

# BUILDING COMMUNITIES THROUGH DIGITAL GOVERNMENT

Digital tools can foster constituent engagement, increase accessibility and enhance trust in government.



The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated an already growing trend in local government toward using digital tools to serve and engage with constituents. From holding town meetings on videoconferencing platforms to sharing updates on COVID-19 vaccinations via social media, governments used an array of innovative methods to connect with communities during the public health crisis.

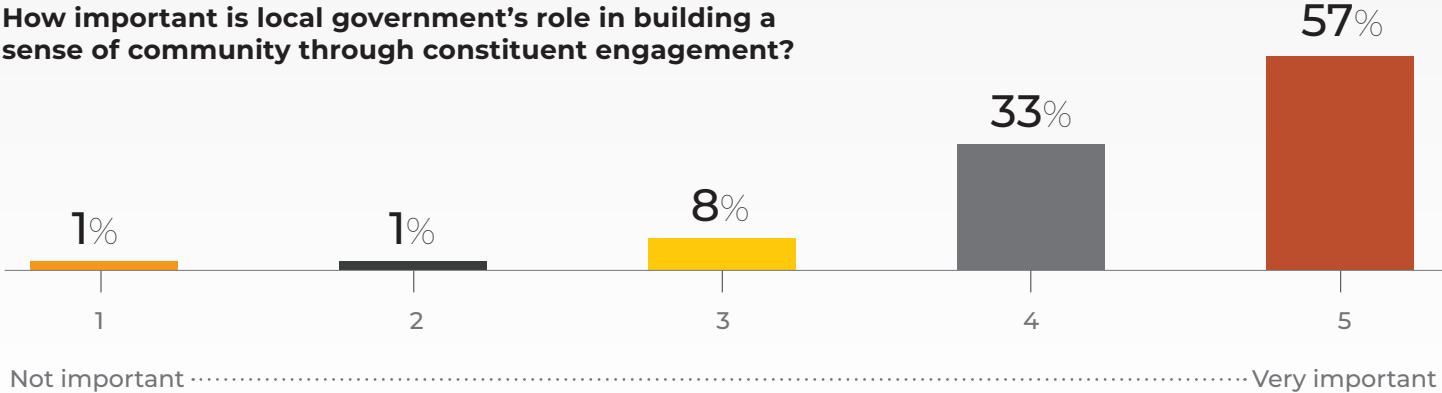
A new Center for Digital Government (CDG) survey of 169 local government leaders examines how governments used these tools to drive constituent engagement during the pandemic, and what technologies and strategies they plan to carry into the future.

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According to the survey, 90% of respondents say it is important for local governments to build a sense of community through constituent engagement. During a year marked by both a global pandemic and civic unrest, local government leaders have recognized the importance of connecting with constituents and fostering a sense of trust within local communities.

As public agencies look beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, they must consider how to leverage tools and technologies to best serve constituents, strengthen their communities and expand civic participation.

