

Still Muted: The Limited Participatory Democracy of Zoom Public Meetings

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Abstract

Recent research has demonstrated that participants in public meetings are unrepresentative of their broader communities. Some suggest that reducing barriers to meeting attendance can improve participation, while others believe that such changes will be produce minimal changes. The COVID-19 pandemic shifted public meetings online, potentially reducing the time costs associated with participating. We match participants at online public meetings with administrative data to learn whether: (1) online participants are representative of their broader communities and (2) representativeness improves relative to in-person meetings. We find that participants in online forums are quite similar to those in in-person ones. They are similarly unrepresentative of residents in their broader communities and similarly overwhelmingly opposed to the construction of new housing. These results suggest important limitations to public meeting reform. Future research should continue to unpack whether reforms might prove more effective at redressing inequalities in an improved economic and public health context.

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced municipalities across the country to implement emergency health, economic, and social policies. It also required them to adapt formerly routine functions including in-person public proceedings on important policy issues such as housing and policing. After a brief pause, municipalities moved these meetings to online platforms. Prominent politicians, activists, and media believe that this shift significantly changed the composition of participants by lowering barriers for many people. For example, in a 2021 op-ed, the *Boston Globe* called for making such changes permanent: “allowing people to participate remotely has proved to be a big improvement, broadening the pool of participants” and two Boston City Councilors introduced an ordinance that would do so.¹ Whether this optimism about online meetings’ effect on participation is justified is an empirical question with important scholarly and policy implications. In this paper, we ask whether reducing participation costs diminishes political inequality. We collect novel administrative data about participation in post-COVID-19 online housing meetings for which potential participants do not have to leave their homes. Critically, these data are directly comparable to published findings about pre-COVID-19 in-person meetings (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019). These questions, and our answers to them, sit at the intersection of literatures about public meeting structures (e.g. Collins 2021), housing politics (e.g. Hankinson 2018), and the effect of reforms on fundamental political participation (e.g. Barber and Holbein 2020).

Making important decisions through local participatory institutions is appealing in many ways. However, recent research (e.g. Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019) has rigorously documented considerable demographic inequalities in participation in traditional public meetings and large skews in the positions that government hears through them. Recognizing such concerns, others have suggested reducing barriers and using alternative formats (including online) to improve participation (e.g. American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2020, Strategy 3). Such ideas are intuitive. Among other things, participating in-person likely means leaving one’s home for a couple of hours in the evening, traveling to a government building, and sitting through chunks of a boring meeting while waiting for deliberation on the issue

on which you would like to participate. For many, it also requires finding child care, taking time off of work, sacrificing scarce leisure time, or other serious obstacles.

While online formats present their own challenges (see below), they seemingly mitigate many of these obstacles. Thus, the COVID-19 induced shift to online meetings provides an opportunity to directly test whether online formats change participation, and to more generally evaluate whether tangible barriers are the driver behind previously observed participatory inequalities. We do this by creating and analyzing data from online meetings in the same municipalities featured in Einstein, Glick and Palmer (2019). To preview our findings, we find that participatory disparities largely persist in online forums. As in traditional meetings, participants are older, whiter, and more likely to be homeowners than voters in their broader communities. Changes in local meeting institutions alone, then, do not appear to dramatically shift the composition of participants and remedy troubling disparities in who participates.

The broader literature provides reasons to expect that reducing participatory barriers may help promote civic engagement and political participation (Norris et al. 2000). Recent studies of mail-in voting, for example, suggest that reducing the costs to participation may increase it (Barber and Holbein 2020; Thompson et al. 2020) among a more representative subset of the population (Bonica et al. 2020). The internet may similarly play an important role in facilitating political participation from underrepresented groups. Some research suggests that it can increase political engagement by supporting the recruitment of disengaged populations (Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal 2007; Gil De Zuniga, Puig-I-Abril and Rojas 2009). Online forums reduce the costs of participation as they requires less time, physical inconvenience, and monetary costs compared to in-person meetings (Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Jung, Kim and De Zúniga 2011). Skilled internet users may be part of previously disengaged groups in offline political interactions (Krueger 2002). What's more, online public meeting participation requires minimum levels of technical competency, which does not alienate current participants (Jung, Kim and De Zúniga 2011; Best and Krueger 2005).

Taken in concert, these studies find that making it easier to participate increases overall turnout—in some cases among underrepresented, less privileged, groups.

There is, however, also reason to doubt that changes to meeting institutions can remedy deep inequities in participation. Internet and computing access is not equally available across all communities (Anderson and Kumar 2013). Moreover, even if moving online does decrease the *costs* of participation, it does not necessarily increase *interest* or *engagement* with politics—two important drivers of participation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Evidence from campaigns and voting reveal that outreach efforts that do not tackle interest or engagement gaps often fall short. Enos, Fowler and Vavreck (2014), for example, show that Get-Out-the-Vote (GOTV) efforts from campaigns that do not explicitly target low-income voters can actually increase participatory disparities. Burden et al. (2019) find that same-day registration reduces participatory disparities, while early voting may, in fact, exacerbate them—a finding echoed in Berinsky (2005). Indeed, many local governments adopted public meetings around land use decisions in an effort to combat the political power of developers—a policy reform that in practice just empowered a different privileged group: older, white homeowners (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019). What’s more, longstanding racism in housing policies (Rothstein 2017; Trounstein 2018) may lead to lower levels of trust in government—which, in turn, may depress political participation; simply changing meeting modalities cannot redress longterm distrust. In short, without increasing political interest, engagement, or trust among less privileged groups, reducing the time it takes to participate by moving online may not bring out new voices or improve representativeness.

