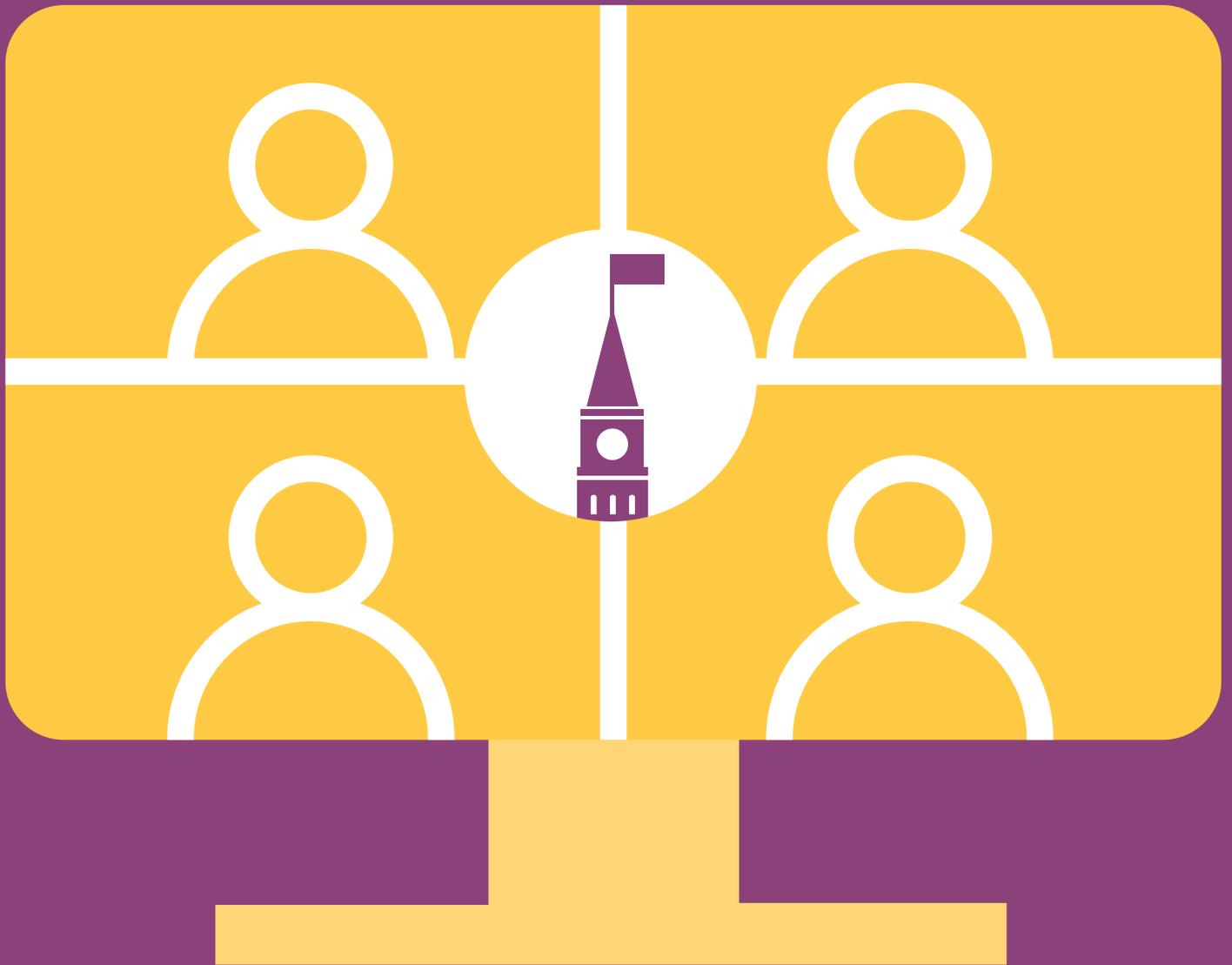


Representation in Isolation



THE SAMARA CENTRE'S 2020
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT SURVEY

DEMOCRACY MONITOR

THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN A STATE OF EMERGENCY

As the coronavirus pandemic continues, democracies around the world are being forced to adapt. Legislatures are putting aside their usual processes to urgently approve support for citizens while also trying to maintain physical distancing. But balance is required: the need for rapid action shouldn't mean democratic representation or government scrutiny are abandoned, and some jurisdictions are finding innovative ways to ensure this does not happen.

This report forms part of the Samara Centre's Democracy Monitor, an ongoing research series that examines the state of democracy in a state of emergency, tracking the ways in which political leaders and institutions are reacting to the crisis, and looking at how elected representatives are engaging with constituents during physical distancing.

Explore the series at samaracanada.com/democracy-monitor.

