



Opening California's Democracy

*A Survey on Remote Public Participation
at Government Meetings*

Acknowledgements

A special thanks to all of the cities that participated in this survey, especially the city clerks and their staff who took the time to answer the 30+ questions and provide feedback on open-ended questions. Our findings would not be as relevant if a quarter of all California cities had not participated. It is clear that city clerk offices care about the open government process. A special thanks also to Blue Shield of California Foundation for their generous funding of our survey and this report. Projects like these are not possible without funders who wish to advance the democratic process for the betterment of all who wish to participate in open government.

Thank you to Nicolas Heidorn, formerly of Heidorn Consulting, for his previous research on this topic, as well as his invaluable assistance in crafting the survey questions. Thank you also to California Common Cause Executive Director Jonathan Mehta Stein and California Common Cause Legislative Director Laurel Brodzinsky for their peer review and editing of various drafts of this report. Thank you to California Common Cause Fellow Hannah Jackson, who engaged in extensive preparatory research for this project. Finally, thank you to California Common Cause interns Deven Reyes and Francesca Abruzzo for their data-gathering efforts, which greatly facilitated this report.

CONTENTS

- Executive Summary 3**
- Methodology 6**
 - Parameters and Response Rate6
 - The Questions6
 - Key Terms Defined in the Survey.....6
 - City Clerks as Respondents.....7
 - Composition of Respondent Cities.....7
 - City Council Meeting Times 8
- Findings..... 9**
 - Remote Access Use Prior to, During, and After the COVID-19 Pandemic 9
 - Public Participation with Remote Comment 11
 - Costs13
 - Potential Hindrances15
 - Potential Benefits..... 17
 - Boon or Burden (benefits vs. costs and hindrances)19
 - Consensus20
- Costs Versus Values22**
- Conclusion23**
- Appendix.....25**
 - 1A: Survey Questions, Data, and Graphs – Remote Access Use
Prior to, During, and After the COVID-19 Pandemic 25
 - 1B: Survey Questions, Data, and Graphs – Public Participation with Remote Comment 29
 - 1C: Survey Questions, Data, and Graphs – Costs31
 - 1D: Survey Questions, Data, and Graphs – Potential Hindrances 34
 - 1E: Survey Questions, Data, and Graphs – Potential Benefits 37
 - 1F: Survey Questions, Data, and Graphs – Boon or Burden
(benefits vs. costs and hindrances)..... 39



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California law enshrines the public's right to participate in local government as a foundational tenet of our democracy. The Ralph M. Brown Act (hereafter, Brown Act) guarantees the opportunity for members of the public to attend and speak at open local government meetings, such as city council meetings.¹ However, that right is only guaranteed if a member of the public attends the meeting in person, which presents barriers to many who have physical, family, transportation, or other constraints.²

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated alternative means for conducting open government meetings. This resulted in California Governor Gavin Newsom declaring a State of Emergency³ on March 4th, 2020, and issuing an Executive Order⁴ that same month that allowed local governments to conduct meetings using solely remote means. That Executive Order and its subsequent extensions⁵ lasted until February 28, 2023, when Governor Newsom declared an end to the COVID-19 state of emergency.⁶ Consequently, remote public comment was used either solely or in tandem with in-person public comment at local open government meetings for nearly three years while California was under a state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

When used during health and other states of emergency, the consensus seems clear: remote access — either telephonically or audio-visually via web-based applications like Zoom — is a viable alternative to in-person access and public participation at open government meetings.

However, when it comes to instituting remote public comment as an additional option at open government meetings *absent* a state of emergency, the consensus, at least between the general public and

1 See generally, Cal. Gov. Code, Sec. 54950 et seq; See specifically, Cal. Gov. Code, Secs. 54953, 54953.8, and 54954.3.

2 The Brown Act does not prohibit local jurisdictions from offering remote options to address a government body in real-time at an open meeting (see Cal. Gov. Code, Secs. 54953.7), but it is at the discretion of a local jurisdiction and must be in addition to in-person public comment and participation (see Cal. Gov. Code, Secs. 54953(b) & (f)), except under rare emergency circumstances where the health and safety of the public are at risk (see Cal. Gov. Code, Secs. 54953(e)).

3 Office of Governor Gavin Newsom. "Governor Newsom Declares State of Emergency to Help State Prepare for Broader Spread of COVID-19." California Governor, 5 Mar. 2020, www.gov.ca.gov/2020/03/04/governor-newsom-declares-state-of-emergency-to-help-state-prepare-for-broader-spread-of-covid-19/.

4 ---. "Governor Newsom Issues Executive Order to Protect Ongoing Safety Net Services for Most Vulnerable Californians during COVID-19 Outbreak." California Governor, 18 Mar. 2020, www.gov.ca.gov/2020/03/18/governor-newsom-issues-executive-order-to-protect-ongoing-safety-net-services-for-most-vulnerable-californians-during-covid-19-outbreak/.

5 Office of Governor Gavin Newsom. "As California Fully Reopens, Governor Newsom Announces Plans to Lift Pandemic Executive Orders." California Governor, 11 June 2021, www.gov.ca.gov/2021/06/11/as-california-fully-reopens-governor-newsom-announces-plans-to-lift-pandemic-executive-orders/. See Executive Order N-08-21; See also California Legislature. "Bill Text - AB-361 Open Meetings: State and Local Agencies: Teleconferences." Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, 17 Sept. 2021, https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=20210220AB361.

6 California Legislature. "Governor Newsom Marks End of California's COVID-19 State of Emergency." California Governor, 28 Feb. 2023, www.gov.ca.gov/2023/02/28/governor-newsom-marks-end-of-californias-covid-19-state-of-emergency/.

policymakers, is not so clear. Based on legislation over the last three years,⁷ lawmakers have generally supported offering remote public comment options when tied to the ability of government officials to participate in open meetings remotely, but not as a regular option in addition to in-person public participation at open government meetings. In contrast, the general public appears supportive of a hybrid model (i.e., where both remote and in-person access and participation are available) for reasons of practicality and ease of access to and participation in the governmental process.⁸

Within this debate, a lot of assumptions have been made about the efficacy and general utility of remote public comment at open government meetings. While some assumptions about ease of access and participation are likely true, other assumptions about costs and the extent of perceived hindrances and drawbacks are less certain. For example, are monetary costs and possible extra staff time to implement and sustain remote public comment options generally feasible for jurisdictions? Do the potential irritations of remote public participation, such as longer meetings and more divisive speech, outweigh the benefits of increased public participation in government? Absent viable data, which has been missing on both sides of the debate,⁹ we don't definitively know the answers to these questions.

This report attempts to answer those and other questions more concretely based on findings from a 2023 survey that California Common Cause conducted on remote public comment at city council meetings. The survey was sent to the city clerk offices of all California cities about four months after California's COVID state of emergency ended. 119 cities responded, with 115 cities answering most of the survey's 38 questions; this represents one-quarter of all California cities.

We found that most city halls view remote public comment as a net positive addition to the open government process that is feasible to implement and regularly offer along with in-person comment at open government meetings.

7 ---. "Bill Text - AB-557 Open Meetings: Local Agencies: Teleconferences." Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, 10 Oct. 2023, [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB557](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB557); See also ---. "Bill Text - SB-544 Bagley-Keene Open Meeting Act: Teleconferencing." Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, 22 Sept. 2023, [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240SB544](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240SB544); See also ---. "Bill Text - SB-411 Open Meetings: Teleconferences: Neighborhood Councils." Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, 10 Oct. 2023, [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240SB411](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240SB411); See also ---. "Bill Text - AB-817 Open Meetings: Teleconferencing: Subsidiary Body." Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, 16 Mar. 2023, [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB817](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB817). See also ---. "Bill Text - SB-537 Open Meetings: Multijurisdictional, Cross-County Agencies: Teleconferences." Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, 5 Sept. 2023, [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240SB537](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240SB537); See also ---. "Bill Text - AB-1275 Health Information." Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, 2023, [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB1275](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB1275). Originally an open meetings remote access bill, but amended to become a telehealth bill; See also ---. "Bill Text - AB-1379 Open Meetings: Local Agencies: Teleconferences." Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, 23 Mar. 2023, [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB1379](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB1379); See also ---. "Bill Text - AB-1733 State Bodies: Open Meetings." Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, 31 Jan. 2022, [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB1733](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB1733); See also ---. "Bill Text - AB-1944 Local Government: Open and Public Meetings." Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, 25 May 2022, [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB1944&firstNav=tracking](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB1944&firstNav=tracking); See also ---. "Bill Text - AB-1795 Open Meetings: Remote Participation." Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, 7 Feb. 2022, [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB1795&firstNav=tracking](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB1795&firstNav=tracking); See also ---. "Bill Text - AB-2449 Open Meetings: Local Agencies: Teleconferences." Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, 14 Sept. 2022, [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB2449&firstNav=tracking](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB2449&firstNav=tracking); See also ---. "Bill Text - AB-339 Local Government: Open and Public Meetings." Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, 13 Sept. 2021, [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB339](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB339).

8 Public support for a hybrid model is based on 1) survey data that indicates an increase in public participation at open government meetings when remote options are available and 2) public sentiment observed by California Common Cause and partner organizations at state and local government meetings when remote participation was discussed.

9 The Little Hoover Commission conducted a survey and published a report during the COVID-19 pandemic on the effects of remote-only open meetings for state commissions. See Little Hoover Commission. "The Government of Tomorrow: Online Meetings." Lhc.ca.gov, June 2021. <https://lhc.ca.gov/sites/lhc.ca.gov/files/Reports/261/Report261.pdf>.

Key findings include:

- **Cities have already adopted remote public comment methods and plan to continue using them. The vast majority of** respondents (93%) adopted remote public comment (RPC) options during the COVID-19 pandemic, most (69%) continue to use RPC in the post-pandemic era, and most (70%) plan to regularly use RPC in the future.
- **Cities have implemented remote public comment options successfully and will not face significant ongoing costs.** Respondents overwhelmingly believe (94%) remote public comment has been successfully integrated into their city council meetings, and a majority reported they can offer it going forward at a less than significant cost and for minimal to no added staff time.
- **Remote public comment options have been beneficial to city council meetings and increased public participation and civic engagement.** A majority of city respondents believe remote public comment options made it easier for the public to participate, improved city council meetings and civic engagement, and that its benefits justify its costs.
- **Remote public comment options have not caused significant negative impacts to city council meetings, such as significantly longer meetings or increased uncivil behavior.** Respondents did not experience significant increases in total city council meeting length or significant increases in uncivil behavior due to offering remote public comment options.
- **City respondents support continuing to offer remote public comment options.** A majority of city clerk respondents (59%) support the future use of remote public comment as an option in addition to in-person comments at city council meetings.

A PDF version of the survey questions may be downloaded and viewed at the following link:
www.commoncause.org/california/opening-ca-democracy/

METHODOLOGY

Parameters and Response Rate

California Common Cause conducted its survey on public remote access and participation at local government meetings over the course of seven weeks (June 20th to August 9th) in 2023. The survey consisted of 38 questions. The survey was sent to the city clerk offices of all 482 California cities with a response rate of about 25%. In total, 119 cities responded to the survey with a cumulative population of about 7.3 million, accounting for about 19% of all Californians. Not all respondents answered all the questions, but 115 city-respondents answered most questions. There were two anonymous city-respondents (i.e., cities that declined to state their city's name or provide a follow-up email).

The Questions

The survey questions fall within one or multiple of the following categories:

- Pre-, during, and post-pandemic open government meetings
 - E.g., was public remote access to open government meetings an option prior to the pandemic and is it still an option now that the pandemic emergency order has been rescinded?
- Public participation
 - E.g., did public participation at open government meetings tend to increase or decrease while using remote access options?
- Costs
 - E.g., what up-front and ongoing costs were incurred to implement remote access options?
- Barriers
 - E.g., what obstacles arose to conducting government meetings as a result of remote access options?
- Pros and Cons
 - E.g., did public participation tend to increase? Did meetings tend to go longer? Did remote access tend to increase public speaker diversity? Did remote access tend to increase divisive comments?

Even though municipalities typically have multiple government bodies that hold open meetings, such as commissions and committees, our survey premised questions on remote access to city or town council meetings, as these meetings are typically the most well-known, occur most regularly, and are usually where the final and most important decisions affecting residents are made.

Key Terms Defined in the Survey

Remote Public Comment means: providing oral public comment at city council or similar government-body meetings that is NOT given in-person but in real-time via phone or video conferencing software (such as Zoom or a similar platform). Remote public comment includes comments given during remote-only or hybrid (i.e., in-person and remote) public meetings.

Hybrid Access means: allowing the public to provide oral public comment at city council or similar government-body meetings BOTH in-person AND remotely.

During the COVID Pandemic means: 2020 to 2023, particularly March 2020 to March 2023 when California was under a state of emergency per Governor Newsom’s Executive Order N-29-20 (and its extensions),¹⁰ which suspended certain sections of the Ralph M. Brown Act to allow local governments to hold remote-only open government meetings.

City Clerks as Respondents

City clerk offices were the chosen respondents for the survey because their offices are the primary point of contact for members of the public. City clerks and their staff are also responsible for receiving and recording public comments at government meetings and are usually present at city council meetings. City clerk offices also play a more passive role in the policymaking and general government decision-making process than elected officials, city managers, or other department heads tasked with making recommendations to the city council do. Because of this, city clerks are less likely to have their views biased by perceived wins and losses at city council meetings that public participation may have influenced.

Out of 117 respondent city clerk offices, 95 (or 81%) are from cities with appointed city clerks, and 22 (or 19%) are from cities with elected city clerks.

Composition of Respondent Cities

119 cities responded to our survey, accounting for 25% of cities, with a cumulative population of about 7.3 million, accounting for about 19% of all Californians. The average and median populations of respondent cities are 62,556 and 32,366, respectively. The largest respondent-city is San Jose with a population of 1,013,240, and the smallest respondent city is Trinidad with a population of 348.