Definitively disentangling these alternative explanations is confounded by external events: the move to online meetings coincided with a global pandemic and a growing protest movement over racial injustice. It is impossible for us to fully parse out in these longitudinal data whether shifts in participation are due exclusively to institutional changes in the meeting structure or a global change in political participation due to the political, economic, social, and public health context. Indeed, the ongoing public health and economic crises had dispro-

prtionate impacts on renters, lower-income individuals, and Black, Hispanic, and indigenous people. These effects may have dramatically reduced these groups' time and capacity to engage in any kind of political participation, including online forums. As a countervailing force, growing public interest in promoting racial justice may have spurred some of those same groups to participate more in online forums than they would have otherwise.

Even without being able to fully separate the causal effect, we believe these results offer scholars and policymakers important insights. The shift to online meetings does not appear to significantly worsen disparities—despite the digital divide. But, it also does not improve representation—even in the face of the broader political mobilization of groups traditionally underrepresented at local political meetings. Disparities are still substantial despite easy, low-cost participation and high levels of general excitement about local politics. Our evidence shows that reformers concerned about demographic disparities and skews in what government hears should not rely on online meetings as a solution. More generally, it suggests that practical barriers are not the primary source of participatory disparities and that other attempts to improve participation through logistical solutions are unlikely to make a big impact.

Housing Meetings

We focus on public planning board and zoning board meetings in 97 cities and towns in Eastern and central Massachusetts. These meetings shape the allocation of new housing units. Because of stringent land use regulations in the United States, most housing proposals involving the construction of more than one unit of housing must go through a rigorous approval process before a planning or zoning board; these meetings typically invite members of the public to participate. Previous research has shown that these participants are advantaged relative to their communities across a variety of traits. Moreover, they are overwhelmingly opposed to new housing—depressing the construction of new units, especially

in privileged places. These neighborhood meetings consequently have a profound impact on overall housing supply and access to housing in high-opportunity places (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019).

Understanding whether online meetings change these problematic dynamics is thus of enormous substantive importance. What’s more, there are methodological advantages to focusing on these meetings. Because Einstein, Glick and Palmer (2019) studied these same communities, we are able to use their data as a benchmark against which we measure political participation in online forums. As Einstein, Glick and Palmer (2019, see for demographic profiles) explain, while these communities are geographically limited, they constitute a mixed set of people and places, including homogenous and affluent communities, diverse and deindustrializing milltowns, dense inner-core suburbs, and more outlying and rural areas. Massachusetts offers significant advantages in studying participation in public meetings: a wide swath of communities have interpreted state open meeting laws as requiring the inclusion of names and addresses of *all participants* in meeting minutes (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019). This allows researchers to *precisely* match participants with administrative data.

We built a database of real participants who spoke virtually about proposals for more than one unit of housing between March-September 2020.² For each participant, we gathered their address and coded their views. We then matched participants’ names and addresses to a Massachusetts voter file from L2, which also matched voters to property records and estimated race using an algorithm similar to (Imai and Khanna 2016). This allows us to identify demographic characteristics of attendants (including age, race, gender, homeownership, partisanship, registration date). While we sought meeting minutes for the same 97 cities analyzed in Einstein, Glick and Palmer (2019), only 87 cities had uploaded minutes as of our data collection.³ In some cases, minutes did not report any public comments or participation. We were ultimately able to match participants to voters in 76 cities and towns.

Results

Overall, we were able to match 798 commenters making 1,078 comments to the voter file. Our main result is captured through the very simple demographic comparison in Table 1. Moving housing approval meetings online did *not* remedy systemic skews in participation. Online meeting participants were more likely to be white (13 percentage points gap), over the age of 50 (22 percentage point gap), and homeowners (25 percentage point gap) than voters in general. These differences are remarkably similar to the in-person disparities (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019).

[Table 1]

In Table 2, we estimate models using the full voter file to assess the relationship between a variety of traits and participation simultaneously. The dependent variable is an indicator of whether the resident participated in a housing development meeting. We estimate additional models with town level controls (column 2) and town fixed effects (column 3). Consistent with the basic demographic comparisons, white residents, older residents, and homeowners are consistently and significantly more likely to participate. Unlike in the in-person context, partisanship also appears to be a strong predictor of participation in public meetings. Republicans were less likely to participate than Independents and Democrats, all else equal.

[Table 2]

What do the Boards Hear in Online Meetings?