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Executive summary

The Samara Centre for Democracy surveys Canada's Members of Parliament (MPs) annually on current democratic issues.¹ The 2020 MP Survey provided an early opportunity to systematically hear from federal political representatives in Canada on the democratic pressures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly 40% of MPs anonymously shared their experiences of the new challenges they faced in their constituencies, how they thought Parliament was performing, and whether they believed an appropriate balance had

been struck between oversight and expediency in the legislative process.

This report examines MPs' experiences staying connected with their constituents during the early period of the pandemic, and finds some cross-partisan agreement—along with deep divisions—regarding how the House of Commons should uphold its fundamental democratic functions during the pandemic. It also presents recommendations to sustain representative democracy throughout this time.

Key Findings

- 1** **MPs' roles drastically changed** during the first months of the pandemic. Parliament had adjourned and constituency work skyrocketed. As other workplaces closed, MPs and their staff took up many responsibilities that usually fall to the public service, and became broadcasters of real-time information for their communities.
- 2** **MPs made new use of digital technologies** to communicate with their constituents, stakeholders, and colleagues. The experience left many Members eager to continue to learn and experiment with digital tools, even beyond the pandemic.
- 3** **More than 80% of MPs agreed that the House of Commons must find a way to meet regularly** in order for Parliament to continue its important function of holding the Government accountable. But they also recognized that business as usual isn't possible.
- 4** **Two-thirds of MPs agreed that major legislative decisions should be voted on by all Members**, rather than only the smaller group of MPs that have been able to meet in person in the House of Commons during the pandemic.
- 5** Nevertheless, with 96% of Conservative MPs opposed to moving most of Parliament's important business online, and the other parties largely in favour, **there was a deep partisan divide over implementing some form of virtual Parliament**. Polarization has gotten in the way of the House of Commons finding a compromise to meet regularly throughout the pandemic.

In the constituency:



Provide digital resources for MPs to engage with their constituents

Many MPs have adopted new technologies to remain connected with the communities they represent. They could still use some tech support. The House of Commons or Library of Parliament should be resourced to make more technology accessible and to make further training in digital communication available to MPs and their staff. Tailored solutions may be necessary for rural communities, where access to reliable broadband internet is an issue.



Equip MPs with exceptional access to information

Given the role MPs have played in sharing the latest information about government programs and public health measures, and the unusually large number of Canadians who have turned to MPs for help in accessing these evolving service offerings, the government should ensure MPs have a direct line to the best, most up-to-date information about its emergency programs, policies, and announcements.

In Parliament:



Finally find a workable compromise so that MPs can perform their legislative duties

After months of talk, it is past time for the House of Commons to find a way to sit regularly to debate and pass legislation. MPs believe important decisions should be voted on by all Members, not just the small group who have attended the House of Commons during the spring. To accomplish this requires MPs to embrace good-faith experimentation and come up with a compromise that will allow for a predictable, fully-functioning Parliament for the duration of the pandemic. A hybrid virtual House of Commons, with a significant contingent of MPs based in Ottawa and others participating through roll-call remote voting, offers the best prospect for getting the work of the Commons back on track quickly.

Introduction

The Samara Centre was poised to distribute a very different 2020 Member of Parliament Survey when that fateful Friday the 13th in March made it impossible to carry out our original plans. Parliament was suspended, MPs returned to their ridings, and the original survey simply would not do.

A new problem had presented itself: MPs had to figure out how to do their jobs as parliamentarians