City Respondent Population Data

| | City Population | City Name |
|------------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Cumulative Pop. | 7,319,009 | |
| Avg. Pop. | 62,556 | |
| Median Pop. | 32,366 | |
| Largest City | 1,013,240 | San Jose |
| Smallest City | 348 | Trinidad |

All populations are based on April 2020 U.S. Census Bureau data.

¹⁰ Governor Newsom ended California’s COVID-19 pandemic state of emergency on February 28, 2023. See Office of Governor Gavin Newsom. “Governor Newsom Marks End of California’s COVID-19 State of Emergency.” California Governor, 28 Feb. 2023, www.gov.ca.gov/2023/02/28/governor-newsom-marks-end-of-californias-covid-19-state-of-emergency/; See Also Office of California Governor. A Proclamation by the Governor of the State of California Terminating State of Emergency. 28 Feb. 2023. <https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/COVID-SOE-Termination-Proclamation-2.28.23.pdf?emrc=1db54f>

Cities of all sizes participated in our survey. A breakdown of the number of small (Pop. < 50K), medium (Pop. 50K - 150K), and large (Pop. > 150K) cities is represented in the table below.

Survey Response Rate Based on Respondent-City Size

| | Pop. < 50K | Pop. 50K - 150K | Pop. > 150K |
|------------------|------------|-----------------|-------------|
| # of Cities | 76 | 30 | 11 |
| % of Respondents | 64% | 25% | 9% |

Note: The two cities that responded anonymously are excluded from this table since their populations are unknown.

City Council Meeting Times

Given that the utility of remote public participation in the governmental process centers around accessibility and convenience, city council meeting times are relevant to the discussion. As indicated in the table below, the vast majority of cities in our survey held regular city council meetings after typical working hours (i.e., 5:00 PM or later) from 2019 to 2023.

Regular City Council Meeting Start Times for Cities in Our Survey

| | # of Cities with CC Meeting Start Times Before 5:00 PM | # of Cities with CC Meeting Start Times At 5:00 PM or Later | # of Cities with CC Meeting Start Times At 6:00 PM or Later | # of Cities with CC Meeting Start Times At 7:00 PM or Later |
|-----------|--|---|---|---|
| Year 2019 | 8 | 109 | 95 | 39 |
| Year 2020 | 10 | 107 | 87 | 35 |
| Year 2021 | 10 | 107 | 89 | 32 |
| Year 2022 | 9 | 108 | 87 | 31 |
| Year 2023 | 9 | 108 | 85 | 29 |

Note: The data reflects meeting times for a regular city council meeting in each city in our survey during the month of August of each year represented. If a city did not hold a regular city council meeting in the month of August of a particular year, then a regular city council meeting for the preceding month was used until a meeting time was found.

FINDINGS

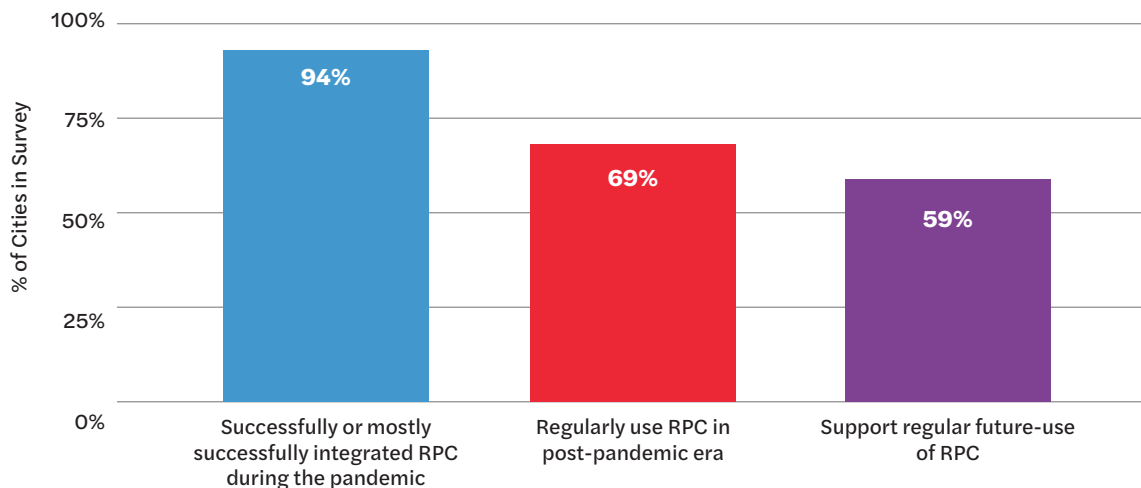
Note that all percentages in the findings are rounded to the nearest whole percent.

Remote Access Use Prior to, During, and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

In this section, we look at how well-integrated remote public comment options are at city council meetings and the likelihood of cities offering remote public comment on a regular basis moving forward.

Nearly all cities in our survey successfully adopted some form of remote public participation at city council meetings during the pandemic, most continue to provide remote public comment as an option in the post-pandemic era, and most cities in our survey also support the continued use of remote comment as an option for the public in addition to in-person comment at future city council meetings.

City Integration, Use of, and Support for Remote Public Comment (RPC)



Most cities prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (or prior to 2020) did not offer remote public comment as an option at city council meetings. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 11 out of 116 respondent-cities offered either telephonic (10 cities or 9% of respondents) or audio-visual (1 city or 1% of respondents) hybrid options for public comment at city council meetings.

The pandemic induced most cities to integrate remote public comment options. The vast majority of survey respondents (112 out of 119 cities, or 93% of responding cities) said they *adopted* remote public comment options at city council meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most cities are now capable of and comfortable providing remote public comment. Out of 115 respondents, 108 (or 94% of respondents) believe that their cities *successfully or mostly successfully integrated* remote public comment at city council meetings.

Most cities continue to provide remote public comment as an option at city council meetings, in addition to in-person comment, in the post-pandemic era. Post-pandemic, 80 out of 116 respondent cities (or 69% of respondents), with an average and median population of 67,503 and 31,490 respectively, *continue to use remote public comment options on a regular basis* at city council meetings.

Most cities provide remote public comment in the post-pandemic era as an audio-visual option, with some cities offering multiple options. Out of 116 respondent-cities, 71 cities (or 62% of respondents) currently *offer audio-visual* options for remote public comment at city council meetings, 54 cities (or 47% of respondents) currently *offer telephonic* options, and 42 cities (or 32% of respondents) currently *read written comments* into the public record at city council meetings.

Most cities have adopted remote public comment as an option at city council meetings as a formal or defacto city policy. Out of 88 cities that responded to this question, 51 (or 58% of respondents), with an average and median population of 84,961 and 32,690 respectively, said they have *formally adopted* remote public comment as an option at city council meetings as city policy. Twenty-two additional cities (or 25% of respondents), with an average and median population of 44,533 and 37,266 respectively, said they have *informally adopted* the practice since the end of the Governor’s COVID-19 pandemic emergency order. Thus, combined, 73 out of 88 respondent-cities (or 83% of respondents), with an average and median population of 73,170 and 32,696 respectively, have either formally or informally adopted remote public comment in the post-pandemic era as a regular or permanent option at city council meetings.¹¹

Most cities intend to offer or continue to offer remote public comment in the future. Out of 115 respondent-cities, 80 cities (or 70% of respondents), with an average and median population of 66,598 and 32,366 respectively, reported that their cities *plan on providing* hybrid remote public comment options on a regular basis in the foreseeable future.

Most city clerks support the future use of hybrid public comment. Out of 116 respondent-cities, 68 cities (or 59% of respondents), with an average and median population of 66,191 and 32,701 respectively, either *strongly support* (51 cities or 44% of respondents) or *somewhat support* (17 cities or 15% of respondents) the future use of remote public comment at city council meetings as an option in addition to in-person comment. In contrast, 15 cities (or 13% of respondents), with an average and median population of 96,723 and 66,295 respectively, either *strongly oppose* (seven cities or 6% of respondents) or *somewhat oppose* (eight cities or 7% of respondents) the future use of remote public comment as an option at city council meetings. The other responsive cities (33 cities or 28% of respondents) were either *indifferent* (29 cities or 25% of respondents) or *unsure* (4 cities or 3% of respondents).

¹¹ Note: even though only 51 cities responded that offering remote public comment at city council meetings is now city policy, a review of the written responses to the “Other” response option revealed that an additional 22 cities have either formally or informally adopted, as a policy or a best practice, remote public comment as a regular option at city council meetings. Thus, 73 out of 88 respondent-cities continue to use remote public comment at city council meetings in the post-pandemic era either as official policy or as a best practice or as unofficial policy.

In sum, nearly all cities in our survey pool (108 out of 115) successfully adopted remote public comment during the COVID-19 pandemic, and nearly three-quarters of those cities (80 out of 116 cities of various sizes based on population data) continue to regularly use remote public comment in the post-pandemic era as an option at city council meetings.

Almost three-quarters of cities surveyed (80 cities out of 115, or 70% of respondents) indicated that they plan on using hybrid remote public comment options regularly at city council meetings in the future, and more than half of respondent-cities (68 or 59%) support the use of remote public comment at city council meetings.

The average and median population data provided in this section suggests that cities of various sizes (i.e., small cities with populations under 50K to large cities with populations over 150K) continue to use remote public comment options on a regular basis and will likely do so into the foreseeable future; however, larger cities appear more likely to oppose consistent future use of remote public comment.

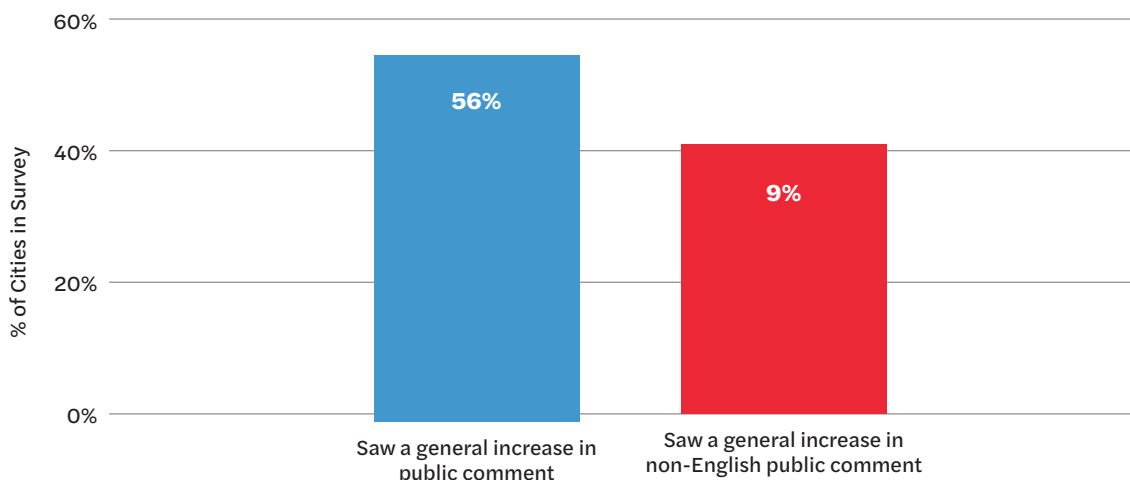
See survey response data in Appendix 1A.

Public Participation with Remote Comment

We assume increased public participation to be a net benefit for democracy; a more participatory local politics results in better decisions and a more engaged community. Thus, the volume of public participation through the public comment process at open government meetings is one way to measure the efficacy of remote public comment. In this section, we compare the number of public speakers at city council meetings before and after the implementation of remote public comment options at city council meetings.

Survey results indicate that increasing access to remote public comment is likely to increase public participation at city council meetings for most cities, but may not significantly increase public comments in a language other than English for most cities. This could change, however, as audio-visual meeting platforms better integrate automatic translation via closed captioning and other tools.

Cities that Saw an Increase in Public Comment When Using Remote Options



The number of public speakers at city council meetings generally increased for most cities while using remote public comment options. Out of 115 respondent-cities, over half (64 cities or 56% of respondents), with an average and median population of 75,511 and 33,813 respectively, believe that remote public comment either *significantly* (20 cities or 17% of respondents) or *somewhat* (44 cities or 38% of respondents) *increased* the number of residents commenting at city council meetings. 41 cities (or 36% of respondents), with an average and median population of 42,924 and 12,803 respectively, saw *no change* in the number of public speakers while using remote public comment options.

Translation services and public comments in a language other than English did not increase in most cities while using remote public comment options. 104 out of 115 respondent-cities (or 90% of respondents) reported *no change* in the number of non-English public comments. This may be because cities did not consistently create new language supports for remote participants with language needs. Eighty-two cities (or 71% of respondents) saw *no change* in the use of translation services, seven cities (or 6% of respondents) reported *significant increases* in translation services, and eight cities (or 7% of respondents) reported that translation services *somewhat increased* at city council meetings.

Most cities rely on hired translators or multilingual staff to translate non-English remote public comments. When asked how cities provide translation for remote public comment (the question was multiple choice), 51 out of 113 respondent-cities (or 45% of respondents) stated they hire translators upon request, 33 cities (or 29% of respondents) use city staff, and 18 cities (or 16% of respondents) rely on the automatic closed-caption translation of a remote platform. (To see how other cities responded, see Appendix 1B).

In sum, more than half of the cities in our survey believe that remote public access increased public comments at city council meetings, but this uptick did not significantly increase public comments from non-English speakers or the use of translation services at city council meetings for most cities. Translation and public speakers commenting in a language other than English could increase as remote meeting platforms advance their offerings for automatic translation services.¹²

In this section, average and median population data suggest that while cities of various sizes saw a general increase in public comment when using remote access options, smaller cities are most likely to experience no change in the number of public speakers when using remote options. This could partially be attributed to a likely smaller pool of potential or would-be public speakers in small cities, in turn decreasing the probability for generally more or new speakers — even if barriers to participation are lowered through remote public comment options.

See survey response data in Appendix 1B.