**How important is local government’s role in building a sense of community through constituent engagement?**

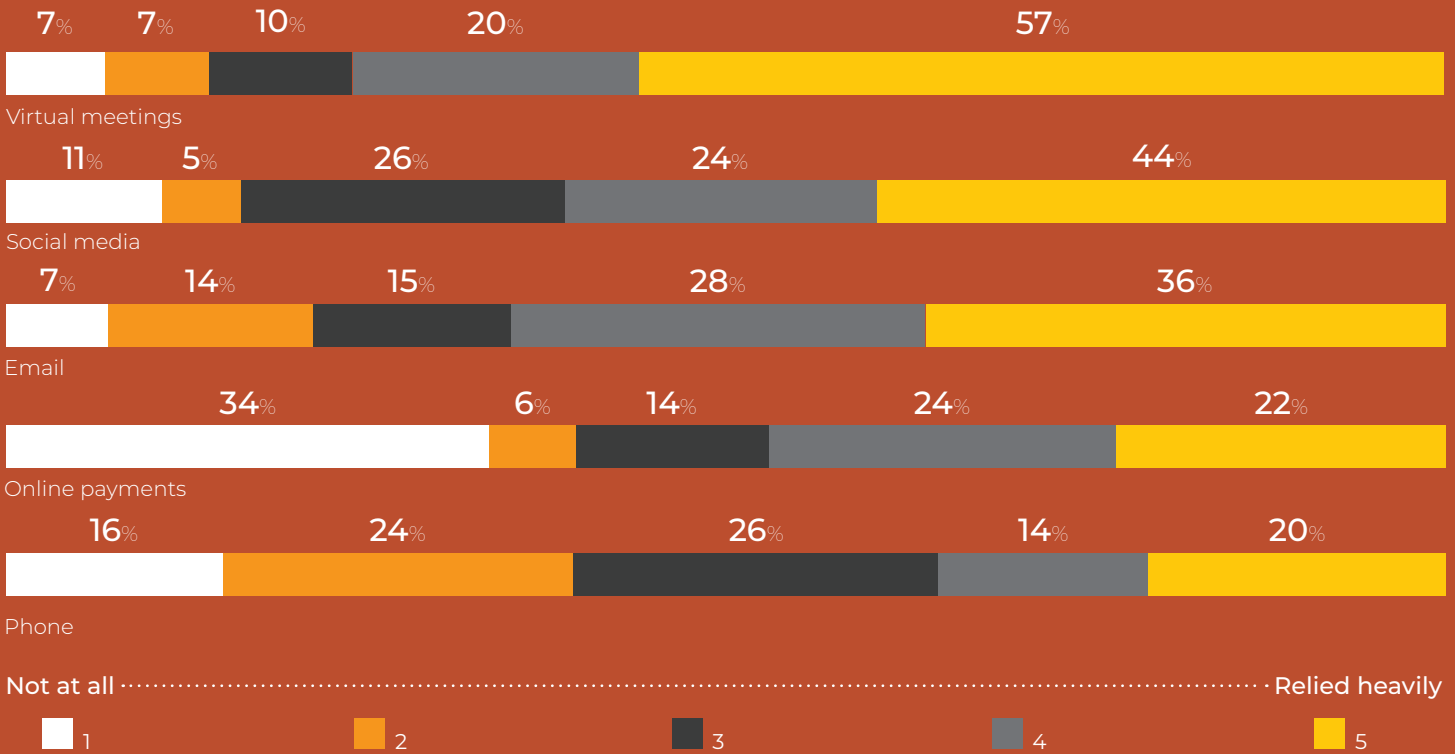


**TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT**

The shutdown of government buildings during the pandemic forced agencies to think creatively about how to interact with constituents. Survey respondents used an array of digital tools to engage with the public over the past year. More than half of respondents relied on virtual conference technology to host meetings and events during the pandemic. Other commonly used digital tools included social media and email.

Use of online payments also increased. Many local government agencies rely now more than ever on online platforms for constituents to pay things like bills, taxes and permit fees.

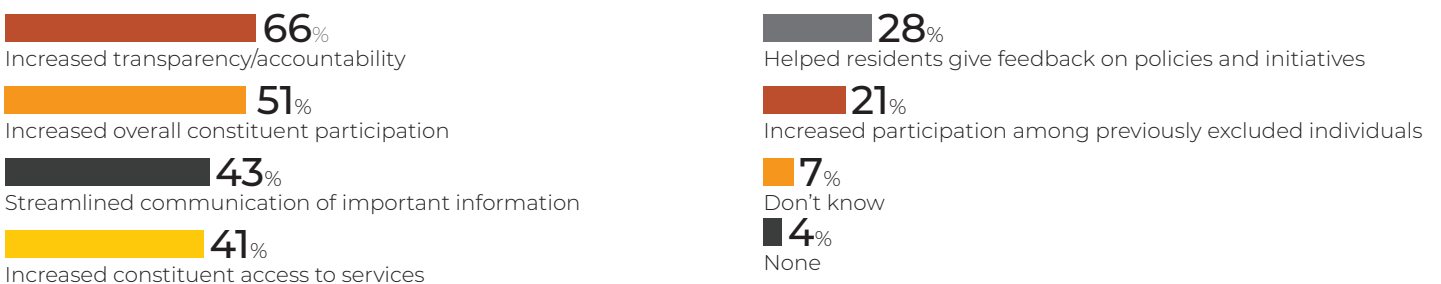
## How much have you relied on the following methods to promote constituent engagement in the past year?