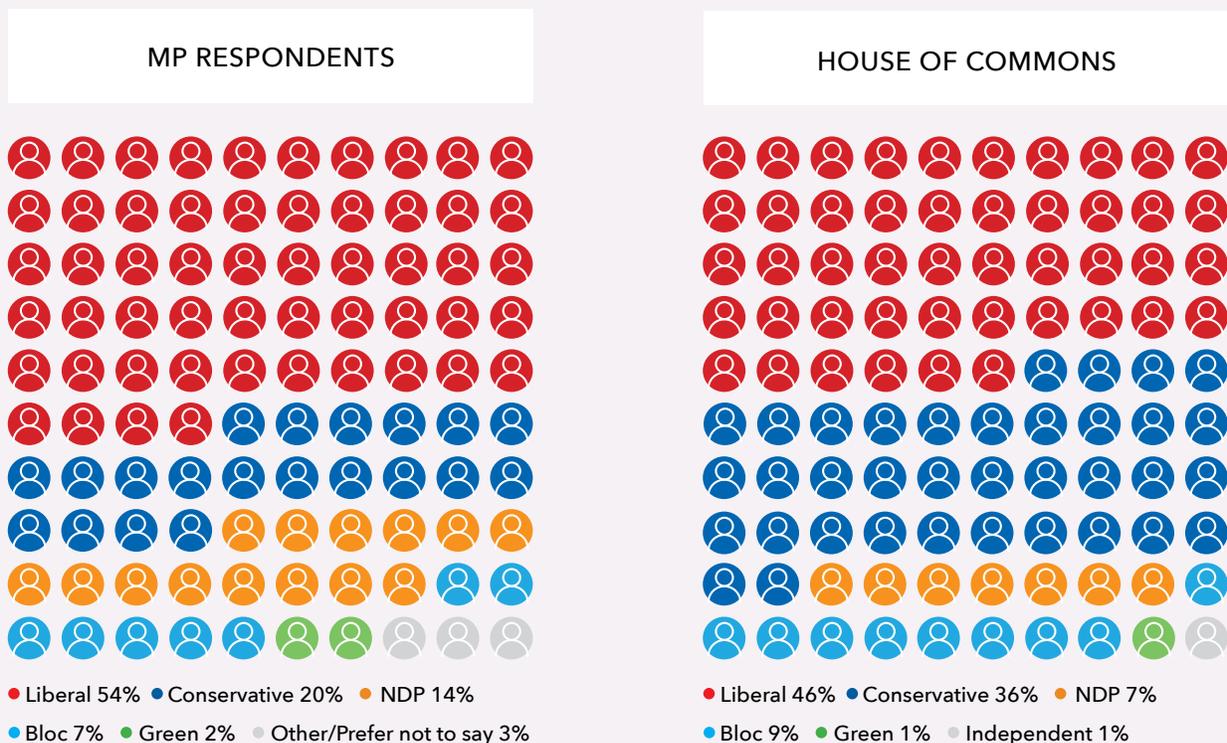
and local leaders under an entirely unique set of circumstances. How does physical distancing affect MPs' role as community representatives, and their ability to stay engaged with their constituents? When everything is in flux, what are the parliamentary sources of support for MPs? And how should Parliament deliver on its essential responsibilities in the pandemic?

Who participated in the survey?

Just under 40% of MPs took part in the survey. Of the 130 MPs who started the survey, 123 completed it. Responses from the 123 completed surveys are examined in this report, representing 36% of the 338 Members in the House of Commons at the time. All political parties were represented, the sample's gender breakdown matched the demographics of the House of Commons, and respondents' age, seniority, and positions in the current Parliament varied.

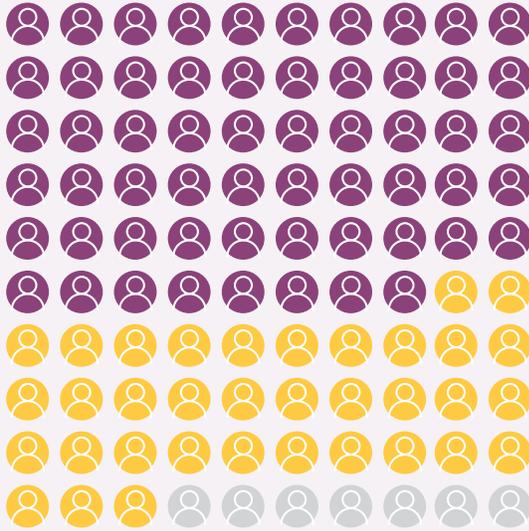
The complete methodology of the survey and further information on the graphs included in this report can be found on page 35.

Political party



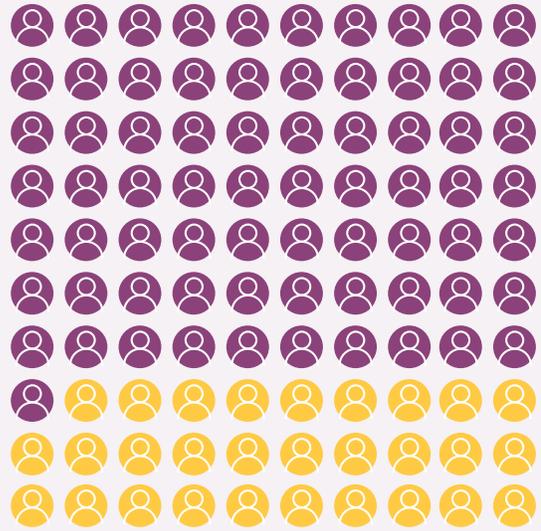
Gender

MP RESPONDENTS



● Male 58% ● Female 35% ● Prefer not to say 7%

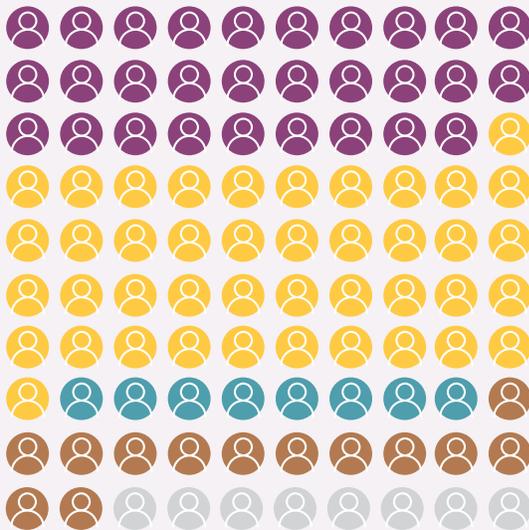
HOUSE OF COMMONS



● Male 71% ● Female 29%

Experience as an MP

MP RESPONDENTS



● 0-3 years 29% ● 4-7 years 42% ● 8-11 years 8%
● 12+ years 13% ● Prefer not to say 7%