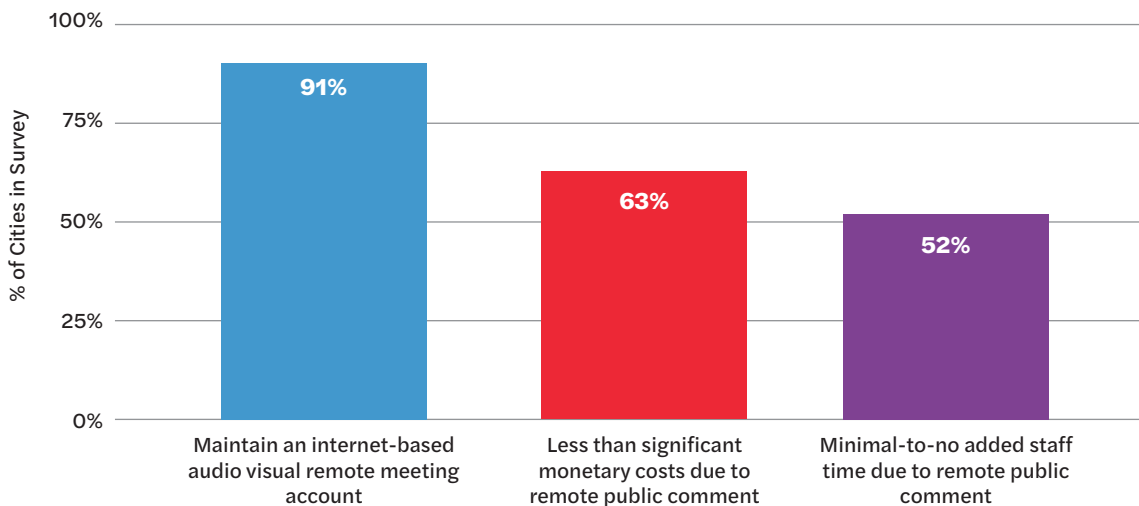
¹² E.g., see “Enabling and Configuring Translated Captions - Zoom Support.” Support.zoom.com, support.zoom.com/hc/en/article?id=zm_kb&sysparm_article=KB0059081#:~:text=Zoom%20translated%20captions%20enable%20users. Accessed 11 Dec. 2023.

Costs

Monetary and staffing costs can be a barrier to any policy. Thus, in this section, we look at the costs in equipment and staff time to implement remote public comment options at city council meetings. Such costs can also act as a baseline variable when inferring about the net utility of remote public comment as a permanent option for the public, which we look at in later sections of this report.

Survey results indicate that most cities already have the capability to provide remote public comment, and costs, which appear to be associated with city size, are likely feasible for most cities.

Most Cities Are Capable of Offering Remote Public Comment Options on a Regular Basis



Cities are already consistently budgeting for and maintaining remote access audio-visual platform accounts. Out of 116 respondent-cities, the vast majority (106 or 91%) *have* a Zoom, Granicus, or similar audio-visual remote-meeting platform account.

Respondents reported varying costs associated with remote public comment at city council meetings. Out of 116 respondent-cities, 29 cities (or 25% of respondents), with an average and median population of 63,206 and 41,542 respectively, reported *significant monetary costs* associated with remote public comment; 30 cities (or 26% of respondents) with an average and median population of 61,903 and 33,559 respectively, reported *moderate monetary costs*; 31 cities (or 27% of respondents) with an average and median population of 53,714 and 25,962 respectively, reported *minimal monetary costs*; and 12 cities (or 10% of respondents) with an average and median population of 44,350 and 30,964 respectively, reported *no added monetary costs* associated with remote public comment offered at city council meetings.

Most cities in our survey saw minimal-to-no added staff time due to offering remote public comment at city council meetings. Out of 116 respondent-cities, 46 cities (or 40% of respondents), with an average and median population of 46,258 and 22,181 respectively, reported *minimal* (or less than

20%) added staff time; 34 cities (or 29% of respondents), with an average and median population of 99,689 and 51,163 respectively, reported *moderate* (or 20-60%) added staff time; while 12 cities (or 10% of respondents), with an average and median population of 78,631 and 42,935 respectively, reported *significant* (or at least 60%) added staff time; and 14 cities (or 12% of respondents), with an average and median population of 26,087 and 12,343 respectively, reported *no* added staff time as a result of offering remote public comment at city council meetings.

The greatest costs associated with remote public comment for most cities are either platform fees or audio and/or visual equipment. Out of 112 respondent-cities, 39 cities (or 35% of respondents) reported that *software/platform fees* were the greatest cost for remote public comment, 35 cities (or 31% of respondents) reported that *audio and/or visual equipment* was the greatest cost, 21 cities (or 19% of respondents) reported that *extra staff* was the greatest cost, and 12 cities (or 11% of respondents) reported that *staff overtime* was the greatest cost associated with remote public comment at city council meetings.

Remote meeting platform costs are likely reasonable and bearable for most cities. Half of the survey respondents (58 cities out of 115, or 50% of respondents) were *unsure* of their city's remote meeting platform costs (i.e., monthly fees to use web-based audio-visual meeting platforms like Zoom or Granicus). Out of the other 57 respondent-cities, 35 cities (or 30% of respondents) reported paying monthly fees of *less than \$200*, while 21 cities (or 18% of respondents) reported monthly fees of *over \$200*. (One city separately reported paying no platform fees.)

Most cities use Zoom, further suggesting feasibility. Most cities (107 or 93% of respondents) indicated that they *use or used* a Zoom account for remote public comment at city meetings. Supplemental research revealed that Zoom's 2023 pricing for top-tier plans, which cities are most likely to purchase, was between \$200-\$250 per year with a minimum of 10 user accounts, or \$2,000-\$2,500 per year, which comes out to about \$170-\$208 per month. Ten user accounts are likely sufficient for most cities, but large cities with dozens of departments that regularly host public meetings would pay more proportional to how many license agreements over 10 they needed. If cities need to host meetings with more than 300 attendees then a minimum of fifty \$200 per-year licenses are required.¹³

Most cities believe that a web-based meeting platform and web-based audio and visual equipment are needed for remote public comment; other equipment and additional staff time may also be needed. When cities were asked what resources were needed to provide remote public comment at city council meetings, 102 out of 114 cities (or 90% of respondents) said *software/platform subscription* (e.g., Zoom) was needed, 65 cities (or 57% of respondents) said *web cameras and web audio equipment* was needed, 53 cities (or 47% of respondents) said *non-web-based cameras and microphones* were needed, 52 cities (or 46% of respondents) said *staff overtime* was needed, and 51 cities (or 45% of respondents) said *extra staff* was required to implement remote public comment at city council meetings.

13 Zoom 2023 pricing for this report was based on Zoom website (<https://zoom.us/pricing>) pricing and conversations with Zoom sales representatives.

In sum, the monetary costs of implementing remote public comment appear reasonable and bearable for most cities, as three-quarters of city-respondents to our survey reported either minimal, moderate, or no costs associated with offering remote public comment at city council meetings. Similarly, most cities reported either minimal, moderate, or no added staff time associated with remote public comment.

The vast majority of cities already have a web-based audio-visual meeting platform account established for remote public comment use. Of the cities that reported known platform costs, most pay less than \$200 in monthly fees. The most common costs associated with offering remote public comment appear to be web-based audio-visual platform fees and audio and/or visual equipment.

In this section, average and median population data shows that the cities that reported “significant” monetary costs due to offering remote public comment at city council meetings tend to be larger cities than those that reported less than significant monetary costs. This suggests that monetary costs may be proportional to city size. This is likely particularly true for large cities that hold multiple city council meetings per week and regularly accommodate more speakers than medium and small cities do. Similarly, cities that reported minimal or no added staff time due to offering remote public comment at city council meetings tend to be smaller cities than those that reported significant or moderate increases in staff time. This, again, suggests that costs may be proportional to city size. How increased costs based on city size compare proportionally to the size of city budgets is beyond the scope of this study; however, it is reasonable to assume that city budgets increase with city size. If costs do correlate with city populations and budgets, then determinations about the feasibility of remote public comment could be fairly constant across cities, or even result in costs becoming comparably more feasible for larger cities.

See survey response data in Appendix 1C.

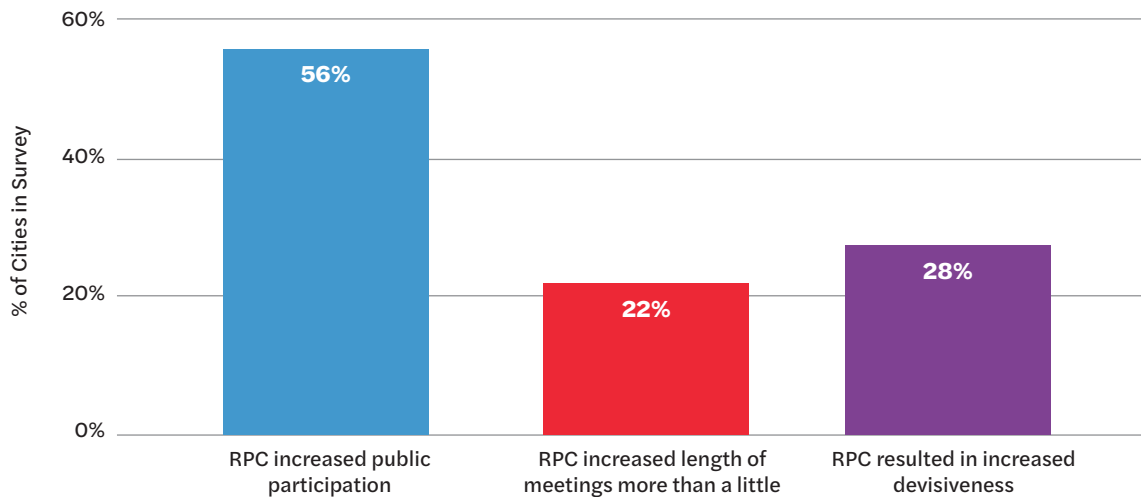
Potential Hindrances

In the previous section, we looked at monetary costs associated with remote public comment at open government meetings. In this section, we look at the “inconvenience-costs” of prolonged meetings and incivility sometimes associated with remote public comment at city council meetings.

Democracy presents a conundrum: it does not work if people don’t participate, but becomes messier and harder the more people participate. Convenience for many can result in inconvenience for others. More speech can result in more “annoying” or unpleasant speech, longer wait times to speak, and more time in general to hear all speech. Thus, increased opportunities for public participation in government, which we view as intrinsically good for democracy and which remote public comment offers, also present the prospect of a messier or less convenient democracy for some, particularly for those who operate in the halls of government. Remote public comment at open government meetings embodies this conundrum.

Our data shows that remote public comment does, on the whole, increase public participation in government through the public comment process at open government meetings while not significantly increasing perceived hindrances.

Public Participation Versus Hindrances



The vast majority of cities in our survey saw little-to-no increase in the duration of city council meetings due to remote public comment. Out of 115 respondent-cities, 89 cities (or 77% of respondents), with an average and median population of 50,575 and 25,242 respectively, reported that remote public comment, in general, either *did not increase the length of city council meetings* (54 cities or 47%) or *increased the length of city council meetings by up to 20 minutes* (35 cities or 30%). In contrast, 24 cities (or 22% of respondents), with an average and median population of 110,974 and 45,532 respectively, reported that remote public comment, in general, either *increased the length of city council meetings by 20-60 minutes* (15 cities or 13% of respondents) or *by more than 60 minutes* (9 cities or 9% of respondents).

While most cities in our survey did not see an uptick in uncivil behavior at city council meetings when remote public comment was used, about a quarter of the surveyed cities did. Out of 115 respondent-cities, 71 cities (or 62% of respondents), with an average and median population of 56,238 and 25,242 respectively, reported *no change in the divisiveness* of open public meetings due to the use of remote public comment (*where divisiveness means swearing, yelling, personal attacks, or similar behavior during public comments*); 22 cities (or 19% of respondents), with an average and median population of 89,937 and 38,716 respectively, reported *somewhat increased divisiveness*; 10 cities (or 9% of respondents), with an average and median population of 66,201 and 40,228 respectively, reported *significantly increased divisiveness*; and five cities (or 4% of respondents) reported *decreases in divisiveness* when using remote public comment at open public meetings.

Most cities identified technical difficulties as the most common hindrance to remote public comment at city council meetings. When cities were asked to identify challenges encountered when using remote public comment at city council meetings, the most common hindrance identified by 76 out of 112 respondent-cities (or 68% of respondents) was *regular technical difficulties*, the second most com-

mon hindrance identified by 28 cities (or 25% of respondents) was *more abusive or off-topic speakers than in-person*, and the third most common hindrance identified by 27 cities (or 24% of respondents) was *generally longer meetings*.