Figures may not equal 100 percent due to rounding.

Despite the restrictions of the pandemic, many leaders found these tools led to an increase in public engagement with government. In fact, more than 50% of respondents said constituent engagement increased in their jurisdiction over the past year.

## How did your efforts over the past year help you increase constituent engagement?



Government leaders experience other benefits as well. More than 60% of respondents say digital engagement activities like virtual meetings and social media communication improved government transparency by giving constituents more convenient ways to access information and participate in public events.

Digital technologies streamlined delivery of government information to the public. The efficient, mass distribution of information via social media, for example, lets agencies communicate important news — whether related to COVID-19 policy changes or other important updates — to a wide audience quickly and efficiently.

Access to public services also improved due to greater use of digital technologies, according to more than 40% of respondents. From applying for virtual job training to renewing a library book, constituents can now take advantage of more services than ever from their homes. The move toward digital services expands the reach of government programs and services to constituents who previously could not or chose not to access in-person services.

## What are your top IT priorities for the next 12-24 months?



Government leaders clearly recognize the growth in public participation via digital technology over the past year, and they want to maintain this engagement beyond the pandemic. In fact, respondents rank citizen engagement among their top IT priorities for the next several years, second only to cybersecurity.

## BARRIERS TO COMMUNITY BUILDING

Despite the opportunities digital tools provide to enhance constituent engagement, agencies also faced challenges when utilizing these technologies. In fact, just 1% of respondents cited zero challenges with their constituent engagement methods in the past year.

### What has your organization done to foster constituent engagement in the past year?



### Name your top constituent engagement challenges in the past year.



The most commonly cited issue was the struggle to increase participation in virtual events. Although overall constituent engagement with government has grown with various technologies like social media tools, email and online payments, getting people to attend online events and meetings continues to be difficult.

Another hurdle is digital equity. Without regular access to digital devices or internet connections, some residents are unable to regularly participate in digital events and programs, and they may also struggle to access the services they need.

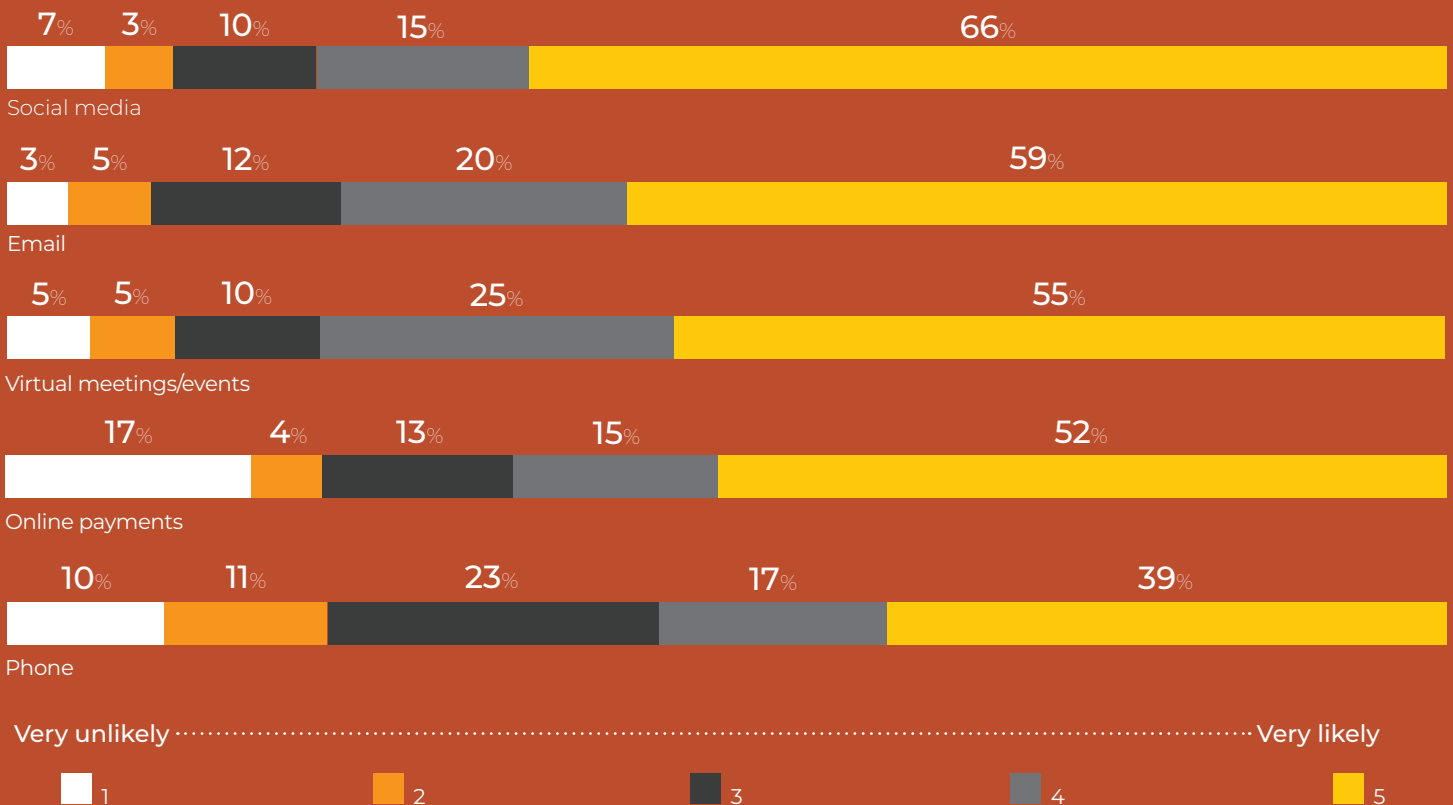
In addition, new technologies don't always integrate smoothly with legacy systems, leading to complications for government IT groups and frustrations for users. Digital tools can help streamline communication, but only if they work within existing IT environments.