HOUSE OF COMMONS



● 0-3 years 31% ● 4-7 years 48% ● 8-11 years 9%
● 12+ years 11%

Note: Demographic illustrations show approximate values when totals do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

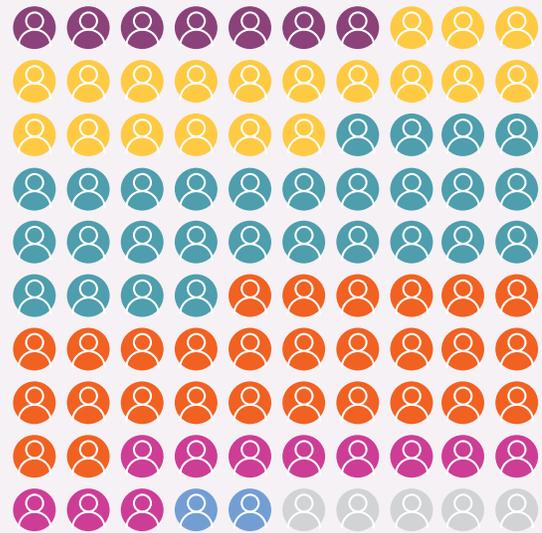
Age

MP RESPONDENTS



● 18-24 0% ● 25-34 7% ● 35-44 14% ● 45-54 27%
 ● 55-64 25% ● 65-74 11% ● 75+ 2%
 ● Prefer not to say 15%

HOUSE OF COMMONS

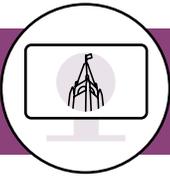


● 18-24 0% ● 25-34 7% ● 35-44 19% ● 45-54 28%
 ● 55-64 28% ● 65-74 11% ● 75+ 2%
 ● No information available 6%

Note: Demographic illustrations show approximate values when totals do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Role(s) in the House (MPs could select multiple)

Critic/Shadow Minister	38 MPs
Member of a regular standing committee meeting remotely during the spring	37 MPs
Backbencher	37 MPs
Parliamentary Secretary	13 MPs
Minister	10 MPs
House Leader or Whip	5 MPs
Party Leader/Deputy Leader	1 MP
Other (including Deputy Speaker, caucus chairs)	3 MPs



Constituency office in the basement

I do not work at home; I live at work. For the first eight weeks I worked seven days a week between 15-17 hours per day. Yes, really. It has dropped the last few weeks, but it is constant and unrelenting and draining. I have one staff person who is now on medical leave for burnout... The public has no idea how hard we are working and this adds to the fatigue. – Member of Parliament

Workload

MPs are often called on to plug service delivery gaps for the federal government.² Under normal circumstances, up to half of an MP's time can go towards casework (assisting with employment insurance, immigration issues, or old age security, for example).³ When COVID-19 forced the closure of many workplaces, including Service Canada's public offices, and inspired a raft of major new programs, MPs and their staff were instantly flooded with constituents' requests for help. Indeed, nearly 80% of MPs indicated that they had much more constituency work than usual. Four out of five MPs said constituents reached out to them much more frequently.⁴

Although the survey focused on their workload during the first few weeks of the pandemic, MPs elaborated on the type of assistance that was sought quickly. As one MP described:

The workload came in waves. Initially it was rescuing people from remote places around the world. Some

people were in life and death situations. I was putting airfares for constituents on my credit card and making complex travel arrangements at all hours. Then it morphed into economic impacts for individuals and small business.

According to MP respondents, normal casework (including immigration files) returned within two or three months, but the top issues MPs were involved with during the early period of the pandemic in Canada included financial assistance for individuals and families, financial assistance for businesses, and international travel or repatriation.

One MP was quick to emphasize that "inquiries" didn't capture the often-frantic requests for assistance that were coming from their constituents:

Most inquiries were far more intense. People were losing their businesses, their jobs, their life's dreams! The emotional intensity of the inquiries are so much higher that monitoring the mental health of my staff has been a new priority.

