Tecnologically savvy high-tech lawmakers across the country are gathering insight and ideas from constituents on a host of issues. But they’re not going door to door. They’re using online discussion groups and conducting virtual town halls using social media and other online tools.

Digital town halls won’t completely replace the old-fashioned kind of public hearing, but with so many Americans connecting with political causes and issues online, these virtual venues are becoming increasingly popular and important.

**Online Innovators**

Once Hawaii Senator Jill Tokuda (D), chair of the Education Committee, made the leap into the online world, it didn’t take her long to become quite adept at learning how to use new tools as they become available. Her first experiment came after Hawaii passed a constitutional amendment in 2011 requiring an appointed state board of education. Senator Tokuda faced the challenge of drafting the enabling legislation on a short timeline. “It was a very hot topic, and I wanted to engage all of our constituents in the dialogue,” she says. “We looked to social media as the quickest way to engage people in that dialogue.”

Tokuda set up a Twitter town hall, and has since conducted a second one about creating a state-funded early learning system. She’s also experimented with Ustream to video stream a live town hall meeting, and used Google Hangout—a group video chat site—to discuss issues with small groups. The Google Hangouts were streamed live and coordinated with a Twitter discussion held at the same time. The video was archived on YouTube, and the Twitter discussions are saved on Tokuda’s website.

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When Tropical Storm Irene slammed into Connecticut in August 2011, the General Assembly turned to social media to communicate with and respond to constituents. The legislature set up Facebook and Twitter pages called “After Irene CT” to communicate with the public and gather comments. Armed with that input, the General Assembly held hearings in Hartford about the storm and the state’s response in its aftermath. It publicized the project, in part, through a video on YouTube.

“We understand that not everyone can come to Hartford, sit and wait for public hearings, and take their turn,” says Senate President Donald Williams (D) in the video. “We want to do something brand new. We want to have a new way for folks to provide their stories and their insights.”

“After Irene CT” is now being used for public feedback about the state’s readiness and response to other extreme weather and disasters, including its recent focus on how best to use $71.8 million in funding to help rebuild communities damaged by Superstorm Sandy.

Across the country in Texas, the Government Efficiency and Reform Committee came up with the “Texas Red Tape Challenge” to encourage public opinions about how to make Texas’ laws and regulations less burdensome. The committee created a “crowd sourcing” website and Twitter account that allowed participants to post comments, read and discuss others’ ideas, and vote on their favorites. The website spelled out the rules and had a frequently asked questions section. The project, which ran from July to October 2012, focused on four topics: public school mandates, state agency rulemaking, manufacturing in the state, and occupational licensing.

The challenge was “an extension of a long standing philosophy that good ideas may be found within the wealth of expertise and experiences of all Texans,” says Representative Bill Callegari (R), chairman of the committee, “and those ideas may contribute to meaningful changes in our laws and regulations.”

Public participation on the site exceeded original estimates: 960 online users submitted nearly 100 ideas by the time it ended.

**The Trailblazers**

All across the country, more and more legislators, legislative committees and caucuses are conducting online forums. Pioneers include the Utah Senate for its use of online legislative town hall meetings, the Indiana House and the Senate Democrats for conducting some of the first legislation forums on Facebook, and the Minnesota House for a website soliciting feedback about property taxes.

In 2007, two health and higher ed committees in Washington teamed up to conduct two three-day “Web dialogues” to gather citizens’ answers to these questions: “What can the state do to reduce the incidence of obesity in Washington?” and “What can communities, colleges and universities do to educate more students to higher levels?”

**Online Opinion Polls**

New features on legislative websites gather constituents’ opinions about legislation during the session.

**NEVADA** posted its first online opinion poll in 1999, and it’s been active every session since. Citizens can express their views and vote on all bills being considered. The website posts the comments, vote tallies and which bills received the most interest. The results are searchable by bill number, zip code, and Senate or Assembly district. Names, addresses and other personal information are shared only with legislators so they can follow up with constituents.