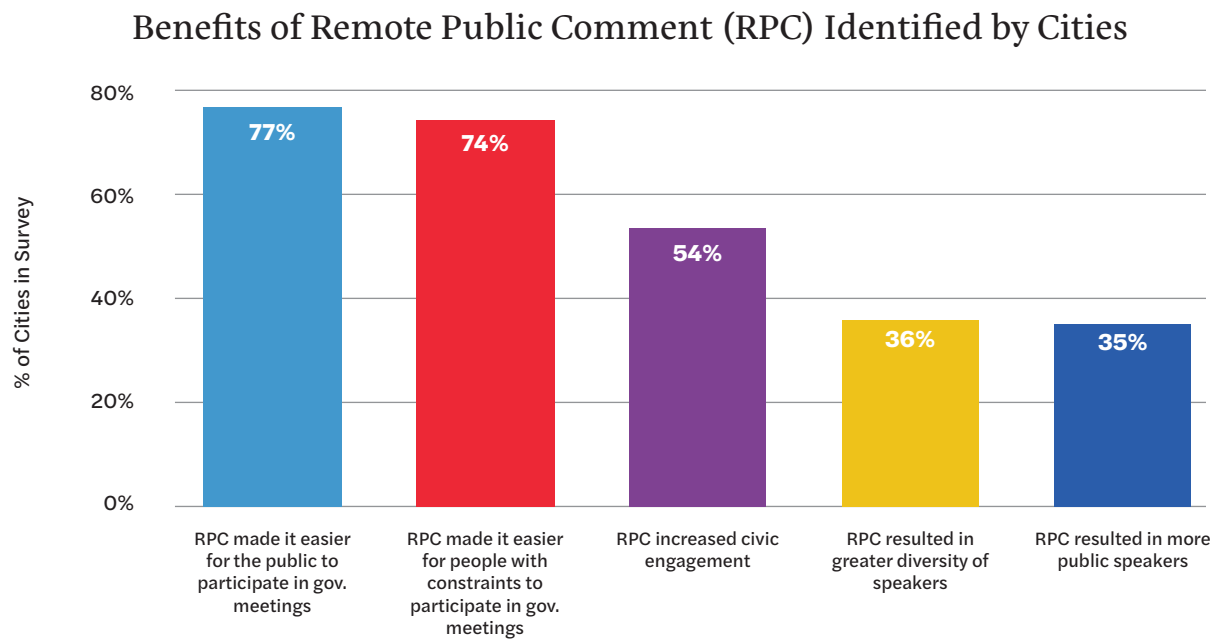
In sum, the majority of cities in our survey saw minimal-to-no increase in the length of city council meetings when using remote public comment. Similarly, most cities did not see an increase in divisive public behavior when using remote public comment at city council meetings. The greatest hindrance to remote public comment appears to be regular technical difficulties with remote meeting platforms.

In this section, average and median population data shows that the minority of cities that reported moderate-to-significant increases in the length of meeting times and divisiveness tend to be larger cities.

See survey response data in Appendix 1D.

Potential Benefits

In the previous section, we looked at potential hindrances of remote public comment. Here we look at the potential benefits of remote public comment at open government meetings.



The vast majority of cities in our survey believe that remote public comment makes public participation easier, especially for those with physical, time, transportation, and other constraints. Many cities also believe that remote public comment increases civic engagement, public participation at government meetings, and the diversity of speakers and their views.

The vast majority of cities in our survey believe that remote public comment makes it easier for the public to participate in government. Out of 115 respondent-cities, 88 cities (or 77% of respondents), with an average and median population of 69,714 and 33,115 respectively, believe that remote public comment makes it either *significantly easier* (47 cities or 41% of respondents) or *somewhat easier* (41 cities or 36% of respondents) for the public to participate in city council meetings. Just five cities (or 4% of respondents), with an average and median population of 45,528 and 42,517 respectively,¹⁴ believe that remote public comment makes it either *significantly harder* (3 cities or 3% of respondents) or *somewhat harder* (2 cities or 2% of respondents) for the public to participate in city council meetings.

The vast majority of cities in our survey believe that remote public comment allows those with physical, time, and livelihood constraints to more easily participate in city meetings. Out of 115 respondent-cities, 82 cities (or 74% of respondents), with an average and median population of 74,135 and 37,266 respectively, believe that remote public comment made it *significantly easier* (62 cities or 54% of respondents) or *somewhat easier* (23 cities or 20% of respondents) for those with work, childcare, transportation, and/or physical constraints to *participate in city meetings*. Just one city (or 1% of respondents) believes that remote public comment made it *somewhat harder* for those folks to *participate in city meetings*.

Most cities believe that remote public comment increases civic engagement. When cities were asked to identify the benefits of using remote public comment at city council meetings (respondents could choose more than one response), the most common benefit identified by 62 out of 115 respondent-cities (or 54% of respondents) was *increased civic engagement* in city government, the second most common benefit identified by 41 cities (or 36% of respondents) was *greater diversity in speakers*, the third most common benefit identified by 40 cities (or 35% of respondents) was *more public comment*, and the fourth most common benefit identified by 26 cities (or 23% of respondents) was *greater diversity of public views*.

In sum, the vast majority – roughly three-quarters of the cities that responded to our survey questions – believe that remote public comment made it easier for the public to participate in city government. In addition, significant numbers of respondent-cities identified increased civic engagement, increased diversity in speakers, increased public comment, and greater diversity of public views as beneficial outcomes of using remote public comment at city council meetings.

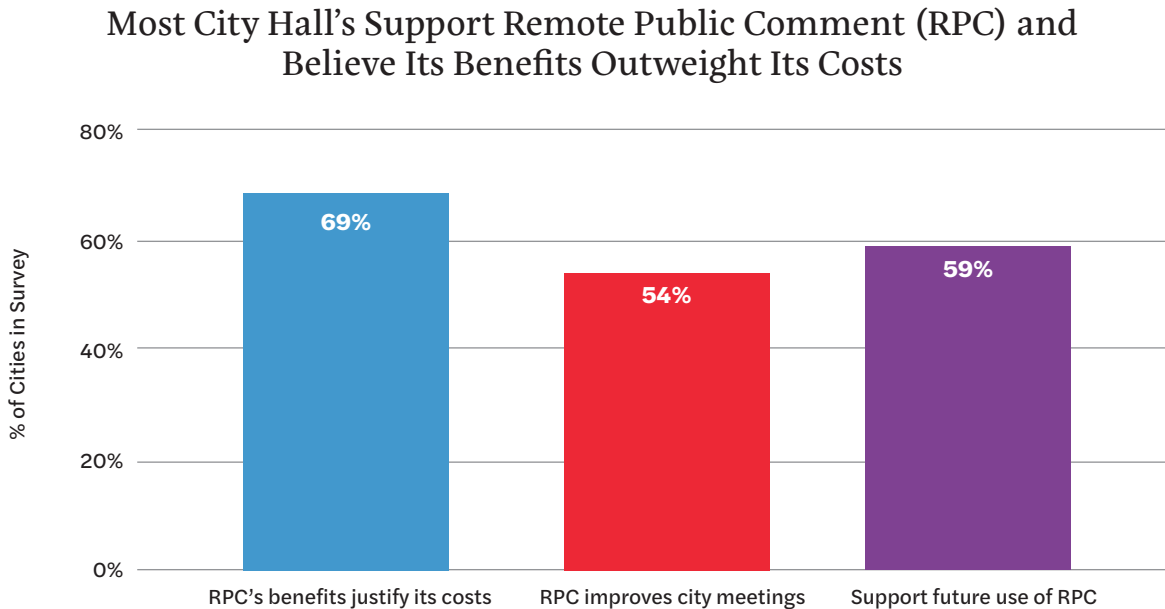
Unlike our analyses of potential hindrances and monetary costs associated with remote public comment, average and median population data in this section suggest that cities of all sizes tend to agree on the benefits of remote public comment.

See survey response data in Appendix 1E.

¹⁴ One city in this group reported anonymously, so the populations represent four cities, not all five respondents.

Boon or Burden (benefits vs. costs and hindrances)

In the previous three sections, we looked at the costs, potential hindrances, and benefits of using remote public comment at open government meetings. In this section, we look at survey questions that collectively consider the benefits and drawbacks of remote public comment at open government meetings to get a sense of the medium's net utility.



The vast majority of cities in our survey believe that the benefits justify the impositions of remote public comment at open government meetings, and most respondent-cities 1) believe that remote public comment improves city meetings and 2) support remote public comment's future use.

Close to three-quarters of responding cities in our survey believe that the public benefits of remote public comment outweigh or match its costs, while a small minority of cities believe the opposite. Out of 115 respondent-cities, 58 cities (or 51% of respondents), with an average and median population of 84,449 and 40,928 respectively, believe that the *public benefits* of remote public comment (e.g., public convenience and increased public participation) either *significantly* (40 cities or 35% of respondents) or *somewhat* (18 cities or 16% of respondents) *outweigh the costs* in dollar amount and staff time associated with remote public comment. Twenty-one cities (or 18% of respondents), with an average and median population of 36,160 and 17,272 respectively, believe that the benefits of remote public comment *match its costs*. In contrast, 13 cities (or 11% of respondents), with an average and median population of 39,347 and 19,909 respectively, believe that the costs of remote public comment either *significantly* (2 cities or 2% of respondents) or *somewhat* (11 cities or 10% of respondents) *outweigh the public benefits* of remote public comment. The rest of the cities who answered the question (23 cities or 23% of respondents) were *unsure*.

When asked if remote public comment was an overall benefit or hindrance to city meetings, a majority of respondents believed that it was a benefit, while a small minority believed it was a hindrance. Out of 115 cities, 62 cities (or 54% of respondents), with an average and median population

of 71,700 and 33,130 respectively, believe that remote public comment either *significantly* (28 cities or 24% of respondents) or *somewhat* (34 cities or 30% of respondents) *improved* city meetings. Just 16 cities, (or 14% of respondents), with an average and median population of 62,426 and 34,924 respectively, believe that remote public comment *somewhat worsened* city meetings. Thirty-two cities (or 28% of respondents), with an average and median population of 52,058 and 25,391 respectively, believe that remote public comment did *not change the quality* of city meetings. Five cities (or 4% of respondents) were *unsure*. (No cities believed that remote public comment *significantly worsened* city meetings.)

As noted in a previous section, well over half of the responsive cities in our survey support the future use of remote public comment at city council meetings as an option in addition to in-person public comment. Out of 116 respondent-cities, 68 cities (or 59% of respondents), with an average and median population of 66,191 and 32,701 respectively, either *strongly support* (51 cities or 44% of respondents) or *somewhat support* (17 cities or 15% of respondents) *the future use of remote public comment* at city council meetings as an option in addition to in-person comment. In contrast, 15 cities (or 13% of respondents), with an average and median population of 96,723 and 66,295 respectively, either *strongly oppose* (seven cities or 6% of respondents) or *somewhat oppose* (eight cities or 7% of respondents) *the future use of remote public comment* as an option at city council meetings. The other responsive cities (33 cities or 28% of respondents) were either *indifferent* (29 cities or 25% of respondents) or *unsure* (4 cities or 3% of respondents).

In sum, significantly more cities in our survey support than oppose the future use of remote public comment options at open government meetings, and most cities in our survey believe the benefits of remote public comment (broadly defined as increased public convenience and participation in open government meetings) outweigh its hindrances (broadly defined as inconveniences or irritations) and costs (defined as monetary costs and staff time).

Population data suggest that cities of all sizes believe the benefits outweigh the costs of remote public comment, but larger cities are more likely to oppose the future use of remote public comment as a regular option for city council meetings.

See survey response data in Appendix 1F.

Consensus

In the previous four sections, we looked at the costs and benefits of remote public comment at open government meetings. Here, we encapsulate the general view of remote public comment held by most cities in our survey.

Based on the majority of responses to our survey, the general consensus of city hall respondents is that remote public comment is beneficial to the open government process and worth the operational costs and inconveniences it may impose.

This consensus view is based on the following survey results:

- 69% of city-respondents believe the benefits of remote public comment either outweigh or match its costs in dollar amount and staff time,
- 54% of city-respondents believe that remote public comment has improved city council meetings (measured by weighing benefits vs. hindrances),
- 77% of city-respondents believe that remote public comment makes it easier for the public to participate in government,
- 74% of city-respondents believe that remote public comment allows those with physical and time and livelihood constraints to more easily participate in city meetings,
- Only 25% of city-respondents reported significant monetary costs associated with remote public comment,
- 52% of city-respondents reported minimal-to-no added staff time due to remote public comment,
- 77% of city-respondents saw little-to-no increase in the duration of city council meetings due to remote public comment,
- Only 29% of city-respondents reported a general uptick in uncivil behavior at city council meetings when using remote public comment,
- 69% of city-respondents continue (post-pandemic) to use remote public comment options on a regular basis at city council meetings,
- 70% of city-respondents plan on providing hybrid remote public comment options on a regular basis in the foreseeable future, and
- 59% of city-respondents support the future use of remote public comment as an option in addition to in-person comments at city council meetings.

COSTS VERSUS VALUES

A common thread identified in the survey is that a majority of cities composed of varied populations (i.e. a fairly diversified pool of small cities < 50K, medium cities between 50k-150k, and large cities >150K) generally agree about the utility of remote public comment as a facilitator of public participation in government.

However, average and median population data suggests that large cities are less likely to view remote public comment as a net positive to the governing process, which appears to be driven largely by monetary costs and inconveniences. While more study is needed, this implies that monetary costs and levels of inconvenience might moderately rise proportional to a city's population over a certain amount, which could be compounded by the greater number of city council and other open meetings that large cities tend to hold compared to medium and small cities.

If this is the case, then large cities must contend with the costs versus values question of how much public participation in government is too inconvenient or too costly. Municipal governments that oppose the regular use of remote public comment will have to convince the public that inconvenience to some (particularly those who govern), and monetary costs to facilitate more public participation in the democratic process, are valid reasons not to offer remote public comment as a regular option at open government meetings. Put another way, should cities be placing a price, monetary or otherwise, on public participation in government? If so, then what price is too high or unreasonable?

CONCLUSION

Our survey, which roughly one-fourth of all California cities (or 119 cities) responded to over a two-month period in 2023 (June 20th to August 9th), asked city halls to provide their opinion on various aspects of remote public comment at city council meetings, including implementation, continued use, costs, and perceived benefits and hindrances of the medium.

Based on how a majority of cities responded to our survey questions, it appears that city staff running city council meetings, those on the front lines of local government and civic engagement, see offering remote public comment as a regular option in addition to in-person comment at government meetings as a net positive for public participation that is generally feasible for cities to implement and sustain.

Our conclusion is supported by survey findings that show most city halls 1) support the use of remote public comment as a regular option at open government meetings and 2) believe the benefits of remote public comment justify the costs in dollar amount and inconvenience. Those benefits, as indicated by a majority of respondents, include: improved city council meetings, increased civic engagement, and ease of access to and public participation in local government affairs.

Survey responses also indicate that remote public comment options are highly feasible; for example, nearly all cities in our survey (94%) integrated remote public comment during the COVID-19 pandemic, most (70%) believe they did so successfully, and most (69%) continue to do so today at city council meetings (in addition to in-person comment) — even though there is no obligation for cities to do so, such as a state of emergency. This suggests that the upfront monetary costs for integrating remote public comment have mostly been borne by cities and that the ongoing monetary costs are feasible, as other survey data supports.

