

Are Virtual Meetings More Equitable? An Evaluation of City Council Meeting Participation in San Diego

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Few studies have investigated the impacts of the recent shift to virtual meetings on public participation and no known studies have explored the implications of e-participation on advancing equity in public administration. This study investigates the frequency of nonagenda public comment provided at city council meetings, comparing participation during in-person meetings to participation during virtual meetings. Our analysis, based on five years of data, reveals that overall participation increased when virtual meeting technologies were incorporated. We found that female participation surpassed male participation in meetings that offered virtual participation options. These findings highlight how virtual meeting technology impacts public participation, how it may encourage female participation, and advance gender equity in public administration.

Keywords

public meetings, virtual public meetings, local government

Broad, equitable public access to policy and administrative decision-making is a key component of sound democratic governance. Transparent governmental process, characterized in part by open, accessible, and inclusive public meetings, promotes effectiveness, legitimacy, and trust (Clark et al. 2024; Fung 2006). Social equity, which we define as fairness in terms of access, administrative process, service quality, and policy outcomes, is closely linked to the opportunity and ability to participate in the political process (Gooden et al. 2023; McCandless and Guy 2020).

The internet and related technologies have allowed local governments to expand opportunities for the public to participate (Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006; Steinbach et al. 2019). “E-participation,” the catch-all term to describe government use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to promote public engagement, has the potential to lower barriers to entry and promote a more inclusive, more representative democracy (West 2005). And though there are ongoing debates about how best to conceptualize e-participation and how to effectively measure the effects of instruments like online forums, discussion groups, and electronic juries (Kim and Lee 2012; Meijer 2015;

Ruess et al. 2021), there is general consensus among scholars and practitioners alike that the internet has the potential to increase opportunities for citizen engagement (Fung 2015; Mossberger et al. 2007; Ruess et al. 2021).

Although technology has evolved and the demands on local governments have grown in complexity, public comment testimony at city council meetings remains one of the primary tools used by local governments to solicit input from the public. Yet we know relatively little about how the adoption of e-participation strategies in this context affects participation. Further, research on the interplay of technology and public participation has been framed rather narrowly to this point, without sufficient consideration of how the use of ICTs may affect the experiences of traditionally disenfranchised and underrepresented groups.

With these broad questions in mind, this study investigates the transition from in-person to virtual public meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. We evaluate empirically how the introduction of virtual meeting technology impacted the level and frequency of public participation, while assessing the implications of e-participation for advancing equity in public administration.

Participation

Public participation in government and in community affairs is central to the American democratic system of governance (Verba and Nie 1987). Efforts to promote broad engagement with and participation in policy decision-making are generally accepted as characteristic of good governance (Irvin and Stansbury 2004). Open meetings are required by law in all 50 U.S. states and by federal statute (National Freedom of Information Coalition 2025). California's Brown Act, enacted in 1953, is a representative example, requiring all local legislative bodies to maintain open public meetings in order to "facilitate public participation in local government decisions and to curb misuse of the democratic process by secret legislation by public bodies" (Office of the California Attorney General 2003).

Policymakers seek out means of public participation to empower their constituents, to provide an opportunity for them to be heard, and in some cases "to acquire consensus or to gain inputs from citizens' knowledge when facing complex or badly understood problems" (Bobbio 2019, 42; Lowndes et al. 2001). Beyond facilitating such engagement, public hearings and meetings also have the potential to imbue the local democratic process with both legitimacy and equity (Adams 2004; Fiorino 1990). As Burby (2003) argues, public involvement can enhance the representation of minority interests and groups that have been disadvantaged, underserved, or marginalized.

Despite this theoretical value, empirical assessment of public meetings has generated uneven results. Scholars have identified relatively low levels of engagement despite increasing efforts among policymakers to incorporate citizen perspectives. People have conveyed a skepticism about their role in the policy process and doubts that their participation is going to influence the outcome of the issue or debate (Baker et al. 2005; Ebdon 2002; Irvin and Stansbury 2004; King et al. 1998). There are concerns that public meetings are perceived as perfunctory and ritualistic (McComas et al. 2010), with influence on decisions lacking, even for those able to attend and participate.

Face-to-face gatherings come with a series of practical impediments for some members of the public, including the need to manage conflicting professional and familial responsibilities, facilitating transportation to and from city hall, parking while on site, and

so on which complicate meeting attendance and thus participation (Einstein et al. 2022; Zheng 2017). Even if a person can navigate these challenges, meeting-specific uncertainties—for example, the timing, duration, means, and subject matter of an individual comment—further complicate full and equitable engagement (King et al. 1998). The logistics of public meeting attendance compound existing inequities in the ability to access the very policy and administrative processes that a participatory approach to governance is designed to combat.

It stands to reason that ICTs may help address some of these potential barriers, leading to a more robust and equitable public discourse. By obviating the need to manage transportation and other logistical complications, ICTs that allow people to join and participate virtually become accessible to a wider segment of the population than in-person events (Jung et al. 2011; Tolbert and McNeal 2003). Virtual meetings are less costly for taxpayers (Kamal 2023) and make possible the participation of the elderly, the infirm, and those who are otherwise unable to travel (King et al. 1998). Online meetings also allow flexibility and time savings for busy professionals, parents of young children, and others whose lives do not afford the luxury of attending a long meeting in the middle of the day (Beyer 2020). Other benefits, like real-time, multi-lingual translation services or the use of aids for the visually and hearing impaired, become more of a possibility when meetings are held virtually (Jacques 2020).

