# A Community Develops Data Resources with Congress

## What is Data in Congress?

Facts, information and evidence for use in decision making that is represented in a form suitable for processing by computer (databases are **structured data**). The House Clerk's criteria for government data are: accessible, accurate, complete, described, free, machine readable, permanent, searchable, timely and usable. From video to social media to PDFs, most congressional data is **unstructured** and not searchable. The SIDE Event data featured in this report is **semi-structured,** i.e. its organization varies from tags, keywords and metadata to conventional handwritten hard copy. See our publication Congressional Data, Redefined for an in-depth discussion on this topic.



A visual representation of unstructured, semi-structured and structured data. Modernizing Congress: Bringing Democracy into the 21st Century.

## Why Data Resources for Congress?

+ Creates capacity for accountability
+ Builds new muscles for tech, data and diverse forms of testimony for the record I.e. images, sound, art.
+ Allows members to co-create with constituents
+ Enriches local knowledge resources for lawmaking
+ Expands civic voice beyond advocacy and lobbying

### Contributing Authors



**Lorelei Kelly**
Fellow

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Congress is building a digital layer to process data in lawmaking. Image credit: Modernizing Congress Bringing Democracy into the 21st Century.

# ABOUT

This publication utilizes our Shape > Structure > Share roadmap to digital public infrastructure. We illustrate this roadmap through two case examples of a member-convened Stakeholders, Individuals, Data, and Evidence (SIDE) Event. One event was in person and one hybrid ( a blend of in person and online). These case examples examine how a congressional staffer worked collaboratively with universities, organizations, and individuals to **shape** an information gathering process.  The staffer then **structured** the information to be compatible with the input formatting methods of Congress. Finally, the congressional office **shared** the information through congressional dissemination channels and with the public through the news media.  We envision this framework as a positive, forward-moving cycle in a modern, representative democracy. The framework for SIDE events originated in the technology task force recommendations supporting the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.

The SIDE Event model bolsters traditional gatherings with a modern method; it is not a dramatic departure from conventional member-led gatherings. SIDE events make use of technology available to all House and Senate members.  Timing is important. We are introducing this model while Congress builds a digital layer on top of centuries old, paper based processes.  A SIDE event can be virtual or hybrid, but the key outcome is tagged and formatted public witness testimony to be submitted by the member into the official record of Congress. This formatted testimony provides semi- structured data to inform  lawmaking. SIDE Events build muscles for the increasingly machine readable workflow of Congress. They also increase member-authenticated local voice as a legislative resource. Ideally, civic engagements like SIDE Events will become a routine form of inclusive lawmaking.

## What Has Congress Done So Far?

The "eHopper," a platform created by the House Clerk in 2020 that facilitates the electronic submission of certain legislative documents, is a companion to the vintage wooden box on the House floor. It is an example of the new digital layer built on top of a centuries old paper-based system.



The box, which is still used today, is called the "Hopper." Image Credit: popvox.org

## How-To

This publication is also a "how to" guide. You will learn how those with different types of knowledge — both lived experience and professional expertise — contributed through the SIDE Event to active legislation: the PFAS Action Act of 2021 (PFAS is a type of chemical pollution) and the 21st Century Dams Act.

These case examples feature policy-adjacent communities, a concept we created to describe knowledgeable individuals who come together as a supportive community to help guide and determine present and future policy decisions. These communities are also critical to implementing policy, because–as in the case of constituents– their lives will be impacted depending on whether or not regulations are effective. These communities are critical for accountability in lawmaking. They are the eyes and ears for future oversight, monitoring and policy evaluation. The concept of policy adjacent communities expands the notion of civic participation to communities as trusted relationship infrastructure, a vital mutual aid foundation for resilient democratic systems.

## Data Collection and Lawmaking

Modern methods of data collection in the lawmaking process have accelerated because of institutional adaptations in the House of Representatives, including remote teleconferencing and electronic document submission. In the future, Congress will have a more searchable record. Structured input and machine readable data will increasingly be the operational norm. The institution is taking first steps. The Modernization Committee held a hearing on data, and the House Clerk announced its intention to adopt standardized document formats. These efforts are complemented by the Congressional Data Task Force and civil society. To be sure, defining data in a way that complements the United States' open and representative legislative system is a critical and ongoing conversation.