For example, online payment platforms can create an easy payment process for constituents. But if users have to create distinct usernames and passwords for payments across different agencies, the inconvenience and confusion may prevent constituents from participating.

## CREATING AN ACCESSIBLE, EQUITABLE COMMUNITY

Many of the digital engagement technologies employed during the pandemic will become permanent. More than half of all respondents said they will utilize social media, email, virtual meeting technology and online payments to foster public engagement in the future.

### How likely are the following methods to remain a normal part of your constituent engagement efforts?



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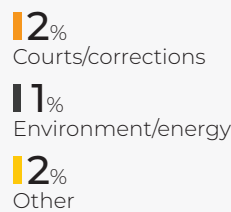
Moving forward, IT directors and CIOs will need to think carefully about what tools they implement and how to best use them to drive accessible and equitable constituent engagement. Nearly 35% of respondents said they plan to adopt new digital engagement technologies this year, with virtual meeting platforms and social media tools topping the list. The survey findings outlined in this report point toward several strategies that government leaders can use to engage the public beyond the pandemic.

- **Ask what constituents want and need from government.** Government leaders need to learn directly from community members about service priorities and how they want to receive those services. By understanding the unique needs of their communities, local government officials can focus resources on engagement tools and approaches that deliver the most value to residents.
- **Consider ease of access.** Engagement tools must be easy to access and user friendly. For example, rather than implementing separate online payment systems for each service, offer a standard process by employing enterprise payment software with single sign-on authentication capability.
- **Think beyond one digital approach.** Improving constituent engagement does not require government to adopt all-digital services, nor will one single digital solution meet the needs of all residents. Instead, government should embrace an omnichannel approach to communicating with and serving the public. This way, government can connect with constituents on the tools and platforms they use, creating a more accessible government.

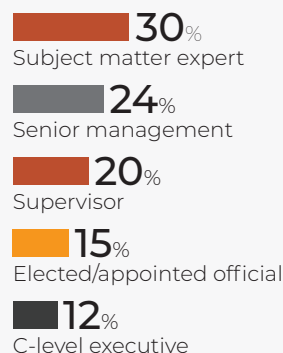
## RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

CDG's Digital Constituent Engagement Survey was commissioned by ACTIVE Network and conducted in April 2021. The national survey collected responses from 169 local government officials representing a diverse range of departments. About 50% of respondents were senior management, elected officials or appointed executives.

### Agency or department function



### Job rank



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Produced by:



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