There is growing evidence that lowering the barriers to participation by incorporating virtual options may contribute to greater overall engagement (Little Hoover Commission 2021). Anecdotes abound from cities that made the transition during the COVID-19 lock down. Jurisdictions like Edwardsville, Kansas (pop. 4,500), Burnsville, Minnesota (pop. 61,000), and Sterling Heights, Michigan (pop. 133,000) reported increases in resident participation during virtual meetings, among many others (Jacques 2020; Kamal 2023). These reports are consistent with more systematic research showing that use of e-participation tools correlates with increases in overall political engagement and broader attention to public affairs (Gil De Zúñiga et al. 2009; Krueger 2002; Mossberger et al. 2007).

Despite this potential, concerns over digital inequities exist (Di Giovanna and Desantis 2022; Vogels

2021), as do uncertainties about the broader propriety of using technology to deliver government services and facilitate public participation (MacLean and Titah 2022). As technology continues to advance, the ways in which these tools influence public participation are ripe for further exploration, particularly as it relates to equity.

Indeed, the benefits of digital access with its flexible accessibility and the lowering of logistical barriers should have a democratizing effect, leading to more engagement from members of racial and ethnic minority groups, non-native speakers, women, LGBTQ+ and disability communities, and those occupying lower socioeconomic status. Yet there is little empirical support for this diversification effect. In one recent study, Einstein and colleagues (2022) compared the composition of several municipal public meetings held in person prior to COVID-19 with online meetings from the same cities held during the 2020 lockdown. They found no meaningful difference across several demographic characteristics, with older, wealthy, White people overrepresented across both types of meetings. The authors conclude 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” (Einstein et al. 2022, 1287).

Despite the very important assertion that meeting modality alone may not be a panacea for persistent structural and socioeconomic inequities, the Einstein et al. (2022) data show that a gender gap in participation closed somewhat after the meetings were moved online. The change was slight—8% underrepresentation in person, 6% online—but noteworthy. The authors’ decision not to address this finding in earnest is representative of the wider e-participation literature and the relatively scant writing on the relationship between gender, technology, and governance (Wihlborg et al. 2022). Somewhat surprisingly, relatively little has been written to examine how ICTs and the use of virtual public meetings may affect gender and the intersection of gender and other relevant demographic characteristics.

Participation and Gender

Women are a powerful constituency in American politics, yet their role as political actors in U.S. local government is understudied and they remain underrepresented in certain political arenas (Holman 2017).

On one hand, the gender gap in political engagement between men and women has narrowed since Verba and colleagues (1997) highlighted that men were more engaged in politics than women. On the other hand, significant barriers to women’s participation and gender equity in the political arena persist. In fact, recent research paints a complex picture of the interplay between gender, participation, and social equity.

Data collected by the Pew Research Center in 2012 show that women register to vote in higher numbers than men and are more likely to volunteer in support of an electoral candidate or political campaign. Women are also equally likely as men to make campaign contributions. This engagement has contributed to reducing the gender gap in some corners of American representative democracy (Burns et al. 2018). Tellingly, however, women are generally underrepresented in leadership and management positions in local government (Holman 2017).

Data show that women engage in direct political activism less frequently than men. Women contact government officials less often and are less likely to attend a political demonstration, rally, or protest (Burns et al. 2018; Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010). Women are also broadly underrepresented among those who engage directly in participatory democracy. For example, a recent study in the United States investigating participation in a series of planning and zoning board meetings on housing development policy found that men were “significantly more likely [than women] to participate” as commenters (Einstein et al. 2019, 28).

Women must navigate the context of public meetings and continue to face barriers that impact their engagement, which shape their participation in public and political arenas. Burns (2007) argues that certain contexts “make gender salient” as “context could affect the benefits of participation or the costs” (107). Scholars argue that women’s engagement in politics is lower because they derive less enjoyment from arguments and disagreements prevalent in the political sphere (Wolak 2022). Women’s inclusion in legislative hearings and other public deliberative discourse sites may also be affected by the gendering of these settings as masculine (Polletta and Chen 2013).

Gender Gap and Barriers

The design of participation opportunities, skills, political knowledge, civic education, and political social-

ization has been cited as factors that impact women's political participation (Clark 2018; Fuller 2004; Verba et al. 1997). Education, institutional, and political contexts along one's development trajectory shape gender roles and contribute to differences in political participation (De Piccoli and Rollero 2010). Women may also be less interested in political issues found at different levels of government, as highlighted by Sánchez-Vítores (2019), who found that the gender gap disappeared when considering interest in local government. Women's ability to participate in the public arena also continues to be shaped by broader social inequities. Struggles with work/life balance persist, as women continue to bear the primary responsibility for childcare, along with unequal access to pay and power (Bishu 2020).

Our study of city council meetings, which provide an opportunity to participate and engage with a local legislative body, is concerned with direct, conventional participation (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). Virtual meetings hold promise for remedying some of the barriers to equity by expanding access and enhancing procedural justice. Considering the limitations regarding public meeting participation raises important questions about existing methods used to facilitate access and participation in government.