## Who Are We?

At the Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation at Georgetown University, we know that the meaningful inclusion of policy-adjacent communities is a constructive way to ameliorate the crisis of democratic legitimacy in American society. These communities offer authentic perspectives that are different from typical experts because they are based on local insights and lived expertise. Individuals with this sort of public serving information make up a deep reservoir of civic voice that government leaders should tap into.

The information and photos in this case example were gathered and presented by Lorelei Kelly, a fellow at the Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation at Georgetown University. It was edited by Katie Hawkinson. The Beeck Center gratefully acknowledges the efforts and insights of the organizations, individuals, and government agencies that have been working in this ecosystem for years.

# Introduction: Shape > Structure > Share



These case examples are based on a collaboration between congressional district staff and organizations and individuals with relevant knowledge. Working together, they provided insights and expertise in the flow of lawmaking to benefit two pieces of legislation: the PFAS Action Act of 2021 and the 21st Century Dams Act.

The Shape > Structure > Share framework provides a way to think about governing, where communities act as contributors with power and agency over institutions that affect them.

In today's Congress, nearly half of all congressional staff are located in districts (compared with 22.5% in 1972). Congress' human capacity is scattered across the U.S., in 900+ district offices. These offices serve as networked connection points for a modern system of national governance, as well as places for experimentation, data gathering, and collaboration.

We are publishing these case examples using the Shape > Structure > Share roadmap to illustrate their replicable components. In these cases, policy adjacent communities helped Members of Congress **shape** legislation during the lawmaking process. Congressional staff worked to **structure** the community contributions in a format compatible with the information gathering and "for the record" archiving methods of Congress. Then, the Member **shared** this collaborative output through congressional channels, including the official record and websites. Local media also shared information about the community participation.

This is also a "how-to" guide. We encourage members of Congress, their staff, and committees to refer to these case examples to include local input while imagining and creating technology that strengthens democracy. In this guide, the New Hampshire offices of Representative Ann Kuster (NH02) and Chris Pappas (NH01) convened SIDE Events with policy adjacent communities that included universities, private and public sector experts, state representatives and local advocates.

This guide contains information gathered from two SIDE Events. The first occurred in a traditional, in person setting. The second was hybrid and took place during the COVID-19 pandemic with public health restrictions in place, and was organized outside, in person, and supplemented by online tools. Congressional staffers designed both SIDE Events as a feedback and revision method to gather and share community insights on a bill during the lawmaking process.

## SHAPE

Representatives in Congress have long desired a broader variety of methods to gather useful feedback from the communities they serve. They know that local voices can contribute valuable data and lived expertise to the lawmaking process. Every congressional district in the United States is unique, including the communications methods between local leaders and the citizens they serve. For instance, New Hampshire has a long tradition of  communities meeting to make collective decisions through Town Meetings, a system that dates back hundreds of years to the state's colonial roots.



The 21st Century Dams Act  hybrid SIDE Event was held outdoors in keeping with health restrictions.  Photo Ann Kuster Staff — audio here.

Representative Ann Kuster (NH02) is a leading voice in Congress on environmental safety and health. She and delegation colleague Representative Chris Pappas (NH01) organized a gathering to hear from locals on the issue of groundwater contamination, the central focus of a PFAS regulation bill moving through Congress. At the PFAS Event, staff collected participant contributions in standardized, hard copy format.

The second use case describes a hybrid gathering on the 21st Century Dams Act, for which Rep. Kuster created an in-person meeting located outside. The Dams Act gathering included a digital template to expand the opportunity to contribute tagged and structured feedback from the attending participants.

Both events made use of the SIDE framework. Information gained from SIDE Events can be used to share ideas, refine a bill in motion or to solicit input from a broader audience.  A key outcome with both events was to gather New Hampshire focused, public witness testimony in a standardized format which the Members could then enter into Congress' official record.



This photo shows the room arrangement for the  PFAS  SIDE Event in New Hampshire. Photo courtesy of Rep. Ann Kuster staff.

1. Kuster's district staffer Charlotte Harris was familiar with content moderation methods through prior experience as a student at University of New Hampshire, the headquarters of NH Listens, a civic engagement initiative. Members Kuster, Pappas and their staff had longstanding relationships with communities who had dedicated time and resources shaping the public discourse on PFAS. Here is a timeline for context.

