



VIRTUAL SESSIONS

a milestone for the Argentine House of Representatives

On May 13th, 2020, the Argentine Honorable House of Representatives (HCDN, by its Spanish acronym) held its first virtual session ever. The development and approval of the protocols necessary to continue with the legislative work virtually was a milestone for the House.

This publication outlines the process by which technology was incorporated in order to carry out legislative work remotely. It also shows the results the HCDN obtained during 2020 and makes some recommendations on how to continue with the modernization of the House of Representatives.

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This publication is a summary of the document "Modernizing the House of Representatives. Adaptations during the pandemic" prepared by CIPPEC's Political Institutions Program within its research area "Digital Adaptation of Politics", which promotes the responsible use of technology in decision-making processes and the relationship between citizens and representatives.



To read the full document, please visit
cippec.org



Sergio Tomás Massa

Speaker of the Honorable
House of Representatives

Since I took office as Speaker of the House of Representatives, I have worked with my team to modernize the House. By 2019, we already knew that the Legislative Branch needed to make important and structural changes to live up to the citizens' demands for agility, efficiency, transparency, and participation.

We took the first steps towards the digitization of the parliamentary process, including extremely important decisions such as the implementation of the digital signature for legislators. We envisioned a modern and open Congress, in accordance with 21st century Government principles, that incorporates technology in every public office. This is the path to achieve a better State, with an active Congress that justly represents citizens' demands.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to accelerate this modernization process that had already begun in Congress. We understood that the House's duties could not be interrupted, and we took several quick and necessary measures to assure citizens that we would continue working as expected.

Political dialogue and consensus between all parties enabled this modernization process that guaranteed parliamentary work during 2020. This massive political agreement paved the way for the first virtual session in the history of the Argentine House of Representatives.

This first virtual session was held on May 13th, 2020. It was the first of many sessions held during last year: during 2020 we enhanced the operation of committees and sittings, which resulted in 70 bills being passed.

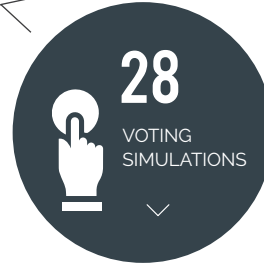
We made equipment and systems available, taking all necessary measures so that the House of Representatives could properly fulfill its duties which were crucial in responding to the pandemic.

Attendance rates increased in legislative meetings and a record amount of experts and Government officials participated and contributed to debates throughout the year. The improvements we made to our technological structure also offered new opportunities for citizens' participation, such as live broadcasting of all committee meetings and sessions. Besides matters related to COVID-19, we also discussed topics that are very important for Argentina.

The results show that 2020 was one of the most productive years in the history of the Argentine House of Representatives. They also set the path to be pursued by the whole Argentine administration in order to provide better government and get Argentina back on its feet once and for all: a path of modernization, dialogue, and transparency.

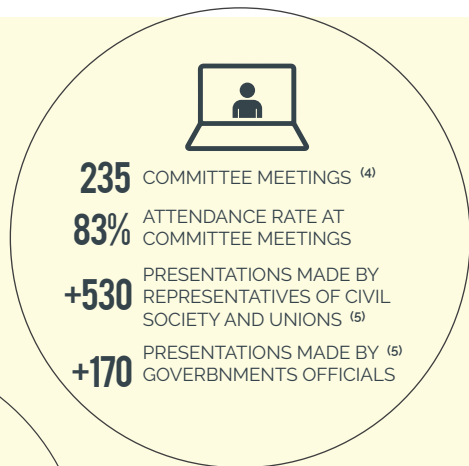
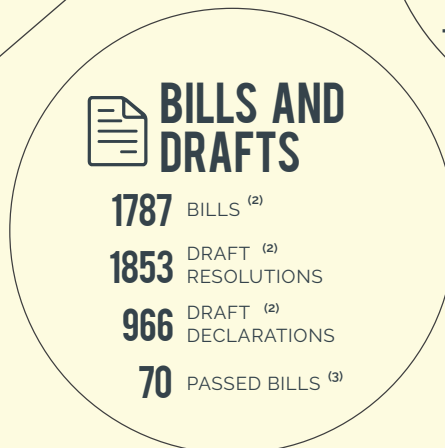
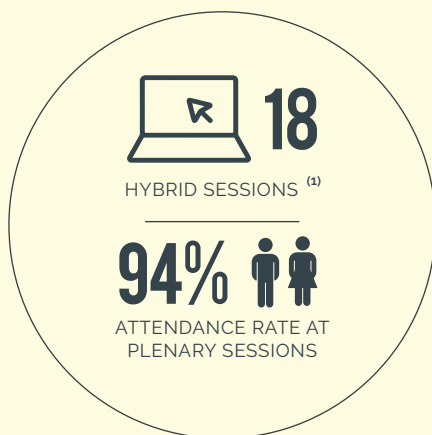
how was it achieved?