Top constituent issues requiring assistance (MPs could select up to three options)

98%

Financial assistance for individuals and families

89%

Financial assistance for businesses

77%

International travel/repatriation

7%

Immigration

7%

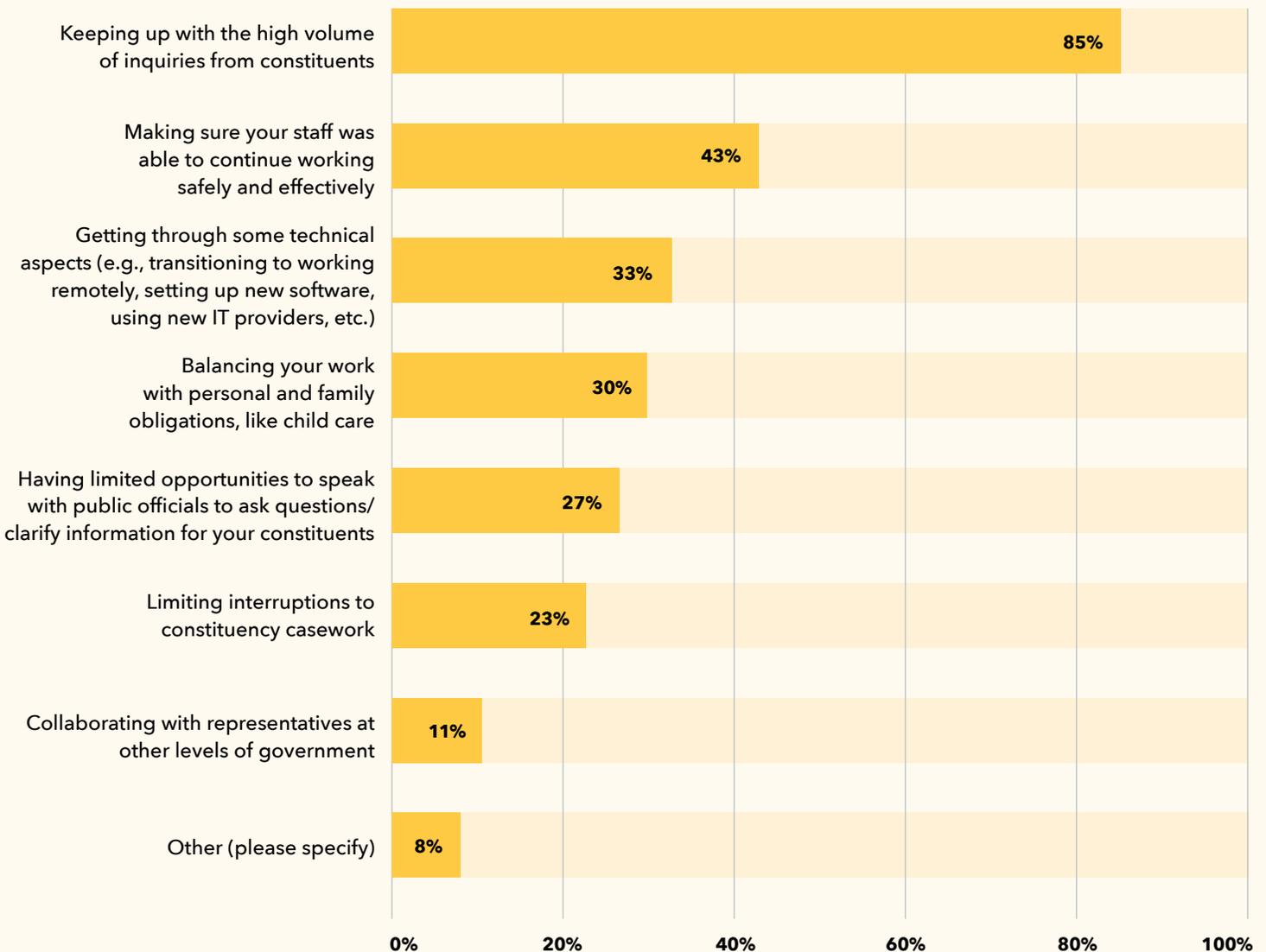
Health policies

Operational challenges

By far, the biggest operational difficulty experienced by MPs and their staff was dealing with the overwhelming number of inquiries from community members.

Over 80% of MP respondents identified the high volume of communication from their constituents as a top challenge they faced during the first couple of months of the pandemic.

Greatest operational challenges for MPs and their staff in their constituency work during the first six weeks of the pandemic (MPs could select up to three options)



The second-most identified challenge was ensuring staff were able to continue working safely and effectively, with just over 40% of MP respondents indicating this was one of the biggest difficulties.

A number of MPs also highlighted the need to pay additional attention to averting staff burnout, by ensuring staff would take time for themselves and prioritize their mental health. On a more personal note, MPs felt a heightened need to manage their own energy levels, learn how not to answer emails and calls at all hours of the day, and keep close tabs on their own mood.