2. For the first event, Charlotte reached out to the policy adjacent communities to organize a gathering on PFAS in a Town Meeting space. Here is Charlotte's Run of Show and participant list for the PFAS gathering. For the hybrid gathering on dams, Charlotte worked with local organizations plus a collaborative process called Uncommon Dialogue, an ongoing process organized by the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment, which brings public and private sector leaders and researchers together to develop practical solutions to pressing sustainability challenges. Here is the Run of Show and video of the dams event.

## STRUCTURE

The SIDE Event creates a menu of options for members to deliberate with policy adjacent communities. It was inspired by the civic engagement agenda of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.  It is a compromise between an open mic town hall and rule-restrictive committee field hearing. This method is adaptable, and could be called a SIDE hearing, roundtable, or listening session.

The key feature of the SIDE Event structure is that members and staff design the venue–both the physical space and who participates. Participation is  limited to ensure quality of discussion. Members and staff know who is dedicated to an issue and productive in good faith efforts to find solutions. Member curation does two things at once; it respects the prerogative of the institution and expands access to participation.



District staffer Charlotte Harris on a visit to DC.  L. Kelly photo

## SHARE

A key outcome of the SIDE Event is to create a permanent, official record of district-based, public witness testimony.  Only Members can enter information into the official record of Congress.  House Members may enter SIDE testimony into committee repositories or as extension of remarks in the "eHopper" for publication in the Congressional Record.  Since 2006,  the National Archives has been capturing and preserving public access to congressional websites and content.  Members may therefore place information on their own websites that will become part of the archival webharvest which happens every two years, at the end of a congressional session.

Increasing the civic voice contribution to the official legislative history of Congress enriches the knowledge base of lawmaking and builds a more representative system. Formatting the testimony as semi-structured data as we suggest in this "how to" guide will make the information more accessible as Congress builds its digital capacity.

Technology has allowed Congress to share information more broadly in all its functions. Committees provide live video on their websites. The pandemic emergency required many members to work from home. Hence, members are increasingly comfortable  with remote conference technology platforms. They are attending hearings, connecting with constituents using virtual platforms, holding hybrid meetings, and attending online events held by community groups. Like individual members, committees use websites and social media to share updated information.

The House Clerk shares committee calendars and documents in its online repository. Meanwhile, Congress shares all legislation through the Library of Congress at Congress.gov. Presently, Congress does not have a designated archive capacity for civic voice, although the Beeck Center  submitted this idea to the Modernization Committee as a recommendation.
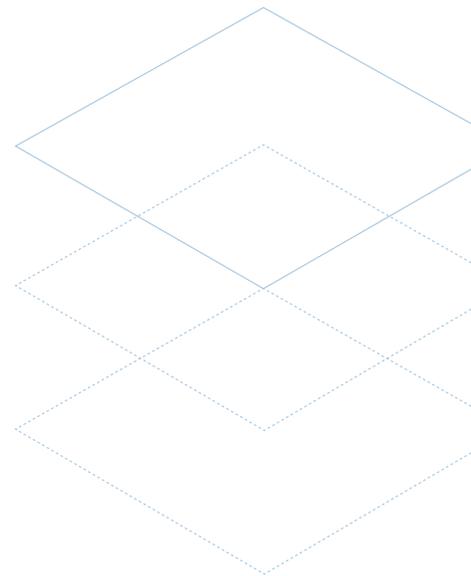


A critical component of the SIDE Event is our formating innovation.  We created a standard template during the pilot in order to bolster the digital layer of Congress.  This method will build muscles for a modern workflow. The outcome will be a norm of collecting member curated participant input as semi-structured public witness testimony for the record.

**Thumbnail of the Roadmap**

| Communities | Members | Congress |
|---|---|---|
| **Shape** Information | **Structure** Information | **Shares** Information |
| District and DC based congressional staff works with the policy adjacent community to organize a SIDE Event to increase timely community feedback during the lawmaking process. | The Member provides content moderation to structure the community contributions by<br>1. Facilitating the SIDE event and<br>2. Providing a standard (machine readable) document template for input as semi-structured data for the record. | In addition to regular media, the Member enters the community contributions via "eHopper" as Extension of Remarks in the Congressional Record, to a relevant Committee Repository or on the official Member website to be captured by the webharvest. |

**The following will further clarify how an elected leader in Congress can work together with a policy-adjacent community to increase a community's civic voice in the lawmaking process.** This report seeks to answer an important question: how did these SIDE Events develop civic voice as a data resource?



Wilder Dam in Grafton County, New Hampshire (photo credit Rep.