Regarding overall monetary costs, more than three-quarters of cities in our survey (81%) reported either minimal, moderate, or no costs associated with offering remote public comment at city council meetings.

Furthermore, while actual costs for the implementation and overhead of remote public comment may be greater for large cities, as indicated by the evidence in this report, proportional costs relative to city incomes/budgets could prove to be lower in general for large cities than for small and medium-sized cities. Further study is needed to determine if this is the case, but if true, then this would further support our conclusion that costs for remote public comment are reasonable and bearable for cities.

Our conclusion that costs to provide remote public comment are reasonable and feasible for cities is further supported by the finding that 70% of city-respondents in our survey plan to provide hybrid remote public comment options on a regular basis in the foreseeable future. This would not be the case if remote public comment placed unbearable costs upon cities.

For all the conveniences that remote public comment provides to the general public, it also may impose inconveniences for some, such as more uncivil public speakers, longer meetings, and longer wait times to speak. However, most cities in our survey believe the public benefits, such as increased public participation in government, more public opinion, greater diversity in speakers, and ease of public access to public participation in government, outweigh the medium’s irritations or nuisances. Regardless, this is ultimately a values question that city governments must contend with and likely rationalize to the public if they believe that the irritations do not justify the benefits of more public speech and participation in government.

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in the era of remote meetings, and, with it, new ideas about how open government could and should operate. While there are legitimate concerns about replacing in-person comment and access to government officials with remote-only comment and access,¹⁵ it is harder now to make the case in the post-pandemic era that remote public comment as an option *in addition to* in-person public comment at open government meetings is not feasible or desirable.

More study can and should be done on this topic, but we conclude, based on an analysis of our survey findings, that a more open and participatory government is possible — and favorable to and feasible for most cities — with the use of remote public comment as a regular option at city meetings.

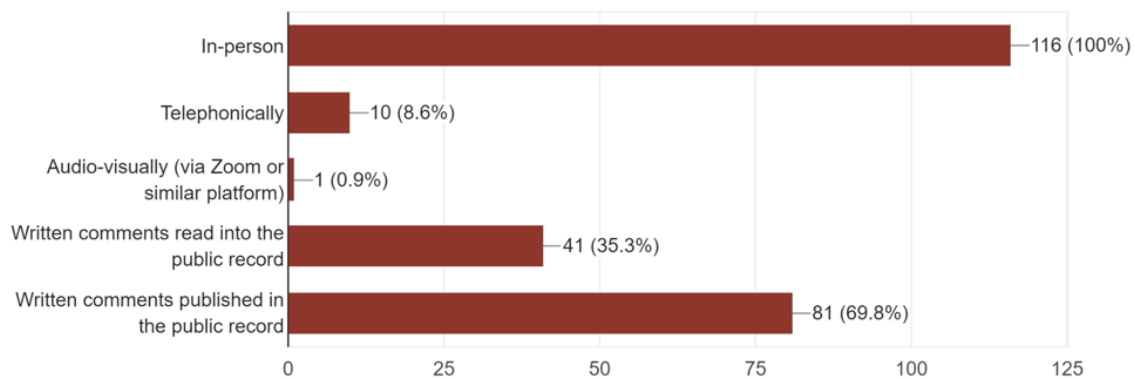
¹⁵ See Los Angeles Times Editorial Board. “Editorial: Don’t Let Local Officials Just Phone It In. They Must Show up to Public Meetings.” Los Angeles Times, 24 Apr. 2023, www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2023-04-24/dont-let-local-officials-just-phone-it-in-they-must-show-up-to-public-meetings; See also Mercury News and East Bay Times Editorial Board. “Editorial: California’s Brown Act Open-Meeting Law under Assault.” The Mercury News, 25 Apr. 2023, www.mercurynews.com/2023/04/25/editorial-an-assault-on-californias-brown-act-open-meeting-law/; See also ---. “Editorial: Stop Two Bay Area Legislators’ Assault on Open Government.” The Mercury News, 11 July 2023, www.mercurynews.com/2023/07/11/editorial-stop-two-bay-area-legislators-assault-on-open-government/; See also Press Democrat Editorial Board. “PD Editorial: Don’t Close the Door on Public Meetings.” Pressdemocrat.com, 2023, www.pressdemocrat.com/article/opinion/pd-editorial-dont-close-the-door-on-public-meetings/; See also ---. “Editorial: It’s Time for California’s Public Officials to Return to Work. In Person.” Los Angeles Times, 11 July 2023, www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2023-07-11/require-public-meetings-defeat-sb-544.

APPENDIX

This appendix presents the raw data and survey questions for each subsection in the *Findings* chapter of this report. All questions, data and graphs appear in this appendix in the order they were analyzed in each subsection of the *Findings*.

1A: Survey Questions, Data, and Graphs — Remote Access Use Prior to, During, and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

Survey Question 8: Please indicate, PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC, the ways that the public could provide comment at council meetings: (Please select all that apply.)



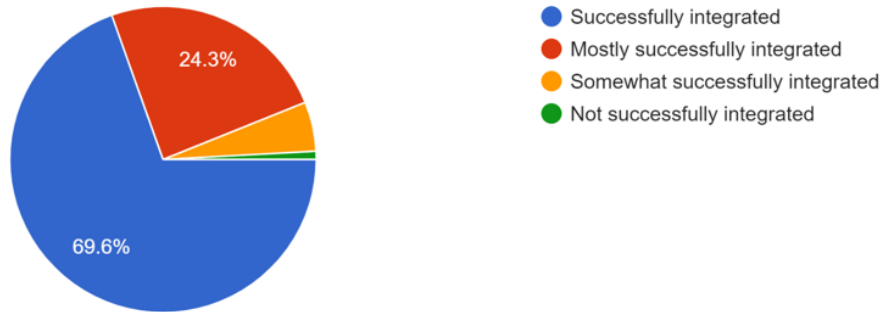
Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 11 out of 116 cities (or 10% of respondents) offered hybrid (telephonic or audio-visual) remote public comment options at city council meetings.

Survey Question 1. Did your city provide remote public comment options for council meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2023)? For example, allowing the public to participate by phone or video?



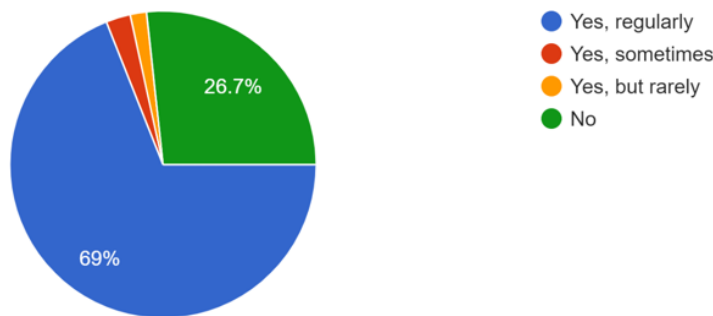
Out of 119 respondent-cities, 109 cities (or 92% of respondents) adopted remote public comment options at city council meetings in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Three cities responded that they already had remote public comment options available at city council meetings prior to the pandemic, and seven cities responded that they did not provide remote public comment options at city council meetings during the pandemic.

Survey Question 14. In your opinion, has or did (if no longer using) your city successfully integrate remote public comment into council meetings?



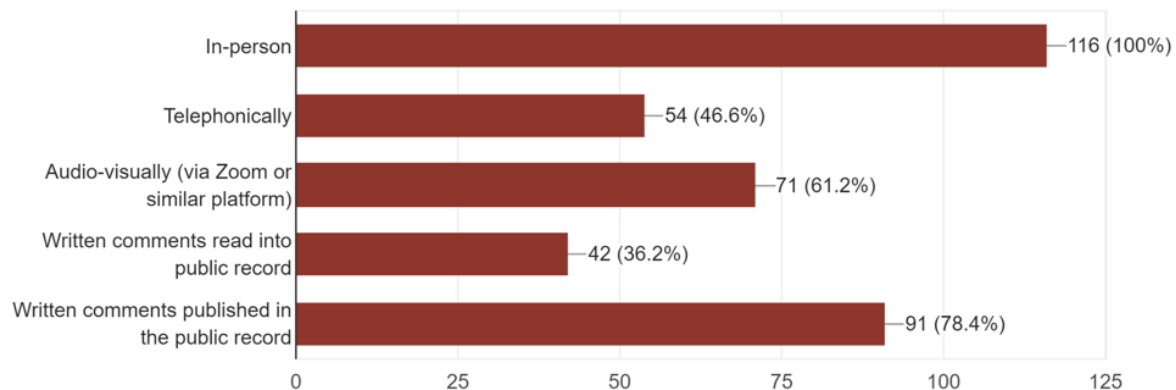
Out of 115 respondent-cities, 80 cities (or 70% of respondents) believe they successfully integrated remote public comment at city council meetings, 28 cities (or 24% of respondents) believe they mostly successfully integrated it, six cities (or 5% of respondents) believe they somewhat successfully integrated it, and one city (or 1% of respondents) believes they unsuccessfully integrated remote public comment at city council meetings.

Survey Question 2. Does your city continue to use remote public comment options for city council meetings in 2023?



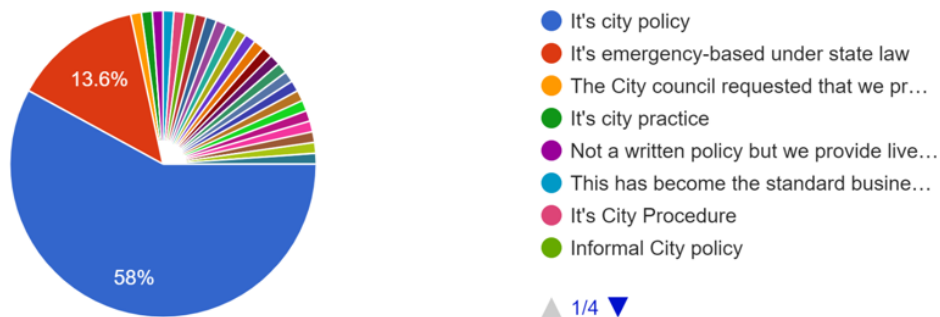
Out of 116 respondent-cities, 80 cities (or 69% of respondents), with an average and median population of 67,503 and 31,490 respectively, continue to regularly use remote public comment options at city council meetings in the post-pandemic era (i.e., after the Governor's pandemic emergency order ended on Feb. 28, 2023); five cities (or 4% of respondents) use remote public comment options on a non-regular basis (three cities use it sometimes and two cities use it rarely); and 31 cities (or 27% of respondents), with an average and median population of 53,515 and 44,557 respectively, no longer use remote public comment options at city council meetings.

Survey Question 6. Please indicate, as of TODAY, the ways that the public may provide comment at council meetings. (Please select all that apply.)



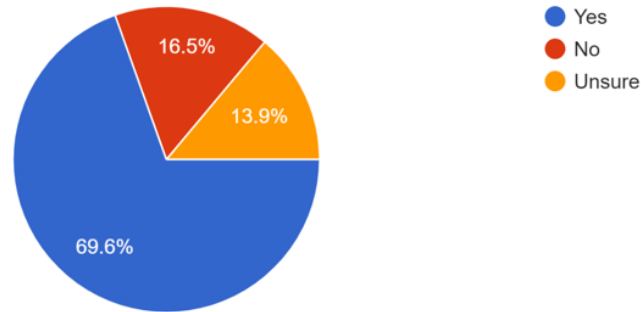
Out of 116 respondent-cities, 71 cities (or 62% of respondents) currently offer audio-visual options for remote public comment at city council meetings, 54 cities (or 47% of respondents) currently offer telephonic options, and 42 cities (or 32% of respondents) currently read written comments into the public record at city council meetings. (All offerings are in addition to in-person public comment at city council meetings.)

Survey Question 3. If you answered yes to the previous question, is the option to participate via remote public comment now city policy, or is it emergency-based only (for example, renewed every 30 days or via official request as is currently allowed under state law [e.g., AB 361 (Rivas) or AB 2449 (Rubio)])?



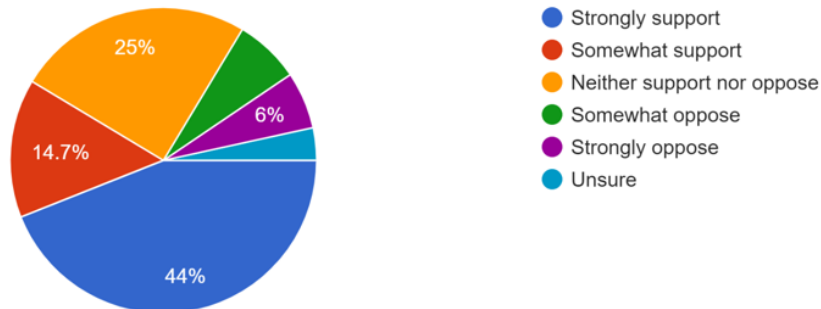
Out of 88 respondent-cities, 51 cities (or 58% of respondents), with an average and median population of 84,961 and 32,690 respectively, have formally adopted remote public comment at city council meetings as city policy since the end of the Governor’s COVID-19 pandemic emergency order. Twelve cities (or 14% of respondents) continue to use remote public comment options at city council meetings on an emergency basis. Of the 25 cities that provided “other” answers, 22 of them (or 25% of the 88 respondent-cities), with an average and median population of 44,533 and 37,266 respectively, noted they have either formally or informally adopted as a policy or a best practice, remote public comment as a regular or permanent option at city council meetings. When accounting for these cities, the total number of cities in our survey that have either formally or informally adopted remote public comment as a policy or best practice at city council meetings in the post-pandemic era is 73 (or 83% of city respondents), with an average and median population of 73,170 and 32,696, respectively.

Survey Question 9. Does your city plan to provide hybrid (meaning both in-person and remote) public comment options regularly in the foreseeable future?