Offering different levels of support to achieve fairness in outcomes based on a group's needs requires an acknowledgment of an imbalance and the need to correct this imbalance (McCandless and Blessett 2022). Imbalances in who participates continue to persist. Virtual meeting technologies that enable e-participation may help "level the playing field" by addressing some of these imbalances. While there is extensive research on gender and the digital divide, less research has been conducted at the nexus of gender, virtual meeting technologies, and participation. E-participation holds promise for furthering social equity by providing alternative means of participation that ideally expand access and engagement. In the mayor-council form of government, these dynamics often play out in city council meetings, which provide a consistent and traditional venue for the public to engage with policymakers.

To summarize, existing research generally points to at least two broad themes related to participation, gender, and technology. First, a range of barriers exists to limit participation in city council meetings and other conventional forms of public engagement with government. Second, the weight of these barriers to

participation tends to be felt more acutely by females, exacerbating long-standing gender-based participation disparities (Burns et al. 2018; Holman 2017; Verba et al. 1997). Evidence from earlier research suggests that the ability to engage online has shown to reduce the costs of participation generally (Jung et al. 2011; Tolbert and McNeal 2003), and contributed to increased engagement among underrepresented individuals and groups (Gil De Zúñiga et al. 2009; Krueger 2002; Mossberger et al. 2007). As such, we propose two inter-related hypotheses:

H1: The availability of virtual participation options will allow for increased overall public participation in San Diego City Council meetings

H2: Female participation in City Council meetings will increase more than male participation with the introduction of virtual participation options

Data and Method

This research is based largely on a unique dataset that details every nonagenda public comment made during San Diego City Council meetings held between January 1, 2018 and December 31, 2022. Meeting records describe the date, time, and location of the meeting, list the agenda items discussed and participants in attendance, as well as the names and subject matter of all nonagenda public comments offered during each session.

Variables

We coded several variables from these raw data, as we describe in Table 1.

Participation. Participation, which is one of the key constructs in our analysis, is operationalized by creating *comments_per_meeting*, a variable that tracks the total of nonagenda public comments submitted on a per-meeting basis.

Meeting type. The San Diego City Council held three types of meetings during the study period: those conducted in person ($n = 135$), those held virtually ($n = 90$), and hybrid meetings ($n = 40$), where speakers were given the option of submitting their comments either in person or virtually. Adjourned meetings ($n = 159$), which are defined as meetings scheduled but not held, were excluded from the analysis.

We operationalize meeting type by coding three binary variables. First, *virtual* ($n = 225$), tracks whether

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max
comment_per_mtg	265	9.226	12.966	1	196
virtual_hybrid	265	0.51	0.501	0	1
virtual	225	0.42	0.495	0	1
hybrid	170	0.24	0.425	0	1
meeting_time	263	0.62	0.486	0	1
meeting_month	2,603	6.71	3.393	1	12
meeting_day	2,603	1.76	0.512	1	5
gender	2,377	0.571	0.495	0	1
comment_focus	2,418	3.428	2.376	0	7
comment_type*	410	0.656	0.476	0	1

Note: *Hybrid meetings only.

City Council meetings were held in person (coded 0) or virtually (coded 1). The second, *virtual_hybrid* (n = 265), includes in-person meetings (coded 0) and both virtual and hybrid meetings (coded 1). The third variable, *hybrid* (n = 170), measures participation during in-person (coded 0) and hybrid meetings (coded 1).

Speaker gender. Pre-COVID-19, individuals wishing to speak during a city council meeting were required to fill out speaker slips. Speakers were not required to provide contact information, and were free to provide partial or full name and subject matter information. With the advent of the virtual meeting, individuals calling in—or later using Zoom audio—did not have to fill out a slip to speak. City staff would capture the names and/or phone numbers of individuals wishing to speak by viewing the queue in the virtual environment and supplement information based on the testimony.

When City Hall was reopened to the public, individuals attending the council meetings in person were still required to fill out speaker slips; virtual participants were captured from the queue listing and testimony. Coding for speaker gender began with two members of the research team separately coding (0 for male and 1 for female) the full list of nonagenda speaker names. Once these preliminary designations were made, the two code sets were reconciled and discrepancies were identified for further analysis. In rare cases, members of the research team who each had years of in-person experience with many of the meeting participants, reviewed video footage to confirm speaker gender identity. The gender identity of speakers delivering a total of 41 comments was unknown.

Comment type denotes whether specific comments were submitted in person (coded 0) or virtually (coded 1). This variable was used for our analysis of hybrid meetings.

Meeting month. Meeting month codes range from 1 (January) to 12 (December).

Meeting day. Meeting days were coded 0 (Sunday) to 6 (Saturday).

Meeting time. Meeting start times were coded dichotomously, distinguishing meetings beginning before 12:00 pm (coded 0) from meetings beginning at or after 12:00 pm (coded 1).¹

Empirical Strategy

To address *H1*, in which we posit that participation will increase with the switch from exclusively in-person meetings to those that offer virtual participation options, we develop a series of negative binomial regression models. Negative binomial is the most effective model choice because our primary outcome variable, *comments_per_meeting*, is a count measure that is overdispersed. We measure the effects of two treatment variables—*virtual* and *virtual_hybrid*—while controlling for meeting month, day, and time.