In addition to demographic skews in who participates, Einstein, Glick and Palmer (2019) show that participants in in-person forums oppose the construction of new housing. We find that online meetings do not change this dynamic. A mere 13 percent of online participants supported the construction of new housing (compared with 14 percent of in-person meeting participants); 61 percent were opposed, and 26 percent expressed neutral views. In Figure 1, we plot the percentage of comments that were supportive of housing proposals by town.

Each circle represents a municipality, and the size of each circle corresponds to the number of comments in the data. In two communities, about half of the comments were supportive. In another five places, roughly one quarter of comments were supportive. In the rest, fewer than 20 percent were supportive, and in 14 of the 36 towns, no comments supported development.

[Figure 1]

In Table 3, we investigate which demographic groups, if any, disproportionately support or oppose proposals. Homeowners dominate both the supporters and opponents, though they skew towards opposition. Women in contrast were relatively more likely to support proposals than oppose them. Interestingly, the finding for in-person meetings was the opposite: women who participated skewed toward opposition. Logit models predicting commenters' position based on their traits. Table 4 show that, for the comments we have coded, supporters are less likely to make many comments; as in in-person meetings. Frequent commenters are significantly less likely to support the construction of new housing. We also find that, as in the descriptive data, women are more likely to make supportive comments, and homeowners are less like to do so.

[Table 3]

Notably, the vast majority of comments across all demographic groups are opposed to multifamily housing development. Figure 2 plots the percentage of comments in support of proposed developments by homeownership, race, gender, and political party. Support was low across every category, with a maximum of 21%.

[Table 4] [Figure 2]

Conclusion

Our results preliminarily show that online meetings—despite their ostensible convenience—are no panacea for eliminating participatory inequalities. While there are some modest differences, the overwhelming finding here is one of similarity between online and in-person

forums. Participation gaps remain substantial, and, in some instances, are actually larger. This is especially striking—and disconcerting—given broader societal conversations about racial injustice that coincided with the shift to online meetings. Despite growing public interest in systemic racism in local governments and protests against police brutality, Black, Hispanic, and Asian residents remained essentially unheard. More broadly, it suggests that practical reforms such as changing meeting timing or venue are unlikely to yield more equitable participation without accompanying mobilization that enhances residents’ sense of efficacy and interest in meeting proceedings.

There are some glimmers of hope, though, for those who aspire to improve local participatory disparities. Our estimates may represent the high end of inequalities in online forums. COVID-19 placed a disproportionate burden on Black and Hispanic people, and on renters. It also imposed new childcare burdens and other uncertainties on younger families. These are the same groups that are underrepresented in online and in-person participation. It may be as the global pandemic wanes, those groups will have more time and inclination to participate in online forums. More immediately, online forums are new. Many people are likely unaware of their existence, and advocacy groups are likely still developing mobilizing strategies in the physical distancing era. What’s more, many of the projects presented at these online forums were already in the pipeline, potentially making them predisposed to the same participatory disparities of the in-person era just via a new channel. Finally, the continued overrepresentation of older residents is certainly troubling from a political equity perspective; however, it offers some reassurance that differences in digital literacy are not massively preventing older residents from participating in online forums.

The limited efficacy of this structural reform does not mean that we should eschew reform in general. For example, online meetings do nothing to address the *length* of a meeting, which may be a significant dissuader for participation—especially for relatively low interest community residents. A shift to shorter meetings might have a more potent effect.

Importantly, our research just focuses on housing policy. Other policy arenas, especially

those which more naturally attract broader participation, may experience different public meeting dynamics in the Zoom era. Policing and education, for example, may be more amenable to political organization and equitable online participation. Indeed, recent research suggests important differences between public meetings in housing policy and education (Collins 2021).

New projects and new strategies both have promise to make online meetings more representative. Changing the meeting format, though, is no substitute for engagement and mobilization by the government and advocacy groups. Simply moving a three-hour zoning board meeting online will not seemingly enhance community members' sense of efficacy or interest in participation.

Notes

1. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/05/27/opinion/pandemic-taught-us-better-way-do-public-business/>
2. Even though Massachusetts imposed a temporary housing moratorium in the late spring, active discussions about housing construction at these meetings continued.
3. This 13 percent drop in meeting minute availability between 2017 and 2020 suggests potentially important capacity and transparency obstacles stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. We include information about the medium in which online meetings were conducted in our appendix.

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Appendix

We summarize the ways that municipalities adapted institutional participatory procedures. Almost three-quarters (70 percent) relied on Zoom. Nearly half (47 percent) provided phone call options. A smaller number of local governments broadcast their meetings through television channels (16 percent), Facebook Live (5 percent), or the government’s website/YouTube channel (16 percent). Only 6 percent required participants to register before meetings. Figure 3 provides more details on local government online meeting procedures. Participants were able to express their concerns in different ways within these platforms. 81 percent of cities allowed commenters to speak via video conferencing or phone. More than half of the cities also allowed chat comments (58 percent) and two thirds provided an option for emailing input (66 percent).

[Figure 3]