# ORGANIZING A SIDE EVENT

## 1. Identify legislation to be improved by community input

A democratic-republic should facilitate human collaboration in service of the whole society. Lawmaking creates the government guidelines that ideally result in such positive outcomes. These values informed the SIDE Events in New Hampshire.

**The key feature of a SIDE Event is to elevate community participation in lawmaking by providing both a convening and a method for feedback into the deliberative process.** The SIDE Event creates a space to gain insight from communities who are most impacted and often historically underrepresented in the official records of Congress.

## Sample issue framing for a SIDE Event could be legislation that:

+ Bridges local to national on an issue where the local angle requires nuance and explanation (e.g. climate resilient infrastructure, cybersecurity, health access, safe and successful elections).

+ Covers a topic where a local policy example has national shared implications  (e.g., digital workforce development, regenerative agriculture, supply chain disruption, veteran health, public lands, inclusive economy).

+ Includes a  global issue that has local implications (e.g., climate change, critical infrastructure, refugee settlement, water scarcity).

## 2.  Reach out to the policy adjacent community and create an event plan

A policy-adjacent community is composed of individuals or groups related through relevant skills, information and/or lived expertise. Importantly, this community also acts with sophisticated knowledge of how the government works.

**Remember, any member-led engagement can become a SIDE Event if the member moderates and provides a structured template for input into the official record.

Here is Charlotte's planning document for outreach to participants who provided public witness testimony on the 21st Century Dams Act.

When selecting community participants for the SIDE Event, think about a cross-section of voices in your district or state. Who can contribute context, memory and share a unique story? Try to build a panel that blends lived expertise and academic or bureaucratic expertise. Here is a helpful reflection

> " For participants, we had a mix of grassroots community activists, academics/scientists, municipal advocates, state regulators, and state representatives. One interesting success of this SIDE Event was that we involved different levels of government by having State Representatives
>
> **CHARLOTTE HARRIS**
> District Staffer, Office of Representative Ann Kuster (NH02)

## Key Resource

How to Identify a SIDE Event Topic
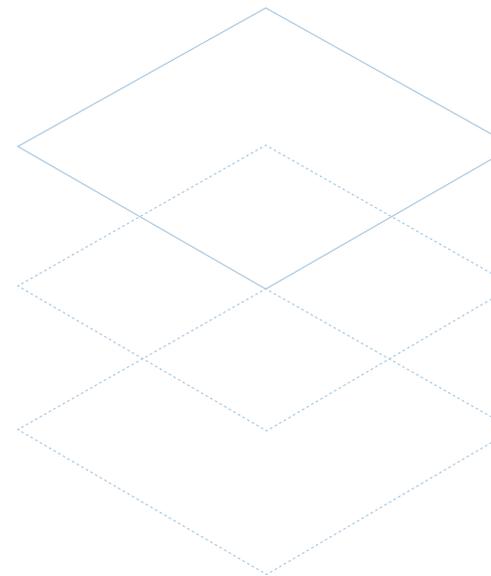
Here is the Run of Show including participants for the in person PFAS SIDE Event and for the hybrid 21st Century Dams SIDE Event.
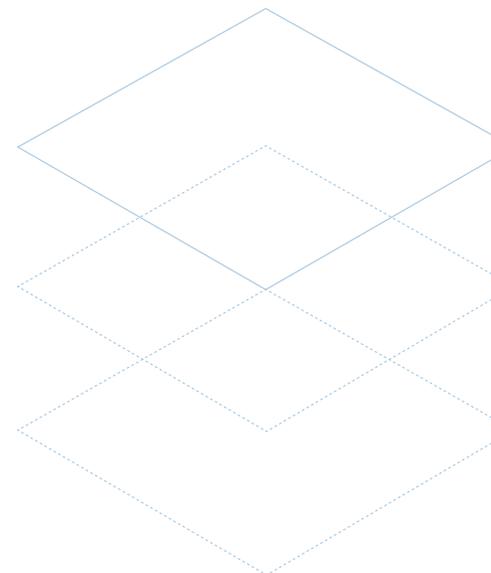
## 3. Design a structured form for public witness testimony

As the People's House, Congress is the national content moderator in policy deliberations. One of its basic duties is to sort and filter incoming information for the purposes of lawmaking.

