



Organizing Virtual Parliamentary Sessions during the COVID-19 Pandemic

#ParlAmericasOPN #COVID19

The objective of the first virtual meeting of ParlAmericas, [Organizing Virtual Parliamentary Sessions during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) provided an opportunity for representatives of the parliaments of Brazil, Chile and Ecuador to share their recent experiences in moving towards remote parliamentary processes, including the holding of parliamentary sittings and committee meetings, attendance registration, voting, and other activities, following national and international recommendations to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.



Access the recording of the session [here](#) (Spanish only)

THEME

Innovation, Virtual Sessions,
Modernization of Parliamentary Processes

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

DATE

April 16, 2020

PARTICIPANTS

More than 80 parliamentarians and
parliamentary staff from 16 countries



This activity is aligned with SDG 16

Summary

This activity was inaugurated by Member of the National Assembly **Elizabeth Cabezas** (Ecuador), President of ParlAmericas, and featured welcoming remarks by Member of the National Assembly César Litardo, President of the National Assembly of Ecuador. Ms. **Anabella Zavagno**, Deputy Director General of ParlAmericas, was in charge of moderating this meeting.

Participating in this virtual meeting as panellists, were Mr. **Gustavo Vasconcellos Calvacanti** ([presentation](#)), IT Analyst in the Innovation and ICT Directorate of the Chamber of Deputies of Brazil; Mr. **Miguel Landeros**, Secretary General of the Chamber of Deputies of Chile; and Mr. **Claudio Prieto** ([presentation](#)), General Coordinator of Information Technologies of the National Assembly of Ecuador.

At the moment, the Assembly has held 63 virtual committee meetings, 6 plenary sittings where we have conducted 21 electronic votes, and there have been more than 80 speeches given remotely by Members of the National Assembly, which, in turn, has also increased their attendance to almost 98%. This has also led to economic savings due to the reduction in legislators' transportation expenses. Working this way has many advantages and we believe that when we return to normality we will have this tool as an important space that will continue to be used.

This global crisis has posed multiple challenges for all parliaments in the world and in the region, and we must definitely live up to what the world demands from parliaments. Being able to meet virtually is already an important point. This is a great opportunity for ParlAmericas to be able to respond to this contingency, especially when parliaments are under scrutiny and we need to give concrete answers to our constituents at this time.

Member of the National Assembly
Elizabeth Cabezas (Ecuador),
President of ParlAmericas



Member of the National Assembly
César Litardo, President of the
National Assembly of Ecuador

Panelists

Mr. **Vasconcellos Calvacanti** presented the [Remote Deliberation System](#) (SDR) that was developed in the Chamber of Deputies of Brazil, which required the integration of a broadcasting system and two critical functions: attendance registration and voting. To implement this system, it was also necessary to approve resolutions and provisions that offer legal support to the discussions and agreements adopted during virtual sittings. The Zoom platform is used for video conferencing, and the [Infoleg](#) mobile application and other parliamentary administrative systems are used for the other functions of the virtual sittings. All of these are also connected to the Parliament's website and the open data portal. The SDR allows for both remote and face-to-face participation in virtual sittings of the plenary.

Furthermore, Mr. **Miguel Landeros** shared that the Chamber of Deputies of Chile needed to approve a constitutional reform in early March, as well as internal regulations to guarantee the legality of remote plenary sittings. The Chamber also uses Zoom for videoconferencing, and a mobile and web application that is integrated with the audio and voting of the room where parliamentary sittings are usually held. It is also available for committee meetings. The internal communications of the parliament are electronic, so bills and various legislative procedures can be presented through these channels. They have been working with applications such as these for several years, to ensure, for example, that female Members of the Chamber of Deputies could participate during the pre and post natal periods. Furthermore, this digitization of parliamentary processes has made it possible to eliminate the use of paper in plenary sessions.

Mobile application

The Infoleg mobile application ([explanatory video](#)) provides citizens with access to legislative information. The data presented includes live broadcasts, the agenda, proposals and bills, voting results, and other information. Recently, functionalities were added to allow MPs to register their attendance and voting in virtual sittings of the plenary. This application is available on Android and iOS.

