



**WHAT TO DO
DURING A PANDEMIC**

A POLITICIAN'S GUIDE

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

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INTRODUCTION

At the start of the year, no one could have predicted the scale and the speed of challenges that the new decade would bring with it. The COVID-19 pandemic has catapulted itself to the top of the agenda in all countries of the world. It is a global problem that has the capacity to affect the lives of all human beings in every country. It has become evident that significant changes are required in societies for life to carry on.

All politicians – elected officials and party leaders – and those working for political parties find themselves having to adapt to the new situation. At the same time, politics carries on, and politicians still have their duties to fulfil.

The situation is unprecedented in modern times, so there have been no guidebooks to dust off the shelf to rely on for help. This short guide aims to help fill that gap by setting out what is different with politics during the pandemic, how politicians and those connected to them can best fulfil their responsibilities, how to communicate most effectively, what different leadership styles look like during a crisis, how to leverage a political network and how to prepare for the post-crisis period. This guide aims to provide practical examples in an accessible and an easy-to-read format.

What should a politician do during the crisis?

1. Go virtual

Most countries now have restrictions on physical gatherings accompanied by social distancing measures. If you are an elected representative, you are likely used to arranging office hours and other meetings with your constituents. Political parties rely on arranging big and small events to rally supporters. If you have not already done so, now is the time to engage constituents and supporters through virtual means. You may already have had active engagement on social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, but not being able to arrange regular in-person meetings means that it is time to step up this engagement. Tools such as Zoom or Facebook Live will help you do this. You should use whatever tools are popular where you are; these vary from country to country.

The benefits of using platforms like Zoom or Facebook Live are that you are able to project live video of yourself to constituents and supporters. Both tools include ways to control how people are able to ask questions, meaning that you will not be overwhelmed with questions and are able to moderate them. In all likelihood, you will find it more economical to use these tools when compared to having to pay for venue hire and all the related costs that are involved in physical meetings. Zoom and Facebook Live are useful tools for events with many participants. If you want to hold direct constituency engagements virtually with video, you can use Zoom or Skype, or even conduct them by telephone if video is not required.

Some politicians already have a regular social media presence. If you do not have one, this is a good time to create one or enlarge an existing one. As an elected representative, you can write blog entries, post videos highlighting key issues and invite your constituents and supporters to tell you what matters to them most. Different countries favor different social media platforms: in some countries, Facebook is broadly used while in others Twitter might be the platform of choice.

2. Be mindful of inclusiveness

The digital divide is real. There will be people who you will not be able to engage through digital means because of limitations related to their gender, age, economic situation, a disability or other factors. It is important to keep these people in mind while expanding your virtual engagement strategy. The COVID-19 pandemic makes it particularly hard to reach these people – but it is important to try, particularly as some of these people are more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic.

There is still a place for engaging with constituents and supporters through regular mail – if the postal service is still functioning normally. You can also reach people by calling them on the telephone, sending them SMS messages or contacting them through a wide variety of messaging apps (such as WhatsApp, Telegram and WeChat). Keep in mind that different segments of society often have different preferences when it comes to digital tools, so limiting yourself to only one tool or app may limit who you reach.

3. Be a reliable conduit of information

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a situation where there is an almost overwhelming amount of information available. Some of this information is accurate while, unfortunately, some of it is not. As an elected representative or a political party, you are in a prominent and trusted position, and people will be looking to you for information during the crisis. When sharing information with your constituents and supporters, pay close attention to the source of the information, making sure that it is from the government, the health authorities or another known reliable source. The types of information you should pass on would include information about the crisis, the government's response to it, what assistance is available and how and where to get help. This is not an exhaustive list. As an example, the World Health Organization (WHO) has launched various tools to combat disinformation about the pandemic on different platforms. More information is available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-launches-a-chatbot-powered-facebook-messenger-to-combat-covid-19-misinformation>

4. Be prepared to adapt

At the time of writing, there are still many things we do not know about the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affects people's health and lives. While under normal circumstances having a consistent ideology and basing political responses around it can be commendable, due to the large number of unknowns and new facts that emerge daily, it is important to adapt your approach as new facts emerge. As the pandemic is global and affects all countries, it is helpful to keep a close eye on approaches and strategies other countries adopt and see how effective they are. What works in other countries may be adaptable to your country. A useful resource is a briefing released by the Overseas Development Institute entitled "Adaptive leadership in the coronavirus response: Bridging science, policy and practice." This resource is available at: https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/032020_pogo_coronavirus_adaptation_0.pdf

How should a politician fulfil political responsibilities during the crisis?

While the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many things in society, politics continues, and politicians, elected representatives and political parties should be keen to continue fulfilling their responsibilities. This section will give ideas on how politicians in different roles can most effectively function during the crisis. Many of these functions overlap each other, but each of these actors has a unique role to play.