Out of 115 respondent-cities, 80 cities (or 70% of respondents), with an average and median population of 66,598 and 32,366 respectively, plan on providing hybrid remote public comment options on a regular basis in the foreseeable future. Nineteen cities (or 17% of respondents), with an average and median population of 48,274 and 34,924 respectively, do not plan on providing hybrid remote public comment options on a regular basis in the foreseeable future. Sixteen cities (or 14% of respondents) are unsure.

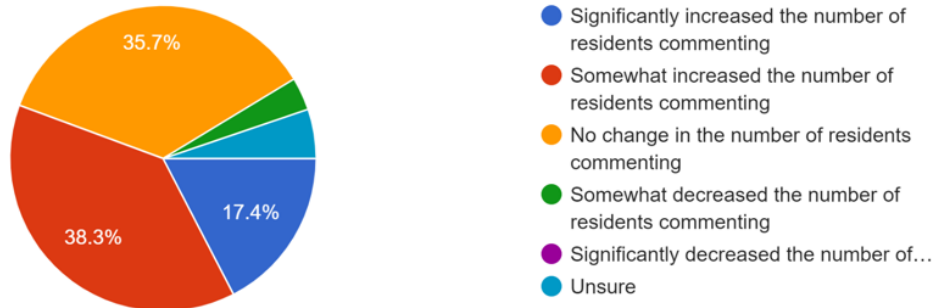
Survey Question 29. Going forward, would you support allowing members of the public to provide public comment at council meetings by phone or streaming video (in addition to in-person options)?



Out of 116 respondent-cities, 51 (or 44% of respondents), with an average and median population of 68,736 and 32,696 respectively, strongly support the continued use of remote public comment at city council meetings; 17 cities (or 15% of respondents), with an average and median population of 58,705 and 33,559 respectively, somewhat support its continued use; 29 cities (or 25% of respondents) are indifferent; eight cities (or 7% of respondents), with an average and median population of 129,733 and 88,665 respectively (note: does not include the population for one anonymous city), somewhat oppose the continued use of remote public comment; and 7 cities (or 6% of respondents); with an average and median population of 63,714 and 56,173 respectively, strongly oppose its continued use. Four cities (or 3% of respondents) are unsure.

1B: Survey Questions, Data, and Graphs — Public Participation with Remote Comment

Survey Question 12. In your opinion, on the whole, has or did (if no longer using) remote public comment increase the number of residents commenting at city council meetings?



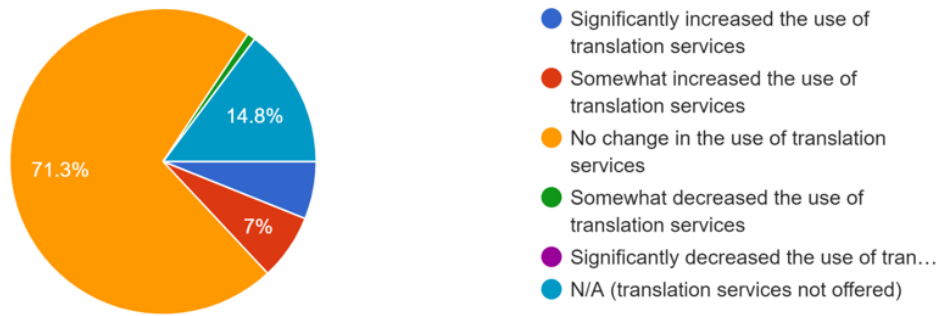
Out of 115 respondent cities, 44 (or 38% of respondents), with an average and median population of 84,999 and 50,302 respectively, believe that remote public comment options significantly increased the number of residents commenting at city council meetings; 20 cities (or 17% of respondents), with an average and median population of 71,198 and 25,989 respectively, believe it somewhat increased the number of residents commenting at city council meetings; 41 cities (or 36% of respondents), with an average and median population of 42,924 and 20,299 respectively, believe there was no change in the number of residents making public comments, four cities (or 4% of respondents) believe that the number of residents commenting slightly decreased, and six cities (or 5% of respondents) were unsure.

Survey Question 16. In your opinion, has or did (if no longer using) remote public comment generally increase the number of public commenters commenting in a language other than English?



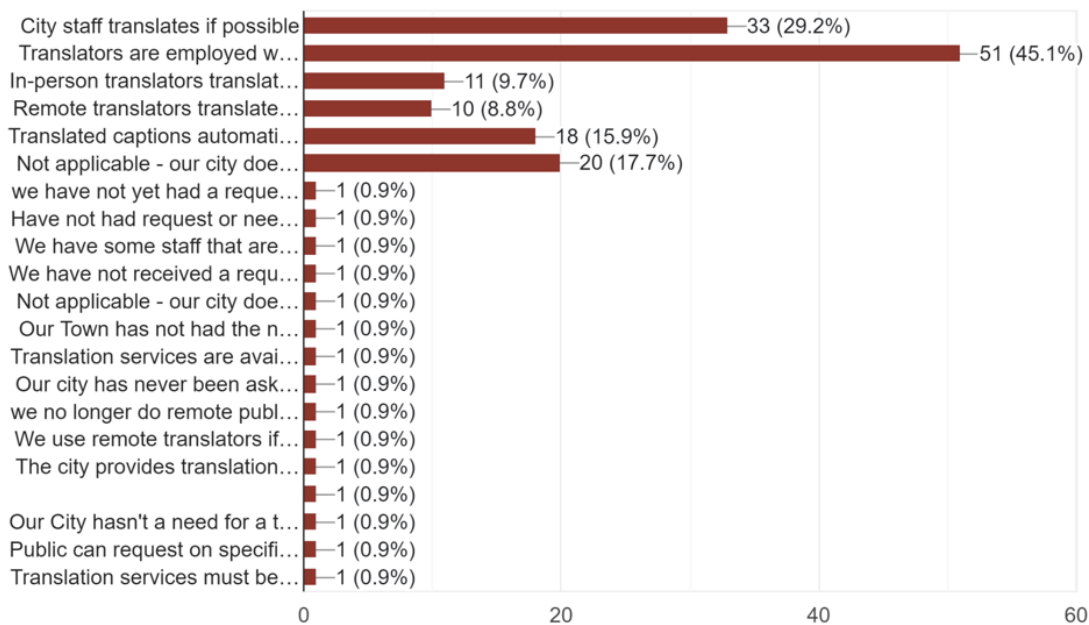
Out of 115 respondent-cities, 94 (or 90% of respondents) saw no change in the number of non-English public comments at city council meetings where remote public comment was an option, eight cities (or 7% of respondents) thought non-English speakers commenting at city council meetings somewhat increased, two cities (or 2% of respondents) thought non-English speakers commenting at city council meetings significantly increased, and one city (or 1% of respondents) thought non-English speakers commenting at city council meetings somewhat decreased when remote public comment was an option.

Survey Question 17. In your opinion, has or did (if no longer using) remote public comment generally increase the City's use of translation services for public meetings?



Out of 115 respondent-cities, 82 cities (or 71% of respondents) saw no change in the use of translation services at city council meetings when using remote public comment, eight cities (or 7% of respondents) thought the use of translation services somewhat increased when using remote public comment, seven cities (or 6% of respondents) thought the use of translation services significantly increased when using remote public comment, and one city (or 1% of respondents) thought the use of translation services significantly decreased when using remote public comment at city council meetings. (17 cities, or 15% of respondents, noted that they do not offer translation services.)

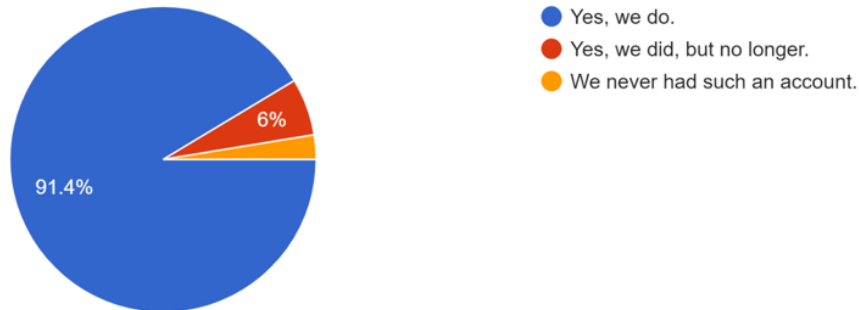
Survey Question 18. How does the City provide translation services for remote public comment? (Please check all that apply.)



Out of 113 respondent-cities, 51 (or 45% of respondents) stated they hire translators upon request for remote public comment, 33 cities (or 29% of respondents) use city staff, 18 cities (or 16% of respondents) rely on the automatic closed-caption translation of a remote platform, 11 cities (or 10% of respondents) have regular in-person translators, 10 cities (or 9% of respondents) use remote translators, and 20 cities (or 18% of respondents) do not offer translation services. All other respondents gave different answers.

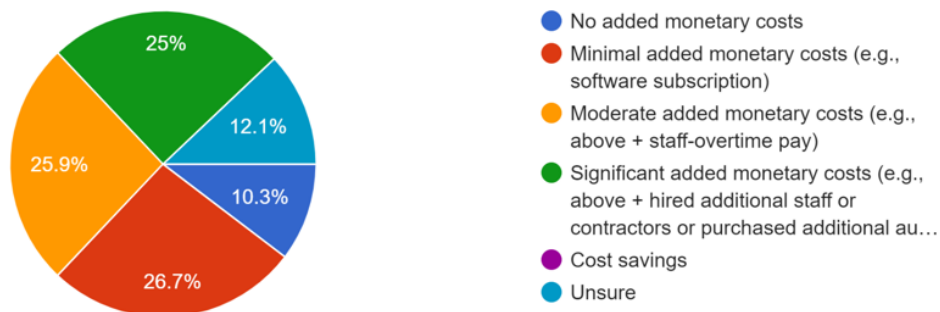
1C: Survey Questions, Data, and Graphs — Costs

Survey Question 4. Does or did (if no longer using) your city have a Zoom or Granicus account (or similar audio-visual software account for public meetings)?



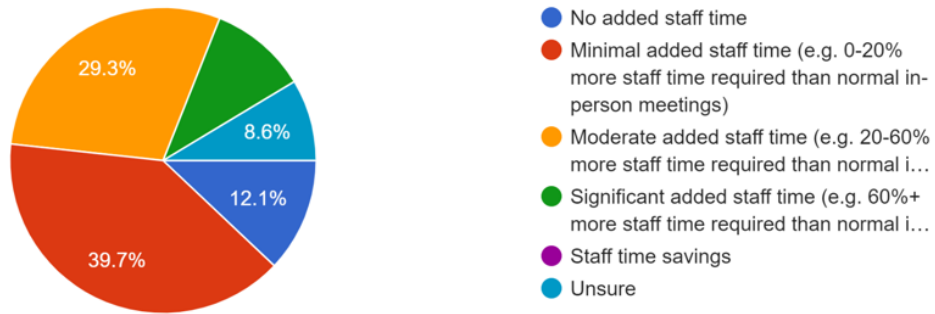
Out of 116 respondent-cities, 106 cities (or 91% of respondents) have a Zoom, Granicus, or similar audio-visual remote-meeting platform account, seven cities (or 6% of respondents) had but no longer have such an account, and three cities (or 3% of respondents) never had such an account.

Survey Question 19. To the extent possible, please estimate, in general terms, any costs in dollars to provide remote public comment to city council meetings.



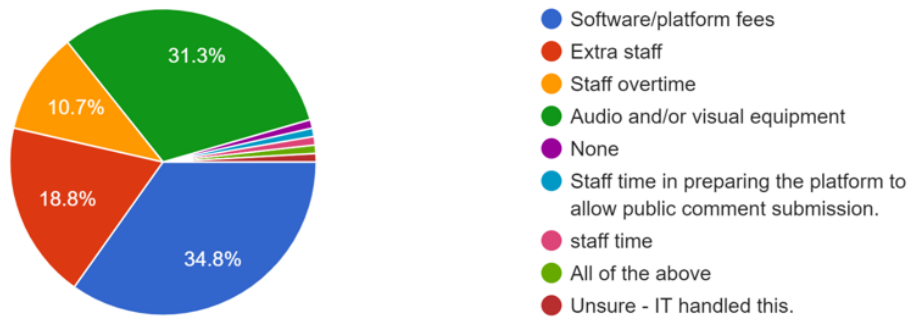
Out of 116 respondent-cities, 29 cities (or 25% of respondents), with an average and median population of 63,206 and 41,542 respectively, reported significant monetary costs associated with remote public comment; 30 cities (or 26% of respondents) with an average and median population of 61,903 and 33,559 respectively, reported moderate monetary costs, 31 cities (or 27% of respondents) with an average and median population of 53,714 and 25,962 respectively, reported minimal monetary costs, and 12 cities (or 10% of respondents) with an average and median population of 44,350 and 30,964 respectively, reported no added monetary costs associated with remote public comment offered at city council meetings.

Survey Question 20. To the extent possible, please estimate, in general terms, any costs in staff time to provide remote public comment to city council meetings.



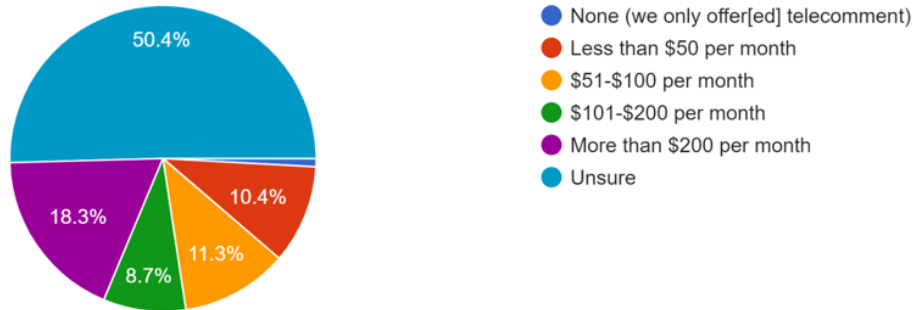
Out of 116 respondent-cities, 46 cities (or 40% of respondents), with an average and median population of 46,258 and 22,181 respectively, reported minimal (or less than 20%) added staff time; 34 cities (or 29% of respondents), with an average and median population of 99,689 and 51,163 respectively, reported moderate (or 20-60%) added staff time; while 12 cities (or 10% of respondents), with an average and median population of 78,631 and 42,935 respectively, reported significant (or at least 60%) added staff time; 14 cities (or 12% of respondents), with an average and median population of 26,087 and 12,343 respectively, reported *no* added staff time; and ten cities (or 9% of respondents) were unsure how much additional staff time was required as a result of remote public comment at city council meetings.