It is important to note that on June 2, 2020, shortly after George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer, the San Diego City Council held a virtual meeting during which it accepted comments on the San Diego Police Department budget and the notion of “defunding” the force. Precisely 196 comments were

1. Typical meeting start times were either 10 am or 2 pm.

offered, a total more than six times the next highest number submitted ($n = 31$) during a sample period meeting. We present results, in terms of incidence rate ratio (IRR), from models that include data from this outlier meeting and those that omit them.

We use logistic regression to evaluate *H2*. The first model considers the correlation between the outcome of interest, *gender*, expressed dichotomously, and the treatment, *meeting_type*, while accounting for meeting month, day of week, and time. The second logit model estimates the effect of speaker gender on the decision to participate in person or virtually during hybrid meetings. The outcome variable, *comment_type*, is dichotomous, as is the treatment measure, *gender*. We again control for meeting month, day of week, and time.

Study Context

This research examines participation in public meetings held by the City of San Diego, California.² San Diego operates under the mayor-council government form, where the council president presides over an open and noticed meeting to consider and vote on items within the purview of the local government jurisdiction and its legislative body. These meetings are administered under the authority established in the Brown Act, a 1953 state law that guarantees the public's right to attend

2. Across California, public meetings happen in a variety of different venues and settings, which may include town halls, boards and commission meetings, or public input sessions on land use policies and regulations, among others.

and participate in local government meetings (§54950 et seq). The Brown Act and the associated administrative rules expressly require that all regularly scheduled public meetings provide a nonagenda public comment section that allows for members of the public to speak to the legislative body about items that are not on the agenda but are within the subject matter jurisdiction of the council.

Since the law's enactment, San Diego City Council meetings have been held at City Hall, with those interested in submitting a nonagenda comment required to do so in person. As we document in Table 1, COVID-19 necessitated significant changes to the administration of public meetings in San Diego and across California. In March 2020, the City Council shifted its meetings to a virtual format in response to the California Governor's stay-at-home order. The magnitude of this change cannot be overstated. The logistics surrounding public meeting administration do change incrementally, often in keeping with technological advances and new transparency efforts. But such revisions typically follow an elaborate, time-consuming process, involving multiple hearings, notice and comment procedures, and in-depth planning and analysis.

Local laws guiding public access and meeting administration had to catch up. By April 7, 2020, the San Diego City Council introduced temporary rules establishing that regular City Council meetings would occur virtually on Tuesdays at 9 am, with Special Meetings called as needed. This abrupt shift to virtual meetings occurred without the ability to facilitate direct public

Table 2. Dataset Modality of Public Testimony

Modality	Date	Description
In-Person	Jan. 9, 2018 – Mar. 17, 2020	Pre COVID-19, public testimony was only allowed in person during City Council Meetings unless Americans with Disabilities Act accommodations were requested. Mar 17, 2020 was the last City Council Meeting where in-person public testimony was allowed. Comments were also read into the record by the City Clerk during this meeting. City Hall was closed to the public via Executive Order 2020—1 issued by Mayor Faulconer on March 16, 2020.
Virtual	Mar. 25, 2020 – Apr. 5, 2022	For a brief period as City Council Meetings shifted to a virtual format, the City Clerk read public testimony submitted prior to the meeting into the record. By early May 2020, virtual testimony transitioned to a dedicated telephone line so that comments could occur in real time. The final shift moved public testimony onto a Zoom audio platform (no video of the speaker was permitted).
Hybrid	Apr. 11, 2022 – Dec. 15, 2022	Both Zoom audio and in-person public testimony were permitted; this is still the current practice for the City of San Diego at the time of this writing.

comment, and the infrastructure did not yet exist to facilitate virtual testimony. The City Clerk was thus required to read all submitted public comments into the record.

This process evolved quickly. By May 2020, participants were able to submit comments in real time using a phone line; by the end of 2020, virtual comments were submitted using Zoom audio. Virtual meetings remained in place until April 2022, when City Hall was reopened to the public and in-person meetings restarted. Notably, Zoom audio was retained as an option for public comment, with speakers given the option of choosing whether to participate in person or virtually. The significance of San Diego as the second largest city in California, coupled with the access and close knowledge of the city's context (two coauthors formerly worked at the City of San Diego), San Diego presents a unique and valuable case to investigate.

Results

The City of San Diego held 265 meetings during the 60-month study period, an average of 4.3 meetings per month. During that period, 964 speakers delivered a total of 2,444 nonagenda public comments.³ We begin our analyses of these data by examining the extent to which participation at these meetings was affected by the abrupt switch from in-person meetings to those that provide the opportunity to participate virtually.

A. The Relationship between Meeting Type and Participation

Results from the first of several negative binomial models designed to evaluate the relationship between participation and meeting type were consistent with *H1*, as is shown in Table 3.