There is a constant concern for security, so new security features are added in each new version of the system. The solution (Remote Deliberation System) is being used successfully, and there have already been several votes, including a proposed amendment to the constitution that was voted on successfully. This is a new reality for all of us and we are learning every day. Therefore, the exchange of experiences as we are engaging in to-day in this meeting is essential.



Gustavo Vasconcellos Calvacanti, IT Analyst in the Innovation and ICT Directorate of the Chamber of Deputies of Brazil

Mr. **Claudio Prieto** spoke of the National Assembly of Ecuador, indicating that it has been working with a “Digital Desk ” system since 2012, which makes it possible to manage the registration of Members of the National Assembly, verification of quorum, requests to speak, and electronic voting during in-person plenary sittings. In order to transition to virtual parliamentary sittings and use the existing systems, a regulation had to be approved to include teleworking, in such a way that it also took into consideration the administrative work of these sessions. With this legal framework, the use of the Digital Desk and other platforms, such as Zoom, could be enabled for remote parliamentary debates and appearances by national authorities before the National Assembly. In order for the Members of the National Assembly to use their Digital Desk, remote access was activated and configured so that each Member and their team could connect to this desk located in the plenary chamber. Training sessions were required for both legislators and their teams so that both mechanisms, the Digital Desk and Zoom, could function and ensure a smooth remote plenary sitting. Furthermore, it was requested that parliamentarians use two devices for this, which has resulted in the participation of nearly 100% of the National Assembly in the sittings.



"Digital Desk" System acquired in 2012 and updated in September 2019



Biometric authentication



Verification of quorum



Request to speak



Electronic vote (plenary sittings / committee)

Each country has its own way of being and has worked either more or less on this. We believe that these initiatives should be done in a simple way. It is important that the country go through its own processes and experiences to adapt or create the necessary development tools according to its context.



Miguel Landeros, Secretary General of the Chamber of Deputies of Chile



Claudio Prieto, General Coordinator of Information Technologies of the National Assembly of Ecuador

This emergency has been a technical and operational challenge, and a general problem for all parliaments, but it has also presented an opportunity to take that digital leap. One of the critical success factors has been that we have had a certain degree of computerization of our processes, and the more computerized they have been, the easier it has been to make this transition.

Conclusions

Following the panelists' presentations, there was a question-and-answer period where officials from different parliaments in the region participated in a dialogue with the invited specialists. To conclude the meeting, the floor was given to Member of the Legislative Assembly María Inés Solís (Costa Rica) who highlighted the work being carried out by parliamentary officials to allow the legislative powers to continue to meet virtually, and to Member of the National Assembly Cabezas who stressed the importance of parliaments continuing to collaborate jointly through ParlAmericas.

The experience and good practices of the National Congress of Brazil, the National Congress of Chile and the National Assembly of Ecuador, as well as of the participants, including the National Congress of Paraguay, which has also begun to meet virtually, allow us to deepen our knowledge as we continue to evaluate options and define solutions that best suit our parliaments and national circumstances.

Member of the Legislative Assembly **María Inés Solís** (Costa Rica), ParlAmericas Board Member



Key considerations for conducting virtual sessions

Establish functionalities that guarantee the security of digital applications or tools used during virtual sittings.

Support parliamentarians and their respective teams during remote sittings in the event that they have any problems or queries.

Train parliamentary officials and legislators in the use of technological tools.

Continue to computerize and digitize parliamentary processes, including internal communications and electronic signatures, to facilitate the transition process to virtual sittings.

Strengthen legislative openness to guarantee transparency, accountability, public participation, ethics, and integrity in the transition to virtual parliamentary processes.

Parliaments Present



Argentina



Chile



Ecuador



Mexico



Bolivia



Colombia



El Salvador



Panama



Brazil



Costa Rica



Guatemala



Paraguay



Canada



Dominican
Republic



Honduras



Peru

Canada

This meeting was made possible with the generous support of the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada.

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PARLAMERICAS



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



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



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



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



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



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