House Members typically enter information into the official Congressional Record using a formatted document. They do this while attending committee hearings or on the House Floor. Entering SIDE Event witness testimony is similar. For our pilot, the Beeck Center added specific searchable text (also called tags) to create a semi-structured format for participant testimony. The form we created for the pilot uses the 4 digit district abbreviation and Member official name and bioguide IDs, metadata assigned by the Library of Congress. We also made use of hashtags.

## 4. Enter the formatted public witness testimony from the SIDE Event into the official record of Congress.

A SIDE Event allows Members to use the record of Congress in two ways: first, to ensure constituent input is included as Congress deliberates (Civic Voice) and second, to open the institutional memory of lawmaking so that it includes more local data like lived experience and geographically specific studies. In today's Congress, this process can happen in the following ways:

+ Members enter the information into the record as Extensions of Remarks on the floor. This information then shows up in the Daily Digest of Congress in the Congressional Record. (Get the app)!

+ Members through their committees enter information into committee archives as additional material for the record. See examples as appendices.

+ Members create space on their individual member websites for SIDE Event testimony that will then become part of the webharvest by the National Archives and Records Administration.

Pilot partner Rep. Ann Kuster made use of the SIDE advisory testimony to revise her bill and entered her SIDE Event testimony into the record during a House Energy and Commerce Environment and Climate Change Subcommittee markup session.
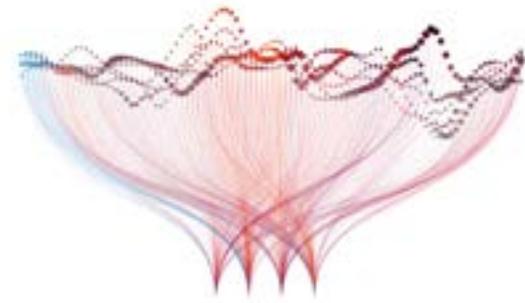
Congress must sort and filter vast amounts of information into useful data in the deliberative process of lawmaking. Image: Modernizing Congress.

Sample SIDE Event Testimony Template to submit information for the record.
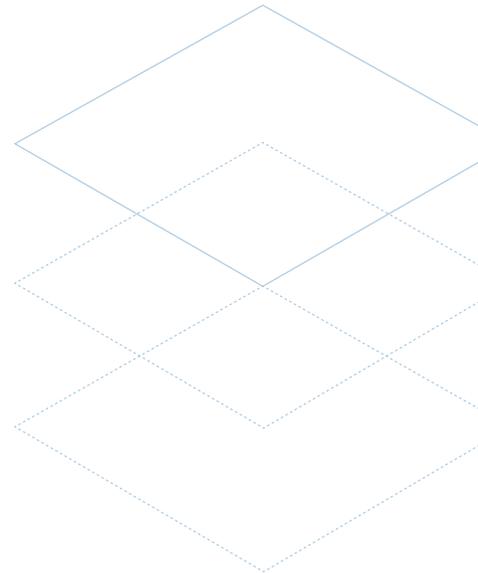
## So, What Happened?

The PFAS Action Act of 2021 passed the House of Representatives in July, 2021. With both New Hampshire representatives as co-sponsors.Here is Representative Kuster on C-SPAN speaking about the successful PFAS bill on the House Floor.

In October 2021, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Michael Regan visited Merrimack, NH, to meet with state regulators and local activists, many of whom also attended the SIDE event. That same month, the EPA announced a comprehensive national strategy to confront PFAS pollution.

These promising updates for public health and safe drinking water continue to carry the throughline of the SIDE event story—government leaders (Representatives Kuster and Pappas) listening to civic voices on the ground and carrying their message to Washington to make progress happen.

The 21st Century Dams Act was introduced in the House in July, 2021. Also that month, a companion bill was introduced in the Senate by Senator Diane Feinstein. The Dams Act is still in the first stages of the legislative process. In the case of this bill, the SIDE Event provided a public venue for civic voice stakeholders to be together, it showcased the collaboration and reinforced the narrative arc of shared problem solving on a complex issue. Uncommon Dialogue has taken the lead to continue the policy discourse on dams, underscoring the importance of policy adjacent communities in carrying the baton forward.