Arrangements made by the House of Representatives for virtual sessions included:



lawmaking in a virtual environment

Results in the House of Representatives in 2020



⁽¹⁾ Data updated to December 29th, 2020.

⁽²⁾ Bills and drafts resolutions and declarations introduced from May 13th, 2020 (date of approval of the Protocol) to February 28th, 2021.

⁽³⁾ Data for session 138 (March 1st, 2020 – February 28th, 2021).

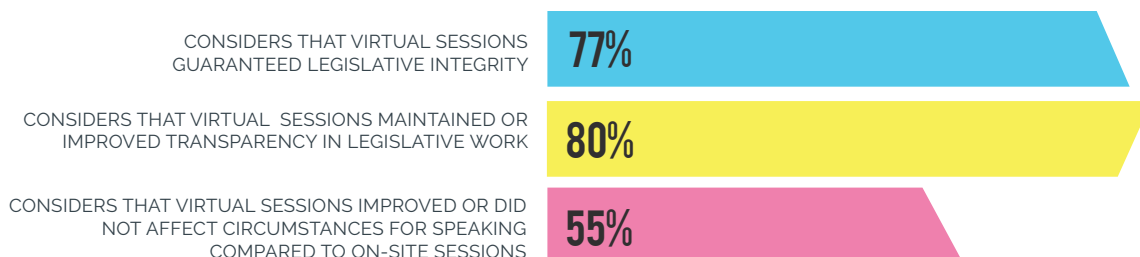
⁽⁴⁾ Data for the period running from March 1st, 2020 to February 10th, 2021. Adjourned meetings are considered as separate meetings. Joint committee meetings are excluded.

⁽⁵⁾ Data include information about briefings and about meetings to process files and receive guests.

how did it turn out?

Representatives' perceptions of remote legislative work.

Survey conducted by CIPPEC among legislators after the first hybrid plenary sessions. The survey was answered by 78 respondents.



Legitimity

THE ROAD TO VIRTUAL CONGRESS

2020

MARCH 20TH

Mandatory and preventive lockdown begins.

MARCH 30TH

First virtual hearing of the Committee on Education of the House of Representatives.

APRIL 29TH

Unanimous approval of the "Remote Parliamentary Operation Protocol" by the Modernization Committee and Powers, Petitions and Rules Committee.

MAY 6TH

Hybrid session trial in order to test the technological tools.

MAY 13TH

First hybrid session of the HCDN; approval of the Protocol by resolution of the House. 248 representatives voted affirmatively, and 2 voted negatively.

Integrity

SECURITY IN THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

In order to protect the legislative process from external interferences and safeguard users' identities, the following tools were implemented:

Virtual Private Network (VPN).

All interactions, including committee meetings and virtual sessions, are held through the VPN, using each legislator's user and password.

Parliamentary Document Management System (GPD, by its Spanish acronym).

This system allows to remotely manage and sign (with digital signature) reports and bills, thus improving the traceability of the process.

Digital Platform of the HCDN.

This platform allows legislators to access remote sessions and voting.