1. Party leader

Leading a political party during a time of crisis is challenging. Strategies that were in place before the pandemic struck will most probably be unusable or at least in serious need of revision. Senior politicians, in particular, have a responsibility to ensure that, while the government's actions remain scrutinized, the response to the pandemic is as effective as possible. The role of the party leaders involves several key responsibilities:

- Echoing and disseminating official health advice to the public. Also, ensuring that prominent representatives of the party (such as Members of Parliament (MPs) and senior officials) do the same through uniform messaging.
- Creating or reinforcing clear and consistent messaging that improves people's health and welfare.
- As the leader of a governing party, having the courage to make difficult decisions while being as open and transparent about them as possible.
- Leveraging the party's network of experts, civil society organizations (CSOs), think tanks and others as widely as possible. These are key assets and will give valuable perspectives during the crisis.
- As the leader of an opposition party, having the courage to question the government when what the government is doing is not having the intended effect, as well as proposing ideas for how to do things differently.
- Listening to a wide range of voices from within the party, particularly critical voices, who should feel safe to speak up, particularly in internal party meetings. This can be enhanced through strengthening internal communication mechanisms within the party to make sure that members and supporters receive frequent and timely updates.
- Continuing to be a visible advocate of the party by communicating what part the party is doing to help resolve the crisis. This can involve apolitical activities such as fundraising for hospitals or promoting local initiatives from civil society organisations.

2. Member of Parliament

Social distancing and parliaments are a difficult combination: parliaments are inherently places where a large number of people gather to debate, legislate and hold the government to account. Many parliaments around the world have set up ways for MPs to be able to take part in the proceedings remotely, allowing them to continue to effectively represent their constituents, ask the government questions and take part in creating legislation. Where these solutions are not available, you can be leader in the process by initiating discussions and agreeing on workable solutions to bring social distancing and remote work to your parliament. MPs have a particularly essential role during the crisis: by the very nature of their jobs, they represent people who are being affected by the pandemic. They have several key roles during the crisis:

- Disseminating official health advice to their constituents.
- Listening to their constituents' concerns and relaying these to the government.
- Asking questions about measures being taken by the government; critical questions about the pandemic can be helpful in pinpointing problems in how the government is tackling the crisis. This is particularly relevant for financial transparency and accountability –oversight of budgets and public spending is even more important in a time of crisis.
- Ensuring that possible new emergency legislation is properly scrutinized. This is to make sure that this legislation ends up delivering what is intended, is limited in duration through sunset clauses and, as far as possible, does not lead to unintended consequences in the future. This should include ensuring that emergency legislation is inclusive. One way to achieve this is to consult vulnerable groups, their representatives and other stakeholders on draft legislation to get their input.
- Abiding by the official health advice and regulations. People will look to politicians as setting an example in following the new rules and advice and may not be forgiving of those who do not follow them or who are perceived as not following them.

- Thinking of post-legislative scrutiny mechanisms that examine the government and parliament's actions when the crisis is over.
- Keeping political decision-making transparent and accessible. During the crisis, it is particularly important to keep constituents, civil society and the media informed about actions that are taken.

3. Local/regional representative

Members of regional legislatures and elected district, county and city councillors are in a good place to understand the "situation on the ground" – sometimes better than MPs in the national or federal parliament. This is because their constituencies tend to be geographically smaller and have fewer people in them. They are also often the first point of contact for many people. Some of the key tasks for them during the crisis include:

- Disseminating official health advice to their constituents and residents.
- Listening to constituents and residents' concerns and relaying these to local and regional authorities as well as to national/federal representatives and the government.
- Paying close attention to how implementation of exceptional or emergency powers is affecting people's lives and the situation regionally and locally, and being vocal if things do not seem to be going in the right direction.
- Scrutinizing the responses of the regional and local government bodies to make sure that emergency measures are being implemented correctly and are having the intended consequences.
- Coordinating relief initiatives with local stakeholders, such as civil society organizations.

4. Governing party vs. opposition party

The COVID-19 pandemic presents serious challenges both to parties that are in government as well as parties that are in opposition. Governing parties have an immense responsibility to implement measures unforeseen in peace time, creating cascading changes in people's lives, the economy and society as a whole for the future. Opposition parties, now more than ever, have the crucial duty of scrutinizing and questioning the government's measures while maintaining national unity. Some of the key tasks include:

- For parties in both governments and opposition parties, communicating positions clearly and consistently to the people. Invest enough time and resources in coming up with a communications strategy.
- For governments, having the courage to lead in a time of crisis while remaining adaptable if it becomes clear that measures being taken are not working.
- For governments, recognizing that backbench parliamentarians also have a key role in scrutinizing the executive. This scrutiny can be done through internal party mechanisms, such as the party's caucus in parliament.
- For opposition parties, having the courage to call out measures the government is taking that clearly are not working – and to propose ideas on how to do things differently. This should be done through focusing on issues, not political positioning. In practice, this can mean focusing on questioning specific measures or spending, not the performance of other politicians. The latter risks being perceived as politicizing the crisis.
- Both governments and opposition parties have a responsibility to maintain national unity while performing their roles; this involves the difficult balance between supporting politicians in other parties while constructively questioning them.

