitive personal information unless it is strictly required for case resolution. Where possible, systems should discourage constituents from submitting unnecessary personal details and guide them toward providing only what is relevant.

Second, AI can be used proactively to protect privacy. When AI for Impact built internal tools for the Massachusetts Health Connector and the City of Boston's feedback platform, we incorporated automatic redaction of personally identifiable information. When the system detects phone numbers, Social Security numbers, or other sensitive identifiers, it removes or masks them before the data is stored or analyzed. This reduces the risk of accidental exposure while still allowing staff to understand and act on the substance of a request.

Third, human accountability must be clear and continuous. AI systems should support staff by organizing and safeguarding information, but humans should remain responsible for decisions about access, use, and disclosure. Clear access controls, audit logs, and role-based permissions help ensure that sensitive information is only available to those who need it.

Finally, transparency builds trust. Constituents should be told in plain language how their information will be used, how AI supports staff work, and what safeguards are in place to protect their data. Clear explanations and visible protections encourage engagement while reinforcing confidence that Congress is handling constituent information responsibly.

Together, practices such as data minimization, automatic redaction of sensitive information, human oversight, and transparency ensure that new tools improve constituent services without compromising privacy or trust.

Strategic Considerations

Many of our most impactful modernization projects require long-term support and development. But securing this support is increasingly difficult as funding for the legislative branch lags behind the executive branch. What is the most effective way to allocate funding to new initiatives when modernization dollars are scarce? Should projects be funded iteratively from research to planning to execution or all at once? Is it better to spread resources across multiple projects for phased evaluation or concentrate on one major initiative? Given the uncertain funding environment, how do you decide which types of projects to prioritize?

Agile development in resource-constrained environments is a well-established practice. It emphasizes small, time-bound sprints; continuous user engagement and rapid testing against real needs. AI further strengthens the case for agile approaches by dramatically reducing development time for early prototypes, lowering the cost of experimentation, and enabling teams to move from concept to deployment in months rather than years. This is how AI for Impact has repeatedly been able to build and deploy usable tools in under six months and how we have long worked in the Office of Innovation in New Jersey.

By contrast, "waterfall" approaches that attempt to fully fund and specify projects from research through execution carry high risk in today's environment. They assume stable requirements, limited feedback, and delayed delivery of value. In practice, this often results in tools that are misaligned with staff workflows, outdated by the time they launch, or underused because they were built without sufficient user testing. When resources are limited, Congress cannot afford to fund projects that only prove their value at the end of a long development cycle.

You can accomplish a lot at scale even without large budgets. For example, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu announced the City of Boston's new permitting experience at a recent press conference. With the help of two AI for Impact fellows, the City ingested twenty-five years of past permit applications to understand what residents are trying to accomplish and used that information to identify the most common requests and design and publish how-to guides. The City's new permitting website has two dozen new guides and will finish writing guides for the most common requests by this summer. Two student fellows working with the City and AI accomplished the project in a few months.[3]

Importantly, innovation demands experimentation not perfection. Successful modernization efforts in cities and states have embraced incremental deployment and public learning. The New Jersey Public Defender's Office wanted to build an AI-enabled brief writing tool. The Office started by loading a limited set of past briefs into a widely available commercial tool. This allowed attorneys to test functionality, provide feedback, and clarify what they actually needed before investing in a tailored solution that Princeton University faculty and students then built as AI for Impact project.[4] The City of Boston also rolled out its City Council AI-enabled summarization tool rapidly, labeled it as a "beta," gathered feedback from residents and staff, and improved the system over time. It is better to deploy something useful early, learn from use, and improve it, than to delay action in pursuit of an ideal solution.

Early funding should support lightweight pilots done in collaboration with staff to ensure that any tools are designed to meet user needs. Later funding decisions should be based on evidence from those pilots. This approach reduces waste, surfaces problems early, and allows Congress to stop or redirect investments before costs escalate.

Finally, in deciding which projects to prioritize under uncertainty, Congress should favor initiatives that meet four criteria: they improve core institutional workflows; they respond to staff needs and reduce staff burden rather than add to it; they are adaptable across offices or committees; and they build long-term capacity rather than dependency on external vendors. Investing in small, iterative projects designed and tested with congressional staff embeds learning within the institution and ensures that modernization efforts strengthen Congress's ability to govern.

In short, when resources are constrained, Congress should start building rather than waiting, fund iteratively rather than all at once, focus on shared capabilities rather than fragmented tools, and prioritize projects that deliver early value while strengthening institutional capacity.

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[3] See https://www.boston.gov/boston-permitting. Note the BETA branding on top.

[4] Jennifer Sellitti, Human by Design: Reflections from the OECD Global Roundtable on Equal Access to Justice, Reboot Blog, December 8, 2025, https://rebootdemocracy.ai/blog/human-by-design-reflections-from-the-oecd-global-roundtable-on-equal-access-to-justice