The juggle to balance the personal and the professional—often unsuccessfully—has been a trademark of political life. It’s no surprise, then, that balancing work with personal and family obligations (like child care) featured among the top operational challenges of the job. Many MPs found that balancing child care and homeschooling with the work of being a parliamentarian was the biggest challenge during the

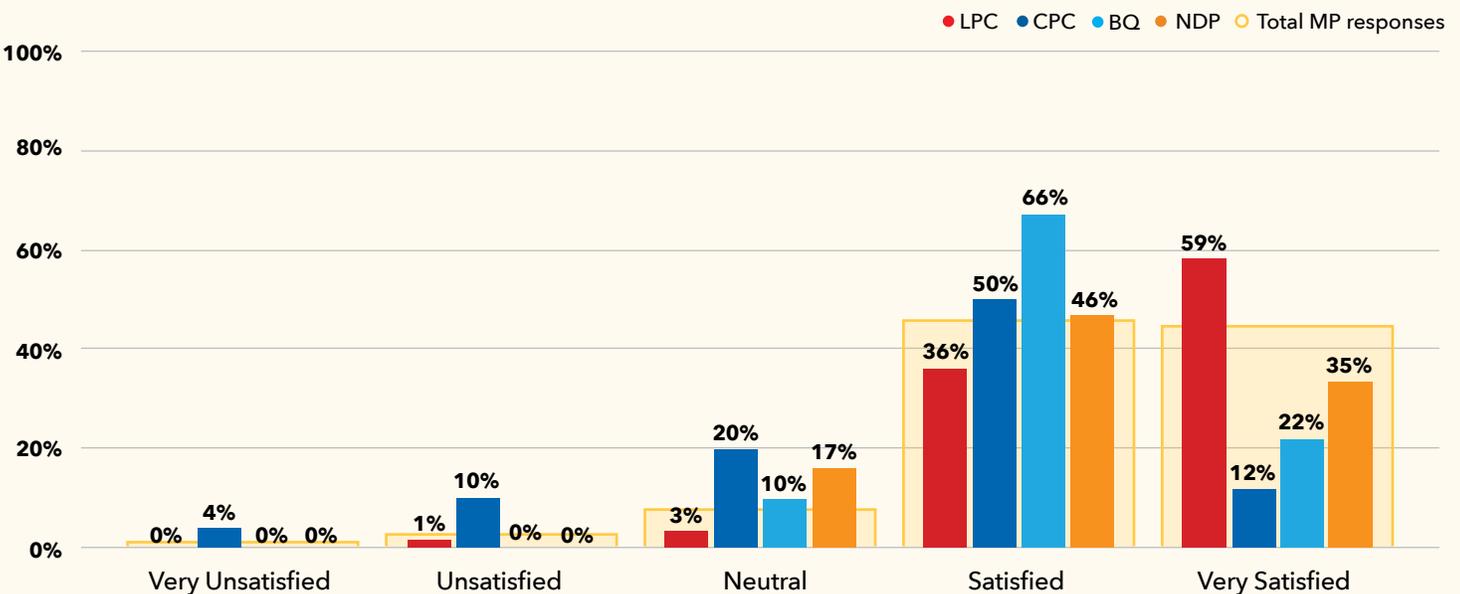
pandemic, but this wasn’t experienced by all MPs to the same extent. Age was a greater factor than gender in determining whether MPs had difficulty balancing work with family obligations. While 35% of female MPs and 28% of male MPs indicated balancing the two was a top operational difficulty, younger MPs (under 55 years old) were nearly three times more likely than older MPs to mention this as an obstacle.

MPs’ (virtual) support networks

There is an enormous amount of information online about COVID, and about the policy responses of every jurisdiction on earth. This is by far the most data-rich crisis I have ever seen. We just have to learn where to look to find this information. – Member of Parliament

In this time of deep uncertainty, to whom did MPs turn for information and advice, and did they get it?

Satisfaction with the support and guidance received from the House of Commons administration