Survey Question 21. What is or was (if no longer using) the greatest cost involved in using remote public comment?



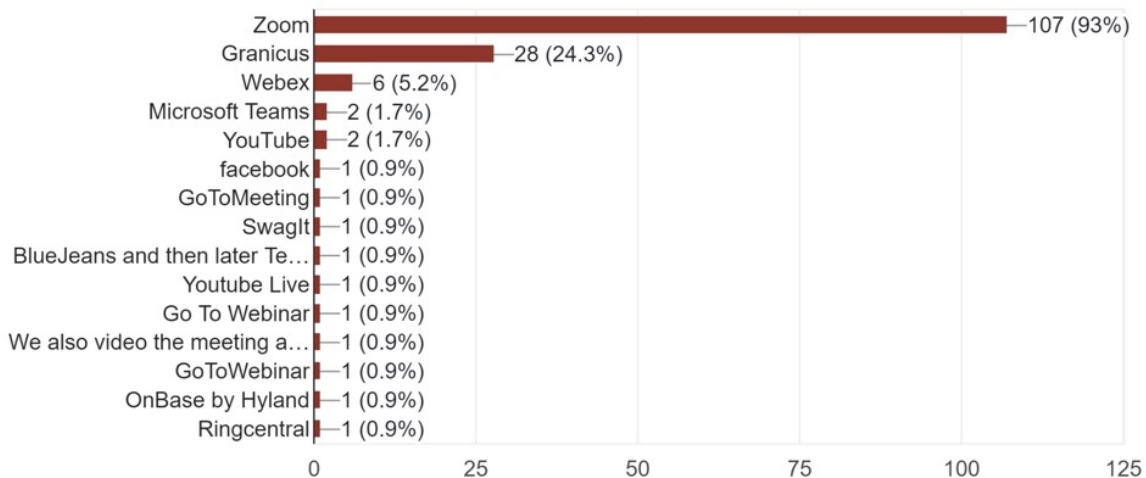
Out of 112 respondent-cities, 39 cities (or 35% of respondents) reported that *software/platform fees* were the greatest costs for remote public comment, 35 cities (or 31% of respondents) reported that audio and/or visual equipment was the greatest cost, 21 cities (or 19% of respondents) reported that extra staff was the greatest cost, and 12 cities (or 11% of respondents) reported that staff overtime was the greatest cost associated with remote public comment at city council meetings. Five cities (or 5% of respondents) gave different answers.

Survey Question 22. To the best of your knowledge, what is or was (if no longer using) the monthly software/platform cost for using remote public comment at City meetings?



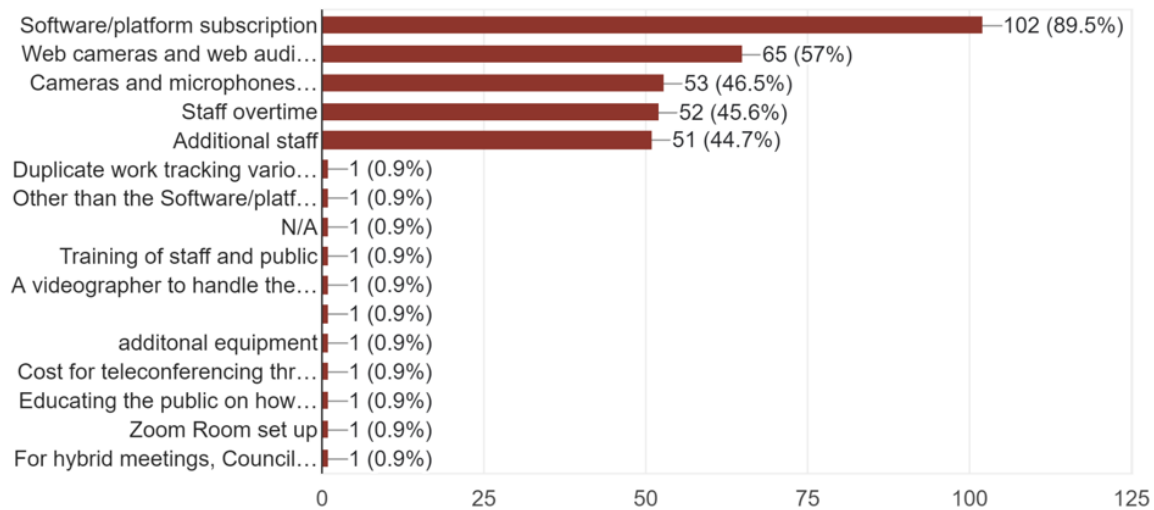
Out of 115 respondent-cities, 58 cities (or 50% of respondents) were unsure of their city’s remote meeting platform costs, 21 cities (or 18% of respondents) reported paying platform fees of over \$200 per month, 10 cities (or 9% of respondents) reported paying between \$101-\$200 in platform fees per month, 13 cities (or 11% of respondents) reported paying between \$51-\$100 in platform fees per month, 12 cities (or 10% of respondents) reported paying less than \$50 per month in platform fees to provide remote public comment at city council meetings. One city reported paying no platform fees.

Survey Question 5. If your city does or did have an audio-visual software account for public meetings, which platform was used? (Please select all that apply.)



Out of 115 respondent-cities, 107 cities (or 93% of respondents) have or had a Zoom account, 28 cities (or 24% of respondents) have or had a Granicus account, six cities (or 5% of respondents) have or had a Webex account, 14 cities reporting using various other audio-visual platforms for open public meetings.

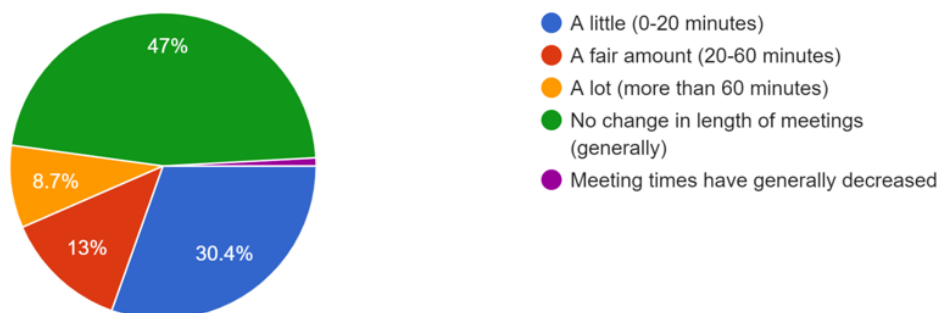
Survey Question 25. What has or did (if no longer using) offering remote public comment entail for your council meetings? (Please select all that apply.)



Out of 114 respondent-cities, 102 cities (or 90% of respondents) said software/platform subscription (e.g., Zoom) was needed to offer remote public comment at city council meetings, 65 cities (or 57% of respondents) said web cameras and web audio equipment was needed, 53 cities (or 47% of respondents) said non-web-based cameras and microphones were needed, 52 cities (or 46% of respondents) said staff overtime was needed, and 51 cities (or 45% of respondents) said extra staff were required to implement remote public comment at city council meetings. 11 cities (or 11% of respondents) gave different answers.

1D: Survey Questions, Data, and Graphs – Potential Hindrances

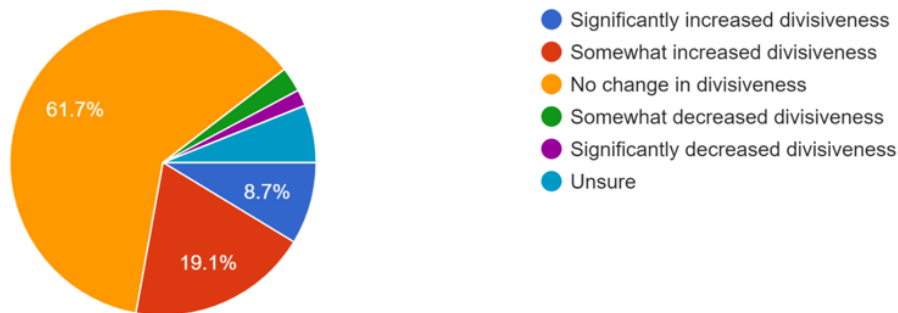
Survey Question 15. In your opinion, remote public comment has or did (if no longer using) generally increase the length of an average council meeting by...



Out of 115 respondent-cities, 54 cities (or 47% of respondents), with an average and median population of 51,234 and 22,359 respectively, reported that remote public comment generally did not increase the length of city council meetings; 35 cities (or 30% of respondents), with an average and median population of 49,547 and 28,366 respectively, reported that remote public comment generally increased the length of city council meetings by 0-20 minutes; 15 cities (or 13% of respondents), with

an average and median population of 146,498 and 84,034 respectively, reported that remote public comment generally increased the length of at city council meetings by 20-60 minutes; nine cities (or 9% of respondents), with an average and median population of 57,689 and 39,253 respectively, reported that remote public comment generally increased the length of city council meetings by more than 60 minutes; and one city (or 1% of respondents) reported that city council meeting times had generally decreased with the use of remote public comment.

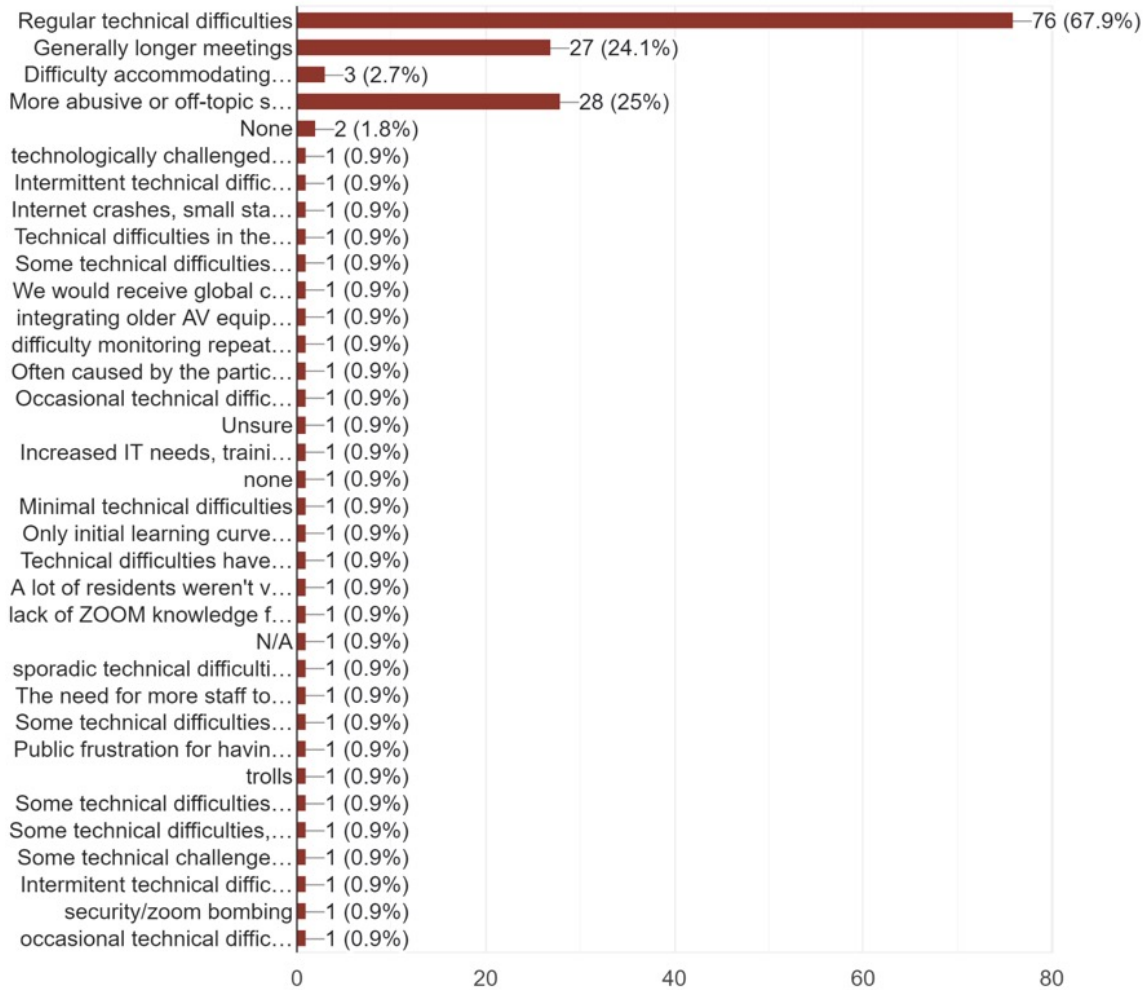
Survey Question 13. In your opinion, taking into account that some meetings will be more contentious than others because of agenda items, has or did (if no longer using) remote public comment alone generally increase or decrease the divisiveness of public meetings (where divisiveness means swearing, yelling, personal attacks, or similar behavior during public comments)?



Out of 115 respondent-cities, 71 cities (or 62% of respondents), with an average and median population of 56,238 and 25,242 respectively, reported no change in the divisiveness of open public meetings due to the use of remote public comment (where divisiveness means swearing, yelling, personal attacks, or similar behavior during public comments); 22 cities (or 19% of respondents), with an average and median population of 89,937 and 38,716 respectively, reported somewhat increased divisiveness; 10 cities (or 9% of respondents), with an average and median population of 66,201 and 40,228 respectively, reported significantly increased divisiveness; three cities (or 3% of respondents) reported somewhat decreased divisiveness, two cities (or 2% of respondents) reported significantly decreased divisiveness; and seven cities (or 6% of respondents) were unsure.