Users' Biometric Review.

An identity verification system was created following an agreement with the National Registry of Persons (ReNaPer, by its Spanish acronym).

Videoconference access.

Legislators can only log in to the system with their official e-mail addresses, with the purpose of strengthening security.

Agreement with ARSAT (Argentine Firm of Satellite Solutions).

Assessments are made to rule out external interferences. An encryption system and data storage service are also included.

Accessibility

EQUAL ACCESS AND USABILITY

It is fundamental to consider these changes comprehensively and systematically so as to avoid new inequalities or deepen already existing ones. In order to guarantee legislators' equal access to information, resources and decision-making opportunities, the following training courses were delivered:

12

TRAINING MEETINGS

attended by
240
legislators.

30

TRAINING COURSES

for representatives
and advisors to learn
how to use GPD
(Parliamentary
Document Management)
system.

Virtuality may favor attendance: it allows legislators to access the system from anywhere in the country, and to work on days that they previously used to travel between their districts and Congress (which is located in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires).

Transparency

CONTROL AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The "Remote Parliamentary Operation Protocol" established the obligation to publicize the activities of the House. Remote committee meetings and sessions are public and, thus, must be transmitted live. Recordings must be made available on the institutional channels of the House.

Legislative Policy

LAWMAKING, SCRUTINY AND REPRESENTATION

Did remote sessions alter the capacity of representatives to coordinate and cooperate in order to build consensus and negotiate in the House?

AFTER THE FIRST REMOTE SESSION

53%

of legislators
considered that remote work
avored or did not affect
coordination and cooperation.

PASSED BILLS INTRODUCED BY REPRESENTATIVES AS OPPOSED TO EXECUTIVE AND SENATORS INITIATIVES



46%

in the 138TH
session



This percentage is
considerably higher than the
average **since 1983**

35%

but lower than the
percentages for the last
two non-election years
in 2018

52%

en 2016

55%

In the same legislative year, 30 bills introduced by the Executive Branch (43%) were passed, which represents an increase by about 14 percentage points compared to the previous non-election year.

How can we continue to modernize the Argentine House of Representatives?

The experience during the pandemic showed that the introduction of technology in the HCDN to hold virtual sessions may have a positive impact on its operation. This is an opportunity to rethink legislative work comprehensively and to implement further changes to modernize its management.

In the future, it is key to keep those changes that improve and promote a greater involvement of the Congress in the decision making process and to enhance the relationship between representatives and the citizens.

IN ORDER TO FURTHER INCREASE LEVELS OF LEGITIMACY, INTEGRITY, TRANSPARENCY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS, CIPPEC PROVIDES THE FOLLOWING LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS.

To move towards a consensus-based reform of the HCDN Rules in order to establish the circumstances under which remote work will be allowed, which topics may be discussed, and which tasks of legislative work can be carried out virtually.

To implement a clear communication program for each change in order to build citizens' confidence in the new tools.

To integrate virtual with on-site participation of in order to facilitate the establishment of the quorum, thus enhancing the agility and operation of the system.

To consider comprehensively the reforms that introduce technology so as to avoid new access inequalities among representatives and among citizens.

To guarantee a gender perspective in the introduction of technology, by inviting the Gender Office to collaborate on modifications

To evaluate legislators' technological infrastructure and resources after every member renewal, in order to allocate resources and train legislations more efficiently.

To supply equipment for remote work, including the required technology and resources for each legislative task.

To institutionalize an initial training program for new members after each election, ensuring access to all necessary tools and devices.

To provide continuous training for workers and users.

To preserve remote work as an option for specific cases, such as family and medical leaves, regardless of the evolution of the pandemic.

To provide access to information about the system, ranging from incidents derived from its use to the schedule of committee meetings.

To continue to hold virtual committee meetings after the pandemic, in order to encourage participation and provide decision-making a more federal perspective.

To promote and escalate the use of tools such as digital signature and the GPD, so as to enhance the traceability and agility of processes and to reduce paper use.



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