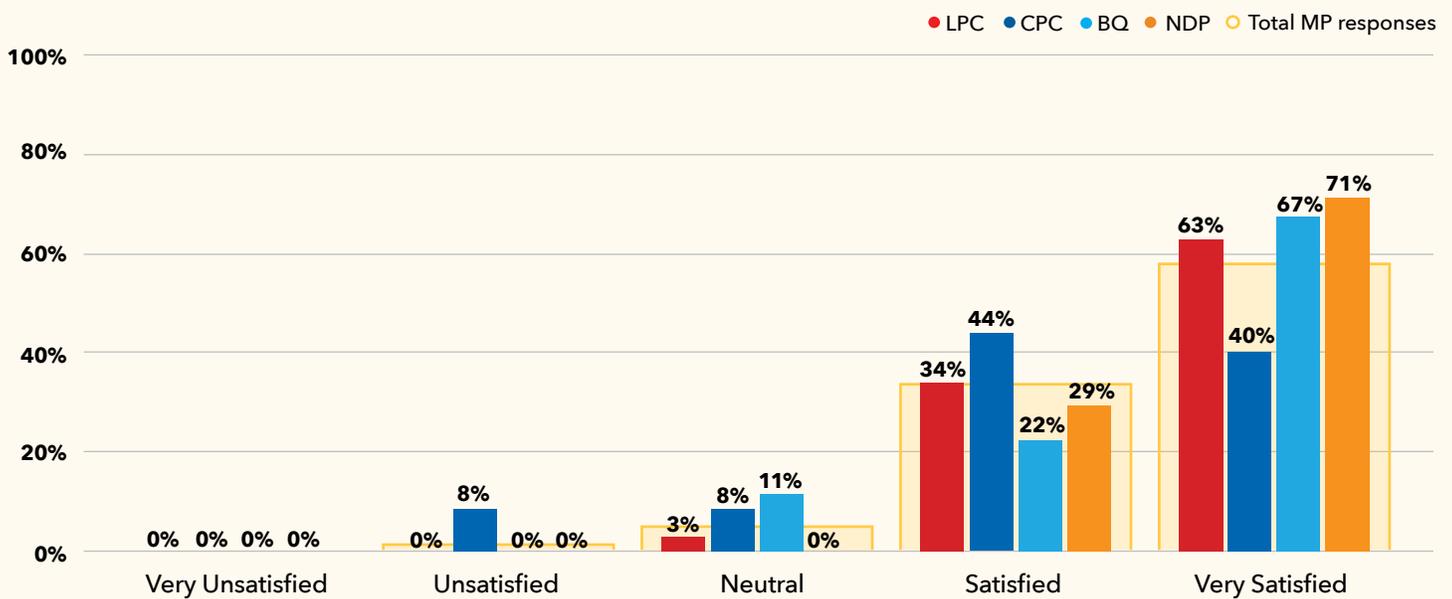
Note: Both Green MPs answered “very satisfied.”⁵

MPs were largely satisfied with the support and guidance they received from the House of Commons administration. As one MP noted, “Equipment was an issue but the HOC responded so quickly and professionally.” Several MPs shared that they had still been able to turn to clerks and Library of Parliament researchers for information and guidance. MPs’ happiness with the support provided to them by the House of Commons administration was only surpassed by their satisfaction with the support and guidance received from their own parties.

In search for information or advice during the pandemic, MPs were, characteristically, most likely to turn to their own political party—through caucus

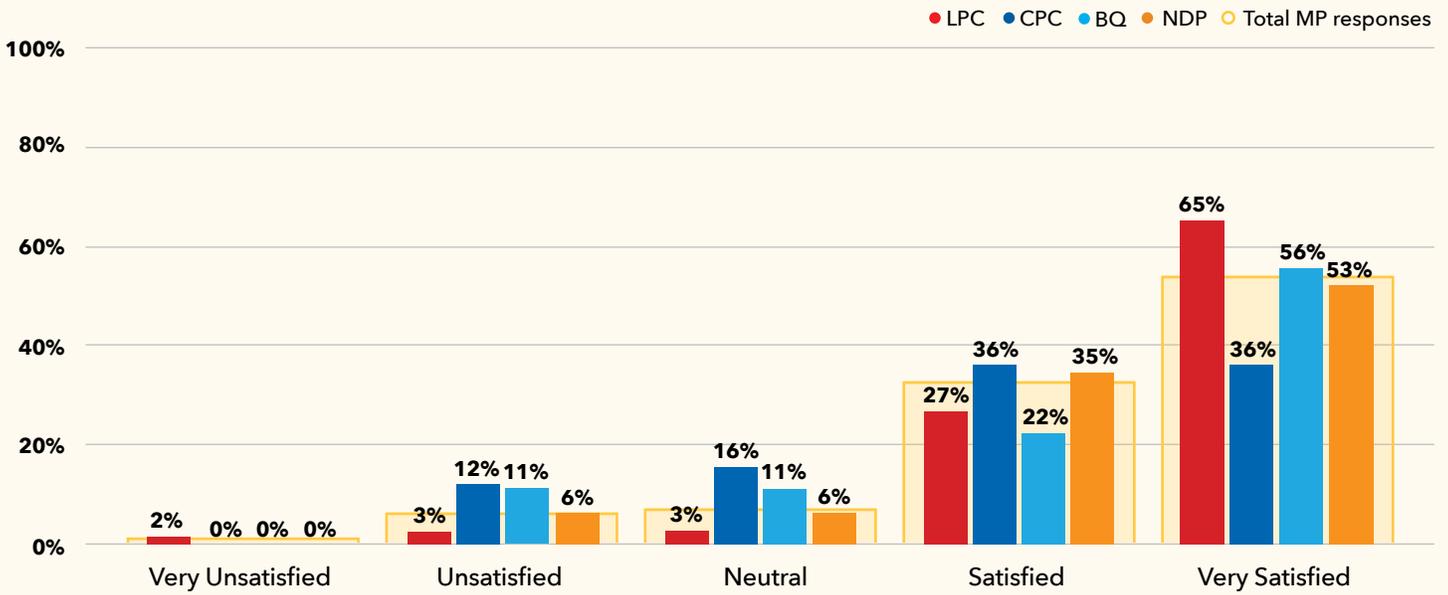
conference calls, research bureaus, updates from the Leader’s office, House Leader, or Whips, or certain spokespersons in the party. For example, the Bloc Quebecois’ “Information Whip” summarized the daily updates to federal government programs and provided Question and Answer documents to their caucus. MPs also reported high satisfaction with the decision-making within their caucuses—though one MP noted that virtual caucus meetings “make[] it difficult for MPs to provide organized dissent.”

