



## Evidence-Based Practices for Supporting Productive Civic Engagement in Nebraska

October 2023

Developing mechanisms that allow for constituents to engage in productive, respectful interactions with state government can be a complex process. But the rewards—to the public and to legislators—are ample. The research-informed practices highlighted below may be used to increase trust in government, make for more responsive and efficient policymaking, and foster a deeper understanding of what citizens actually want and what legislators actually do.

### **Opportunities for public comments can make constituents feel heard, and spur legislators to thoughtfully explain their stances**

Daniel Scheller, Texas Tech University (formerly University of Nebraska Omaha)

Constituents want to be able to see that their representatives have heard and are responding to their concerns. And in-process research being conducted in Omaha contains evidence that elected officials in our state are responding to Nebraskans' public comments; findings so far indicate that even when legislators have made up their minds, electronically submitted or in-person public comments ([such as those listed in Item 11](#) of a recent council meeting) have led Omaha councilmembers to engage in additional research or outreach to better inform the public of why they are voting in a particular manner. In this way, public comments are serving their intended purpose, and elected officials who respond to public comments might consider various ways of making those responses more legible to their constituents.

### **Public fora for citizen input can increase understanding of constituents' preferences and pave the way for future legislative success**

Geoff Lorenz, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Identifying in advance the level of public support that a given bill will have, and among whom, is an important challenge in the legislative process. This issue can be mitigated by beginning the legislative process with a broad, convenient public forum, e.g., an open committee hearing. Hearings not only allow committee members to hear expert testimony, but also help committee leaders build support for legislation across a [wide range of constituents](#), including those representing a variety of industries, social causes, and communities.

Demonstrating this support base [makes bills easier to pass out of committee](#) as well as the parent chamber.

This is especially true in legislatures like Nebraska's where [polarization has increased markedly](#) in recent years.

### **Participatory budgeting programs can increase community engagement in government, particularly for otherwise marginalized groups**

Ron Hayduk, San Francisco State University

Making government more accessible and engaging makes government more responsive and efficient, and [participatory budgeting programs](#) (PB) use effective institutional designs and processes that have a proven track record to increase community engagement in government.

## **Supporting Productive Civic Engagement in Nebraska**

Participatory budgeting, which allows everyday people to deliberate on public budget allocations alongside their legislators, can employ [several intentional strategies designed to engage groups](#) that traditionally may not have had empowering interactions with state government. PB meetings can bring government functioning into closer proximity to where constituents live, in schools, libraries, senior centers, and community-based organizations—“trusted” and convenient spaces that [make participation easy and welcoming](#). Many PB processes can be made virtual, use bilingual materials and/or interpreters, and even offer childcare and food to aid in accessibility. State governments can share promotion and management of PB programs with community-based organizations, which have long been credited with helping to introduce marginalized constituencies to political stimuli that [foster their longer-term participation](#).

### **Citizens’ Initiative Reviews can empower constituents to combat misinformation and highlight the impact of referenda and initiatives on their communities**

John Gastil, Pennsylvania State University

In states like Nebraska, which use referenda and initiatives, voters can drown in misinformation and biased campaign ads. To counter this problem, Oregon passed a state law in 2011 establishing the [Citizens' Initiative Review](#). The Review authorizes a randomly selected citizen body to deliberate on a ballot measure, then write a summary Citizens' Statement for the official voters' pamphlet. Ten years of research shows that [these panels work well](#), sifting through arguments, avoiding biases, and countering misleading claims. A majority of Oregon voters become aware of these Reviews when they occur, with most finding it quite useful when weighing the issues. Nebraska could adopt this same approach, while improving on deficiencies in the Oregon legislation that created the Review.

### **Encouraging constituents to engage through nonprofits that follow best practices for advocacy work can channel Nebraskans’ energies in productive ways**

Jodi Benenson, University of Nebraska Omaha

The [2018 Nebraska Nonprofit Advocacy survey](#) heard from nonprofit leaders and policymakers (elected and non-elected officials) in the Nebraska Legislature to learn more about their thoughts on nonprofit advocacy in the state, and found that policymakers rated advocacy activities such as lobbying in person, testifying at hearings, working and meeting with government, and responding to their requests for information to be the most likely to influence public policy, in comparison to activities like filing legal briefs or discussing grant opportunities. Surveyed policymakers also reported that individual policy experts, direct service providers, Executive Directors, professional staff, and *individual members or clients* were the most effective figures in influencing public policy. When Nebraskans are more informed and aware of these practices, the more productive they can be in participating in the policy process.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT LISSETTE ALIAGA LINARES ([LALIAGALINARES@UNOMAHA.EDU](mailto:LALIAGALINARES@UNOMAHA.EDU)).**

**THE SCHOLARS WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS MEMO DID SO IN THEIR PERSONAL CAPACITY. THE VIEWS EXPRESSED ARE THEIR OWN AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THOSE OF THEIR RESPECTIVE INSTITUTIONS OR OF THE SCHOLARS STRATEGY NETWORK OR THE NEBRASKA SCHOLARS STRATEGY NETWORK.**