**ALASKA**’s Public Opinion Messaging System, available since 2002, allows citizens to send a 50-word message on any topic to legislators during legislative sessions. It requires a name and address, which is matched to information from voter registration lists.

**NEW YORK** Senate’s OpenLegislation website, created in 2009, lets visitors view and comment on bills anonymously, as well as read comments from others. Users also can sign up to receive an email update called Bill Buzz that alerts participants when comments are made on the bills they’re following.

**IOWA** began seeking the public’s input on how to improve state government in 2009 as a result of the State Government Efficiency Review Committee. Its website displays the suggestions offered.

**WYOMING** created an Online Hotline in 2011 to track the level of public support for particular bills. Although the votes and comments are not posted on the Web, they are shared with legislators.

Earlier this year, three more legislatures added online comment forms. **MARYLAND**’s new Voice My Opinion System, **NORTH DAKOTA**’s Constituent Views and **WASHINGTON**’s E-Comments allow constituents to state their views on a specific bill. Messages require an address so that constituent views can be sent to lawmakers to respond.

Public announcements invited citizens to participate. The websites offered background information on the issues. An agenda gave details about the focus for each day’s discussion. And the online comments were recorded by trained staff.

**Is It Worth It?**

Any effort to increase participation in the public square is worthwhile, of course, but evidence shows the specific benefits of jumping online, even before the dominance of Facebook or Twitter.

A survey of participants in the Washington Web dialogues found that more than three-quarters of those responding felt the online experience was positive or somewhat positive, and said they would view legislators who solicit the general public’s opinions through similar online dialogues more favorably than those who don’t. Eighty percent wanted more dialogues on other topics in the future. And more than two-thirds gained a deeper understanding of the issues.

In a study of a series of 20 online town hall meetings by members of Congress, the Congressional Management Foundation found these virtual meetings increased participants’ trust in their representatives and their likelihood to vote.

Specifically, the study found that the online town halls:

- Increased the member of Congress’s approval rating—with the average...
net approval rating (approves minus disapproves) jumping from 29 percent before the session to 47 percent after.

- Improved constituents’ view of the lawmaker’s position on the issue discussed—with approval jumping from 20 percent to 58 percent.
- Attracted a diverse array of constituents, including those from demographics not traditionally engaged in politics and people frustrated with the political system.
- Increased the participants’ probability of voting for the member in the future, particularly among swing voters.
- Were extremely popular—95 percent of participants said they would like to attend similar events in the future.

**Lessons Learned**

The congressional study also discovered which elements contributed most to the success of the online town halls:

- Use a neutral moderator,
- Set clear ground rules,
- Invite a broad sample of participants, including some not acquainted with the lawmaker,
- Allow unscripted, real-time questions and comments from participants,
- Focus on one timely issue, and
- Provide concise, unbiased information on the topic in advance.

Although Senator Tokuda moderated her forums, she says she now sees the value in having another person available to monitor the technology and the questions flooding in from various sources, such as a Twitter stream. In Texas, Jeremy Mazur, a former legislative committee staffer, served as the neutral moderator of the Texas Red Tape Challenge.

The recommendation to include a wide variety of views is easily addressed through social media, which can attract a diverse group of participants. To ensure they reached a diverse group, the forums in Connecticut, Hawaii and Texas used Web announcements, Twitter tweets and Facebook posts, along with traditional press releases, to publicize the events.

**The Time Factor**

The time required for this kind of preparation, however, is often the biggest barrier to conducting online forums, says Rich Nafziger, the former chief clerk of the Washington House who worked on the Web dialogues. He recommends choosing a very specific and salient subject, trying it out and then building on it.

“It’s worth the effort and worth building on,” says Tokuda. “I think it’s impossible to do it perfectly, but I feel it’s opening doors and giving voice to individuals who really want to share their thoughts.”

For links to more information on virtual venues for lawmakers, go to: www.ncsl.org/magazine.

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