## CONCLUDE

The US Congress is in transition. As the centerpiece of the First Branch of Government, Congress is adapting and evolving to meet the demands of the modern world. The 2020 COVID-19 emergency rules—followed by a violent riot on January 6th, 2021—accelerated technological change in Congress. After these events, members themselves saw the urgent need for technology and data capacity. Indeed, throughout the pandemic, Congress demonstrated its ability to continue on and uphold its crucial Article One responsibilities. Attention focused on the continuity of Congress remains a critical need. Moreover, technology, and data create space for an auspicious pathway toward rebuilding trust between Americans and their government institutions. This "how to" guide "A Community Develops Data Resources with Congress" illuminates this pathway.

The benefits of modern change show up in today's congressional workflow, which, at its roots, is a centuries old paper-based process. Committee hearings now routinely deploy remote teleconference platforms, making the entire country a potential bench of contributing witnesses. Members now submit one-third of their legislation electronically and the House Clerk provides six ways to
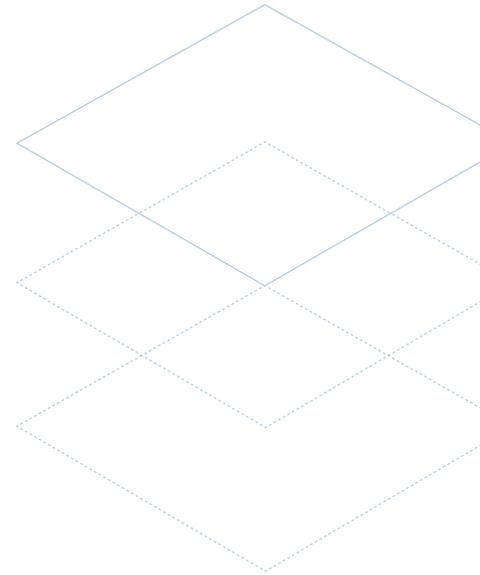
submit materials via email–including for the Congressional Record. House committees even have a one-stop document repository. In spring 2022, the House created a digital service and the Modernization Committee convened a hearing on technology and innovation. Concurrent with these developments, the Foundations for Evidence Based Policymaking Act continues to animate the conversations on data as a lawmaking resource.

SIDE Events provide a method to strengthen Congress' representative duties. The case examples in this guide illustrate how individual members can start developing data resources by using the SIDE Event model and template to submit local participant testimony as semi-structured data for the record. Building these muscles now will accelerate the machine readability of the information used in lawmaking. Modernization will also create a broader, deeper, more user friendly library of representative data in American democracy. Indeed, the way Congress sorts, filters and stores data is crucial to maintaining the United States' character as a democratic republic. More Member-led efforts to re-imagine and archive public deliberation will build accountability, legitimacy, and resilience into the American governing system.

The lawmaking memory of democracy is mission critical data. It follows that the continual evolution of data capacity in Congress is a way to 1) enrich the civic voice component of lawmaking, 2) build more mechanisms for deliberation, oversight, evaluation and monitoring and 3) restore a modern grievance processing capacity in Congress so that it can fulfill its Constitutional Right to Petition duties mandated by the First Amendment.

We look forward to a future when constituents, local experts and policy-adjacent communities regularly participate in the formative and advisory stages of lawmaking and also bolster other oversight functions through monitoring implementation and evaluating impacts. We believe that this kind of institutionally adapted civic activity is a generator of data for evidence-based lawmaking and provides a pathway toward increased capacity, understanding, and trust between lawmakers and the communities they serve.

PFAS contamination threatens water supplies in New Hampshire. L. Kelly credit.
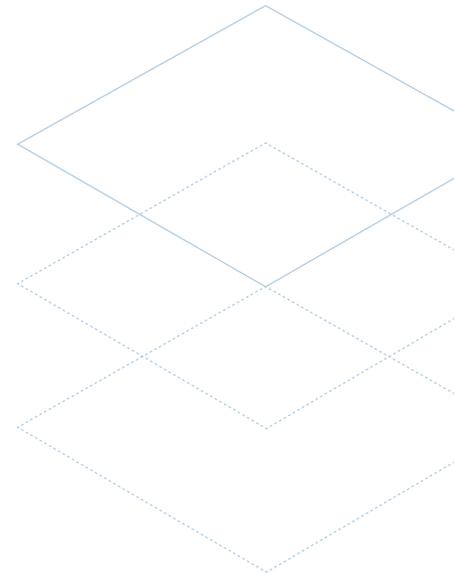
The Right to Petition government in favor of or against policies without fear of reprisal is a basic American freedom, included in the First Amendment in the US Constitution. What should public petitioning look like in the digital era?