Models 1A and 1B display results of our comparison of participation during in-person meetings, held between January 2018 and March 2020, and virtual meetings held between April 2020 and March 2022. Per 1A, virtual meetings received on average 77% more comments than in-person meetings (IRR = 1.77; $p < 0.001$), after accounting for meeting month, day of the week, and start time. Data from 1B show higher participation during virtual meetings (IRR = 1.57; $p < 0.001$), even after removing from the analysis the

Table 3. Modeling the Effect of Meeting Type on Public Participation during San Diego City Council Meetings, by Meeting

Model specification	(A) June 2 included		(B) June 2 excluded	
(1) In-person vs. Virtual meetings (Jan. 2018 – Mar. 2022)				
	IRR	SE	IRR	SE
virtual	1.77***	0.173	1.57***	0.131
month	1.01	0.014	1.01	0.012
meeting_day	2.35***	0.383	1.32*	0.158
meeting_time	0.65**	0.104	1.32	0.169
Intercept	1.91**	0.411	3.13***	0.513
N	222		221	
(2) In-person vs. Virtual/Hybrid meetings (Jan. 2018 – Dec. 2022)				
virtual_hybrid	1.77***	0.150	1.61***	0.118
month	1.01	0.012	1.02*	0.011
meeting_day	2.20***	0.305	1.31*	0.144
meeting_time	0.66**	0.092	1.18	0.140
Intercept	2.07***	0.391	3.21***	0.484
N	262		261	

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

196 comments delivered at the City Council's police reform meeting, held virtually on June 2, 2020.

In Models 2A and 2B we expanded the scope of analysis to include hybrid meetings. Data from 2A indicate that the combination of virtual and hybrid meetings, including the June 2 outlier data, saw on average 77% more comments per meeting than did in-person meetings (IRR 1.77; $p < 0.001$). When the June 2 data were removed, the combined virtual/hybrid meeting group received an average of 61% more comments per meeting than did the in-person block (IRR = 1.61; $p < 0.001$), as per 2B.

Table 4 displays the findings of subanalyses designed to more carefully track the effects of the April 2020 modality change. In particular, we compare participation during in-person meetings (Jan. 2018–Mar. 2020) with participation during the first three (Apr. 2020–Jun. 2020), six (Apr. 2020 – Sept. 2020), and 12 months of virtual meetings (Apr. 2020 – Mar. 2021). Results in column A include the June 2 outlier meeting, while those in column B do not. Analysis conducted at three and six months post-transition shows a sizable delta between

3. Note that speaker and comment totals vary slightly in the analysis to follow. These discrepancies are attributable to missing data on descriptive variables like *gender* and *comment type*.

Table 4. Modeling the Change in Comment Volume during the Transition from In-Person to Virtual Meetings

Model specification	(A) June 2 included		(B) June 2 excluded	
	IRR [SE]	N	IRR [SE]	N
(3) 3 months	2.37** [0.588]	138	1.12 [0.224]	137
(4) 6 months	2.13*** [0.417]	147	1.26 [0.192]	146
(5) 12 months	1.89*** [0.280]	165	1.34* [0.161]	164

*** $p < 0.001$ ** $p < 0.01$ * $p < 0.05$

Note: The City of San Diego held 127 in-person meetings between January 2018 and March 2020. It held 11 meetings between April and June 2020, the first three months of transition to virtual meetings, 20 between April and September, and 38 meetings between April and March 2021.

Table 5. Modeling the Relationship between Meeting Type and Female Participation

Model specification	(A) June 2 included		(B) June 2 excluded	
	OR [SE]	N	OR [SE]	N
(6) virtual	3.10*** [0.306]	1,967	3.10*** [0.316]	1,773
(7) virtual_hybrid	3.08*** [0.281]	2,371	3.09*** [0.287]	2,177

*** $p < 0.001$

in-person and virtual participation, even after controlling for meeting month, day, and time. However, these differences largely disappeared when the June 2 meeting, which was held virtually, was removed from the analysis. By contrast, data from the 12-month analysis show higher participation levels during virtual meetings, regardless of whether the outlier meeting was included (IRR = 1.89, $p < 0.001$) or excluded (IRR = 1.34, $p < 0.05$).⁴

In sum, the analysis presented in Tables 3 and 4 suggests that participation, measured here in terms of non-agenda public comments submitted during 265 public meetings held in San Diego over a five-year period, was greater when those meetings included virtual participation options. These findings, which are consistent with *H1*, were robust to the meeting type—participation was higher during meetings where virtual options were made available. The data do suggest that the impact of virtual meeting options may have taken some time to materialize, as comparisons at three and six months showed no meaningful difference after the outlier meeting was removed.

4. Covariates, including *meeting_month*, *meeting_day*, and *meeting_time*, had limited practical effect on the meeting type-gender relationship and were thus not included as part of the data shown in Tables 4, 5, or 6. Full results are available upon request.

B. The Relationship between Meeting Type and Gender

To evaluate *H2*, wherein we hypothesize that virtual participation options will lead to more female participation, we estimate a series of logit models designed to isolate the effect of meeting type (in-person, virtual, and hybrid) on gender-specific participation.

As shown in Table 5, Models 6A and 6B suggest that the shift from in-person to virtual meetings correlated with an increase in female participation. Indeed, women were approximately three times more likely than men to submit a non-agenda public comment when they had the option of doing so virtually. This remained the case whether the June 2 data was included (OR = 3.10; $p < 0.001$) or excluded (OR = 3.10; $p < 0.001$). Results were largely stable even after adding hybrid meetings to the analysis. Models 7A and 7B show that compared to men, women were three times more likely to participate during virtual meetings than they were during in-person meetings (OR = 3.08 with June 2, $p < 0.001$; OR = 3.09 without June 2, $p < 0.001$).