Leadership qualities during a crisis

Certain styles and qualities of leadership resonate well with citizens during a time of crisis, and also work towards resolving the crisis. In addition to the qualities that have already been discussed in this guide, the following political leadership qualities can be effective during a time of crisis:

1. Be calm and collected

A calm and composed politician will reassure people. People will look up to politicians as leaders of their communities, particularly during a time of crisis. Leaders who show signs of uncertainty and panic will easily transmit these feelings to the people.

2. Be inclusive and collaborative

During a time of crisis, when faced with a new and unknown situation or threat, politicians will be able to get the best responses by being as inclusive as possible. A small, closed circle of political leaders will not be able to get good and reliable information on its own, nor will these politicians be able to reach good decisions. Political leaders should take advice as widely as possible and have an open mind. By doing this, they will empower others to find solutions as well as to implement them. This will also enable them to ensure that vulnerable and marginalized groups in society are included.

3. Be optimistic and forward-looking

Crises, by their very nature, breed pessimism: many people's lives will be negatively affected through the loss of a job, health or even lives. As community leaders, politicians can provide hope and a cause for optimism. This can be done by sharing success stories and focusing on the future. It is important to be optimistic but at the same time not be unrealistic. It is possible to be optimistic while being open and honest.

4. Be non-partisan

People can be easily turned off by the sight of politicians "playing politics." This is even more true during a time of crisis. People's priorities will be on survival and getting through the crisis. People will expect politicians to lead the community and act for the common good – not engage in partisan politics or promoting themselves. Be non-partisan by working together with others of different political persuasions as much as possible without compromising any constitutional roles or responsibilities.

Preparing for the period after the crisis

Politicians have a particularly important role in trying to predict as best as they can what the medium and long-term impacts of the crisis are going to be. While many actors in society will be involved in crafting solutions to how to cope with the crisis, politicians will be the ones

implementing a managed return to the new normal. As there are still so many unknown factors, the future is very hard to predict. At the same time, the earlier the thinking to adapt to future circumstances begins, the better.

1. Developing and adapting policies

As an individual politician, you are probably already known as focusing on a specific subject area (such as education, health or criminal justice). If you have such an area of expertise, this is a good time to start thinking about the different ways in which that area will be affected by the pandemic and how it might evolve in the medium to long term.

As a political party, you will already have crafted a policy platform. It is not an understatement to say that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have an impact on all areas of policy. It is advisable to review all of the party's policies in light of the pandemic.

Both individual politicians and political parties may benefit by asking themselves the following questions:

- What aspects of society will the COVID-19 pandemic change in the medium to long run? How will this affect your constituents, your supporters and your fellow citizens?
- On a practical level, if social distancing has to continue, what does this mean for restaurants, public transport, shops, schools, universities, etc.? How can these challenges be addressed on a policy level?
- What will society look like in a year's time? What will it look like in five years' time? And in a decade's time? What will be the biggest areas of change? These should be the ones on which you should concentrate your efforts.
- What political and policy decisions will allow for society to implement a managed return to the new normal?
- What will continued social distancing mean for running your political party, acting as a politician and running an election campaign?

2. Exit strategy

Politicians have already started facing pressure to articulate an "exit strategy" – or a way out of the current pandemic and the restrictions that have been imposed because of it. This is extremely complicated politically due to a number of reasons: there are still numerous unanswered questions about the virus that is causing the pandemic; any decision to lift restrictions too early may result in a significant loss of life; and keeping restrictions in place for too long may cause substantial damage to the economy. Politicians and political parties may want to consider the following points in their thinking around an exit strategy:

- Any exit strategy should be accompanied by well-articulated policies about the medium and long-term effects the pandemic will have on society. These policies by themselves will form the cornerstone of an exit strategy.
- Any exit strategy will have to bear in mind that there are a large number of unknown factors surrounding the COVID-19 virus. A strategy should be open and transparent about what is known and what is unknown – and should be adapted when new facts about the pandemic are discovered.
- Any exit strategy has to avoid giving the impression that society can return to what it was before the pandemic – at least in the medium term. Being open and transparent with citizens is key in managing expectations and preparing citizens for a new normal.

Sample Exit Strategy for COVID-19

An exit strategy for the pandemic, at a minimum, should include the following considerations:

1. "Flattening the curve" – reduced deaths, infections and ICU beds in use through social distancing
2. COVID-19 tests and antibody tests
3. Accurate and trustworthy contact tracing
4. Hospital surge capacity
5. Supply of personal protective equipment
6. Availability of a vaccination

Countries will most likely have to return to a non-crisis situation in stages.

Stage 1:

- Lift stay-at-home orders, but maintain social distancing provisions
- Reopen small businesses, outdoor recreational facilities and other low-risk activities
- Increase flexibility for parts of the country with fewer cases
- Open schools with new guidelines

Stage 2:

- Allow greater numbers of people to meet by raising the limits on social gatherings
- Open more shops and restaurants with safety restrictions
- Allow those non-essential workers who cannot do their jobs remotely to return to work under new safety guidelines

Stage 3:

- Go back to non-crisis life in stages
- Wind down tracking of potential outbreaks or surges of the virus while maintaining a reserve capacity to respond to future pandemics
- Evaluate lessons learned from the crisis response, preferably by an independent institution or expert