Survey Question 26. What challenges have or did (if no longer using) you encounter when using remote public comment? (Please select all that apply.)

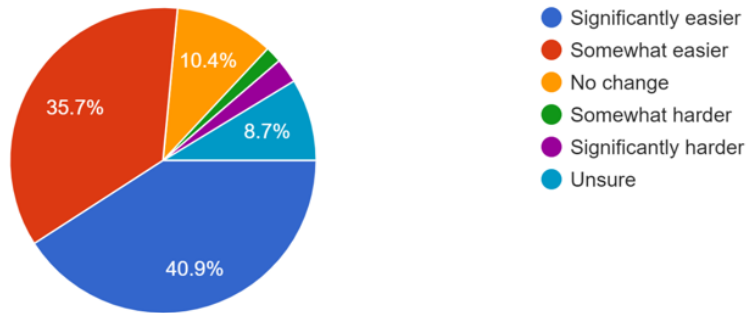
Out of 112 respondent cities, 76 cities (or 68% of respondents) identified “regular technical difficulties”



as a hindrance when offering remote public comment at city council meetings, 28 cities (or 25% of respondents) identified “more abusive or off-topic speakers than in-person” as a hindrance, 27 cities (or 24% of respondents) identified “generally longer meetings” as a hindrance, three cities (or 3% of respondents) identified “difficulty in accommodating non-English speakers” as a hindrance, two cities (or 2% of respondents) reported no hindrances, and 29 cities (or 26% of respondents) each identified other hindrances when using remote public comment at city council meetings.

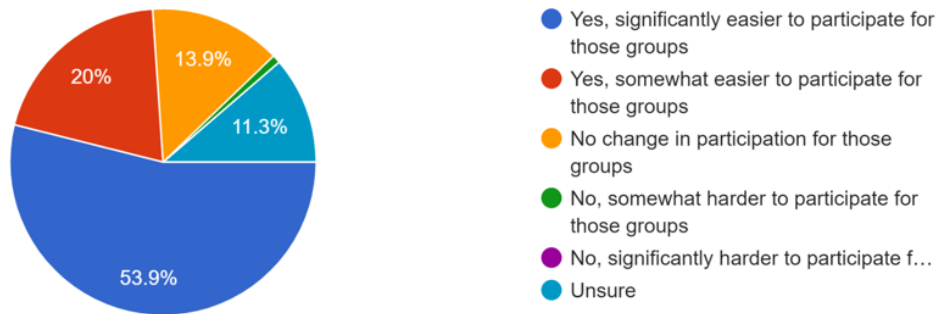
1E: Survey Questions, Data, and Graphs — Potential Benefits

Survey Question 10. In your opinion, compared with solely in-person meetings, has or did (if no longer using) remote public comment make it easier or harder for all members of the public to participate in council meetings?



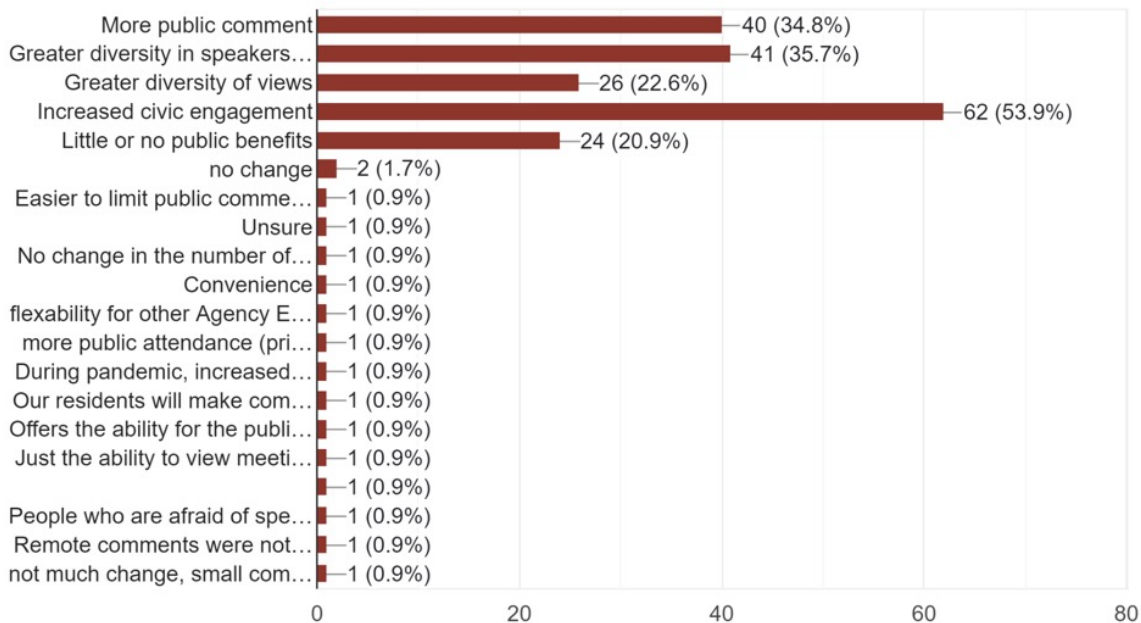
Out of 115 respondent-cities, 47 cities (or 41% of respondents), with an average and median population of 93,270 and 37,266 respectively, believe that remote public comment makes it *significantly easier* for the public to participate in city council meetings; 41 cities (or 36% of respondents), with an average and median population of 42,711 and 31,490 respectively, believe that remote public comment makes it *somewhat easier* to participate; 12 cities (or 10% of respondents) believe that remote public comment *does not make it easier or harder* to participate; 10 cities (or 9% of respondents) are *unsure*; three cities (or 3% of respondents), with populations of 95,558 and 45,532 respectively (the other city is anonymous), believe that remote public comment makes it *significantly harder* to participate; and two cities (or 2% of respondents), with populations of 39,501 and 1,519 respectively, believe that remote public comment makes it *somewhat harder* for the public to participate in city council meetings.

Survey Question 11. In your opinion, on the whole, has or did (if no longer using) remote public comment allow people with work or childcare obligations, or who are unable to easily travel to city hall, to more easily participate in City meetings?



Out of 115 respondent-cities, 62 cities (or 54% of respondents), with an average and median population of 81,948 and 35,413 respectively, believe that remote public comment made it *significantly easier* for those with work, childcare, transportation, and/or physical constraints to participate in city meetings; 23 cities (or 20% of respondents), with an average and median population of 53,075 and 45,532 respectively, believe that remote public comment made it *somewhat easier* for those folks; 16 cities (or 14% of respondents), with an average and median population of 29,708 and 17,272 respectively, believe that remote public comment *did not make it easier or harder* for those folks; 13 cities (or 11% of respondents), with an average and median population of 38,154 and 26,290 respectively, were *unsure*; and one city (or 1% of respondents), with a population of 13,696 residents, believes that remote public comment made it *somewhat harder* for those with work, childcare, transportation, and/or physical constraints to participate in city meetings.

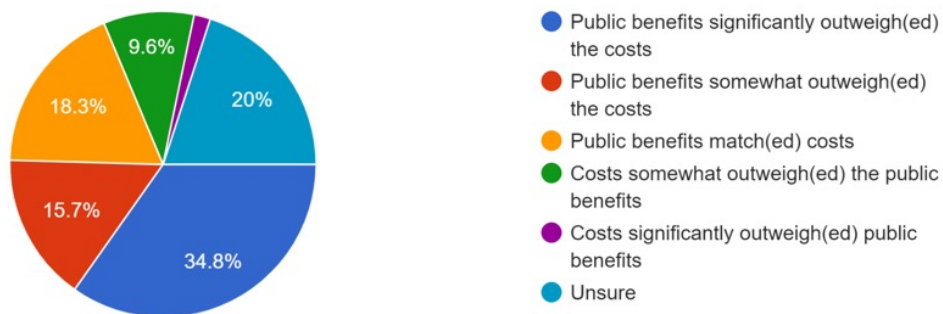
Survey Question 23. In general, what benefits have you observed when using remote public comment? (Please select all that apply.)



Out of 115 respondent-cities, 62 cities (or 54% of respondents) believe that remote public comment resulted in “increased civic engagement” in city government, 41 cities (or 36% of respondents) believe that remote public comment resulted in “greater diversity in speakers” at city council meetings, 40 cities (or 35% of respondents) believe that remote public comment resulted in “more public comment” at city council meetings, 26 cities (or 23% of respondents) believe that remote public comment resulted in “greater diversity of public views” at city council meetings, 24 cities (or 21% of respondents) believe that remote public comment resulted in “little or no public benefits,” two cities (or 2% of respondents) believe that remote public comment did not affect the status quo, and 14 cities (or 13% of respondents) provided unique answers.

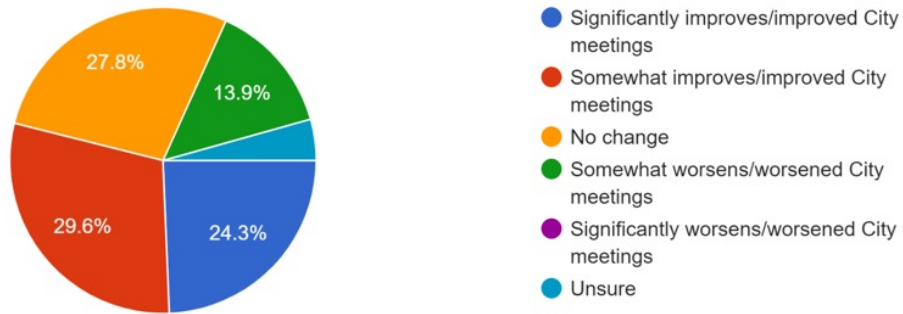
1F: Survey Questions, Data, and Graphs – Boon or Burden (benefits vs. costs and hindrances)

Survey Question 24. In your opinion, does or did (if no longer using) an increase in public participation and/or public convenience as a result of offering remote public comment at City meetings outweigh the costs in dollar amount and staff time?



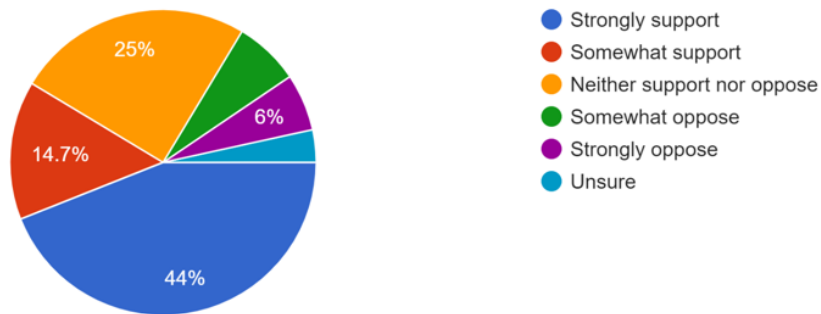
Out of 115 respondent-cities, 40 cities (or 35% of respondents), with an average and median population of 67,912 and 35,413 respectively, believe that the *public benefits* of remote public comment (e.g., public convenience and increased public participation) *significantly outweigh the costs* in dollar amount and staff time associated with remote public comment; 18 cities (or 16% of respondents), with an average and median population of 121,197 and 44,903 respectively, believe that the *public benefits* of remote public comment *somewhat outweigh its costs*; 21 cities (or 18% of respondents), with an average and median population of 36,160 and 17,272 respectively, believe that the *public benefits* of remote public comment *match its costs*; 11 cities (or 10% of respondents), with an average and median population of 44,540 and 24,053 respectively (one city’s population is absent because of anonymity), believe that the *costs* of remote public comment *somewhat outweigh its benefits*; two cities (or 2% of respondents), with populations of 1,518 and 25,242 respectively, believe that the *costs* of remote public comment *significantly outweigh its benefits*. The rest of the cities who answered the question (23 cities or 23% of respondents) were *unsure*.

Survey Question 27. Overall, in your opinion, is or was (if no longer using) remote public comment a benefit or hindrance to conducting city meetings?



Out of 115 cities, 28 cities (or 28% of respondents), with an average and median population of 74,529 and 32,528 respectively, believe that remote public comment *significantly improved* city meetings; 34 cities (or 30% of respondents), with an average and median population of 69,371 and 38,571 respectively, believe that remote public comment *somewhat improved* city meetings; 16 cities, (or 14% of respondents), with an average and median population of 62,426 and 34,924 respectively, believe that remote public comment *somewhat worsened* city meetings; 32 cities (or 28% of respondents), with an average and median population of 52,058 and 25,391 respectively, believe that remote public comment did *not change the quality* of city meetings; Five cities (or 4% of respondents) were *unsure*. (No cities believed that remote public comment *significantly worsened* city meetings.)

Survey Question 29. Going forward, would you support allowing members of the public to provide public comment at council meetings by phone or streaming video (in addition to in-person options)?



Out of 116 respondent-cities, 51 cities (or 44% of respondents), with an average and median population of 68,736 and 32,696 respectively, *strongly support* the future use of remote public comment at city council meetings as an option in addition to in-person comment; 17 cities (or 15% of respondents) *somewhat support* remote public comment's future use; 33 cities (or 28% of respondents) *neither support or oppose* remote public comment's future use; eight cities (or 7% of respondents), with an average and median population of 129,733 and 88,665 respectively (one city's population is absent because of anonymity), *somewhat oppose* remote public comment's future use; seven cities (or 6% of respondents), with an average and median population of 63,714 and 56,173 respectively, *strongly oppose* the future use of remote public comment at city council meetings as an option in addition to in-person comment; and four cities (or 3% of respondents) are *unsure*.



California

**Common
Cause**

430 S. Garfield Ave.
Suite 418
Alhambra CA 91801