Table 6 displays findings from our subanalysis, where we compared gender-based participation during in person meetings with participation during virtual meetings held three, six, and 12 months after the transition. Taken together, the results show a clear picture: women were more than two times as likely as men to submit a non-agenda public comment when it was pos-

Table 6. Modeling the Effects of Transition from In-Person to Virtual Meetings on Gender-Based Participation

Model specification	(A) June 2 included		(B) June 2 excluded	
	OR [SE]	N	OR [SE]	N
(7) 3 months	2.76*** [0.504]	1,072	2.17** [0.524]	878
(8) 6 months	2.44*** [0.360]	1,175	2.08*** [0.362]	981
(9) 12 months	2.84*** [0.356]	1,370	2.73*** [0.379]	1,176

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 7. Modeling the Effects of Gender on Comment Type during Hybrid Meetings

	OR	SE	p	[95% CI]
<i>gender</i>	5.05	1.187	<0.001	3.19 – 8.01
<i>month</i>	0.89	0.040	0.010	0.82 – 0.97
<i>meeting_day</i>	0.66	0.301	0.367	0.27 – 1.62
<i>meeting_time</i>	1.37	0.626	0.487	0.56 – 3.35
Constant	2.67	1.65	0.114	0.79 – 8.98

N = 404; Pseudo R2 = 0.1119

sible to do so virtually, regardless of the sample size, the proximity to the change from in-person to virtual sessions, or the inclusion/exclusion of the June 2 data.

On April 11, 2022, after 24 months of exclusively virtual meetings, the City Council switched to a hybrid modality, where individuals could choose to submit their comments either in person or virtually. Table 7 lists findings from our analysis of the relationship between speaker gender and comment type during these hybrid meetings. When given the choice of how to engage, females chose overwhelmingly to do so virtually. After accounting for meeting month, day of the week, time, and comment focus, women were 5.05 times more likely to deliver their comment virtually than they were in person, as compared to men ($p < 0.001$). These data were born out descriptively as well: Of the 279 comments delivered by women during hybrid meetings, 214, or 76.6% were submitted virtually, whereas just 40% (50 of the 125) of male comments were given virtually.

Figure 1 shows the rise of female participation over time. Women submitted on average 2.5 comments per meeting during in-person sessions, compared to 3.8 male-submitted comments over that same period. During virtual meetings, females averaged 6.5 comments per meeting, while males remained largely steady

at 3.6. During the hybrid period, female engagement increased to an average of 6.8 comments per meeting, while male averages fell from 3.6 to 3.0.

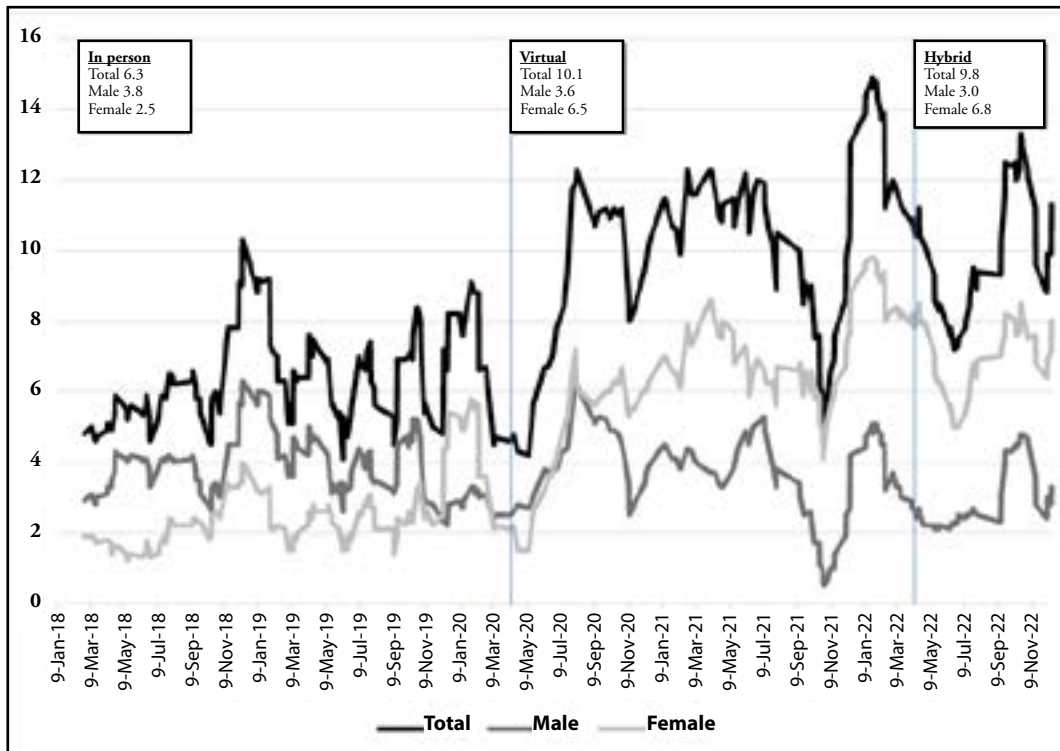
On balance, these data are consistent with the expectations established in *H2*. Results from several logit models showed that the possibility of virtual participation correlated with greater female engagement in San Diego City Council meetings.

Discussion

This article drew on records from 265 San Diego City Council meetings held between January 1, 2018 and December 31, 2022 to examine how meeting modality affects participation in local-level public meetings. We expected that the institution of virtual participation options would mitigate certain barriers to participation and thus contribute to higher levels of overall participation (*H1*). We also hypothesized that women would prefer virtual to in-person participation, leading to higher levels of female engagement when virtual options were available (*H2*).

We found support for both hypotheses. San Diego's transition from in-person to virtual meetings correlated with sharp increases in overall participation. The ability to engage virtually seemed to have mitigated barriers

Figure 1. 10-Day Moving Average of Per-Meeting Public Comments Submitted between 2018 and 2022, by Speaker Gender and Meeting Modality



Note: For the sake of clarity, Figure 1 does not include data from a meeting held on June 2, 2020, during which 196 speakers submitted comments, the vast majority of which intended to address the City’s proposed response to George Floyd’s murder. Data from the excluded meeting furthered the argument that the move to virtual meetings contributed to more robust female participation. Women accounted for 65.3% of speakers on that date.

to participation in city council meetings. This was especially evident among women. Female participation grew substantially with the switch to online meetings and remained elevated even after the city introduced the hybrid format, which allowed participants to choose whether to submit comments in person or online.

These results should be considered with various caveats in mind, beginning with certain technical limitations. As noted earlier, we faced several coding challenges, including how to characterize the gender of anonymous callers and how to code participants with similar but not identical names. Further, our findings are based on imperfect statistical models, though logistic regression is appropriate for the type of data we use. Robustness checks indicate that our approach is sound, but goodness of fit markers, including pseudo-R, do suggest the presence of some omitted variable bias. This is common in nonexperimental studies like this one and reflects the broader context of the research, which takes place during—and indeed, as a consequence of—an unprecedented disrup-

tion in the functioning of public institutions and the daily lives of our study participants. Despite these caveats, this research has meaningful implications for our understanding of public participation and the potential significance of virtual participation options for promoting equitable conditions for engagement, particularly among women. Much more research is needed to examine the effects of virtual participation options, particularly given the inconsistency between our findings and other recent scholarship (Einstein et al. 2019, 2022).

Attempts to replicate this research using data from other jurisdictions would be a useful place to start. There is also a case to be made for examining how the availability of virtual participation options affects non-agenda comments and other measures of public engagement, including commentary on agendized items and engagement with specific issue types presented during city council and other general-purpose public meetings. This research could also be extended by examining participation patterns in subcommittee and other special-

ized meetings, on specific council action items, or other avenues of “thick” public participation (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). Indeed, a focus on issue-specific engagement may offer an interesting mechanism for examining the contention—which we found no evidence for—that female participation in public life is driven in substantial part by an interest in policy debates tied closely to gender identity.

Our findings raise important questions about the value of open meetings for promoting representative public debate, conveying an accurate view of a jurisdiction’s policy and administrative preferences, and advancing fairness of access. Our results suggest that a small segment of high-volume, repeat speakers had an outsize influence: 13 individuals issued a total of 835 comments, over 35% of all comments made during the study period.⁵ These data are consistent with criticism of public meetings as limited venues for participation, susceptible to domination by a vocal minority, a group unrepresentative of the wider population (Adams 2004; McComas et al. 2010). As Adams (2004, 44) notes, the overwhelming role of such a narrow segment of the community may undercut “the legitimacy of the hearing as a venue for assessing public opinion, and it provides officials with an excuse to ignore public comments.” Future research that examines public officials’ response to these “frequent flier” and other patterns of public participation would bring empirical insight to what are largely theoretical debates over the impact of “right to participate” laws like the Brown Act. Further, this specific avenue of research would help to reveal our understanding of equity in this context, particularly in light of the tension between expanded female participation during virtual/hybrid meetings and the dominant role of the most frequent speakers over the same period. Incorporating virtual meeting technologies provided a new avenue to participate, enhancing equity of access for women.

The interaction between meeting modality, speaker gender, and comment frequency is also worth pursu-

5. These numbers varied somewhat by meeting type (in person = 35.9%; virtual = 30.5%; hybrid = 43.6%), but remained a sizable share throughout. Exactly 9 of 13 “frequent fliers” were women, together accounting for 587, or 70.3%, of the 835 total comments offered. These same women accounted for just 32.1% of the 290 “frequent flier” comments made in person, an interesting contrast to their outsize involvement during virtual and hybrid sessions.

ing. Engagement among the most frequent male commenters was highest during the in-person segment of the study period, tapering off during the virtual/hybrid segments. Female frequent fliers, by contrast, became more actively engaged as virtual participation options became available. Do virtual participation options mitigate barriers to participation most acutely felt by women? Is the preference for in-person participation among male frequent fliers evidence that the city council meetings served as a “third place” (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982), where this group of male participants derived value from face-to-face interaction? Was this value diminished as the City transitioned to virtual meetings? Qualitative research into how and why more frequent speakers engage the way they do would build theory about the motivation behind certain types of public participation and could help to unlock efforts to promote a more active, equitable brand of engagement with policy and administrative debates.

Conclusion

In this study, we focused on public participation in local government, specifically on the frequency of nonagenda public comment provided at city council meetings. In our analysis we compared participation during council meetings where the public could only speak in-person to participation during meetings that incorporated virtual meeting technologies. Our purpose was to investigate the impact of virtual participation options on participation since, as practitioners have returned to public meeting management in a post-COVID-19 environment, many are weighing the value and feasibility of maintaining a virtual option for members of the public. Yet, few studies have tackled this subject or provided information and suggestions for best practices that would guide these decisions. Additionally, investigating these issues is critical to understanding the potential of e-government tools, in this case virtual public meetings, to fulfill the promise of achieving greater social equity by enhancing fairness in access to public participation.

Our findings demonstrate that participation increased when virtual meeting technologies were incorporated during the transition to virtual and hybrid meetings during and subsequent to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, contrary to what is suggested by prior studies, female participation surpassed male participation. Female participation increased substantially

as virtual options became available, and the overall observed growth in participation is owed entirely to increased female participation.

The findings presented engage with the research at the intersection of local government participation, gender, and virtual technology. While studies point to the shortcomings of public hearings or meetings (Baker et al. 2005; Hock et al. 2013; Irvin and Stansbury 2004; King et al. 1998), scholars have also acknowledged that hearings and meetings play a valuable role in the local democratic process by providing legitimacy for the public process overall (Adams 2004). Our study demonstrates that both the level and frequency of participation increased when virtual meeting technologies were incorporated, raising important implications for future research and practice.

The study presented here further investigates the component of “who participates” (Fung 2006, 2015) in a government meeting context addressing a call for generating evidence on who participates in public meetings (Williamson and Scicchitano 2014). Importantly, we also contribute to an understanding of the role of gender and gender disparities in local government participation. Our data show that women were more likely to participate when presented with the opportunity to do so virtually, suggesting that incorporating virtual meeting technologies enhances fairness of access to public meetings for women. The correlation between these findings and the removal of logistical, financial, and/or sociological barriers to participation warrants further investigation. In a related vein, this work also invites future research exploring the causal link between virtual and hybrid meetings and increased participation of females.

Technological advancements are not new to the public meeting forum. Past updates to the meeting process occurred slowly as state law was changed to reflect newer capabilities (e.g., on-line access to the agenda) and access initiatives (Americans with Disabilities Act and language access requirements). However, past research has shown that there is continued uncertainty about the benefits of technology and e-government tools (MacLean and Titah 2022) and our study contributes to closing this gap in our understanding. Existing literature reviews of e-government either exclude e-participation (MacLean and Titah 2022) or do not explicitly focus on investigating the role of technology in improving access to and participation in public hear-

ings (Twizeyimana and Andersson 2019). Like technology, social equity is always evolving (Guy and Williams 2023), thus studying and ensuring fairness in access demands ongoing vigilance as public administrators and organizations increasingly rely on technology in public meeting management.

Also, as previously described, our findings raise important questions about the value of public meetings for promoting representative debate and conveying an accurate view of a jurisdiction’s policy and administrative preferences. Our results suggest that a small segment of high-volume, repeat speakers had an outsize influence during the study period. This should be examined in future research, along with the interaction between meeting modality, speaker gender, and comment frequency.

Lastly, the study scope was limited to nonagenda public comment in city government, as one of the contexts where virtual meeting technologies were adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. While virtual technologies present new participation opportunities, the impact of their integration has not been fully considered and our study helps to shed light on their value as governments face critical decisions on how to invest limited resources. As our study is limited to nonagenda public comment only, it would be worth exploring practices in other jurisdictions, as practitioners need to know how to navigate a post-COVID-19 context with limited resources and competing priorities. The generalizability of this work is also limited by the fact that our data draws on one case with unique political and socio-economic conditions.

We offer valuable lessons for practitioners, which are strengthened by the fact that our project team includes two former practitioners, including a city clerk with nearly 20 years of professional experience managing city council meetings. It is a key strength that we bring to this research and also informs our recommendations to practitioners.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, almost every municipality or institution that held public meetings turned to the virtual environment to ensure that work could continue—decisions could be made, policies set, and the public voice could safely continue to be a part of the process. When the public was allowed once again to gather in person, many municipalities and institutions continued to offer a virtual option for public participation (Di Giovanna and Huling 2021; Einstein et al. 2022). For those who returned to in-person only, the

main reasons given revolved around older technology and a lack of funding for upgrades. The data analyzed for this article demonstrates a benefit to having a virtual option for public testimony. In order to make this possible, legislators considering amendments to open meeting laws should consider enabling virtual public meeting participation through legislation that emphasizes fairness, clarity, and transparency. Virtual testimony provides an alternative method for engaging in the public meeting process, but as such, there may be certain limitations necessary to allow for effective meeting management, including issues surrounding video versus audio-only participation, addressing “Zoom-bombing” disruptions, managing group presentations, and providing translation and other accommodation services. These concerns, along with technology costs, need to be discussed among meeting management professionals so that best practices can be established and shared to enhance the benefits of virtual meetings.

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