Satisfaction with the support and guidance received from political party



Note: Both Green MPs answered “very satisfied.”

Satisfaction with the level of open, participatory discussions and decision-making within party caucus

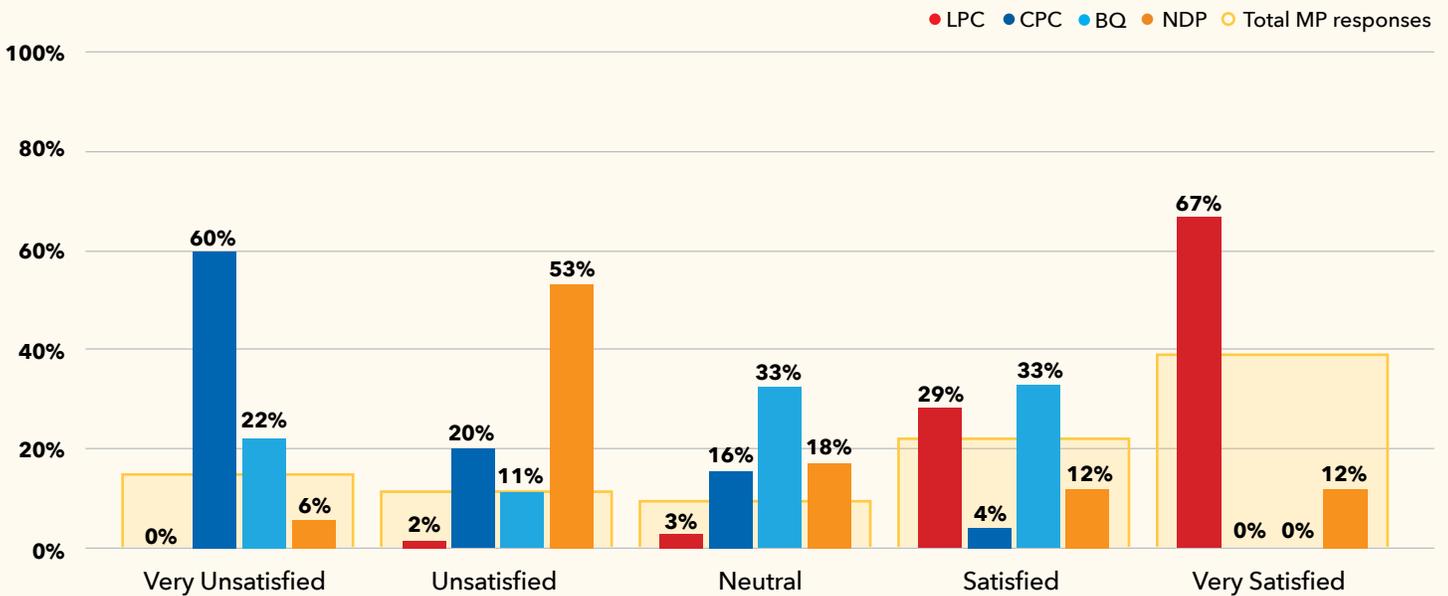


Note: Green MPs answered "satisfied" and "very satisfied."

Satisfaction with the information shared by the federal government, however, was predictably mixed. Governing Liberal MPs were near-universally content,

with 96% satisfied, while Conservative MPs were most critical, with 80% unsatisfied.

Satisfaction with information being shared by the federal government



Note: Green MPs answered "satisfied" and "very satisfied."

A number of MPs mentioned that it was extremely difficult to acquire precise, timely, high-quality information, which made it all the more difficult in turn to answer constituents' questions. While this may have been due to the dynamic nature of the pandemic, where everything was in flux and new information often overruled yesterday's news, some MPs described feeling like the federal government deliberately left them in the dark. For example, one MP recalled how the government had publicized more funding to their riding, but the MP had personally not received any

notice, nor details of the plan even following the public announcement.

The government organized technical briefing calls, which were open to all MPs and held on a daily basis during the early stages of the pandemic. These briefings, often featuring public health officials or officials from other federal departments, were hailed by some MPs as "VITAL" (all caps in original), and alternatively described by others as "not particularly helpful and did not address the concerns brought to their attention."



Communicating while isolating

The biggest challenge has been figuring out just exactly what type of role I should be playing in the community in the midst of a pandemic. This has been exacerbated by the isolation from traditional ways of interacting with constituents: public events, community town halls, fairs, etc. – Member of Parliament

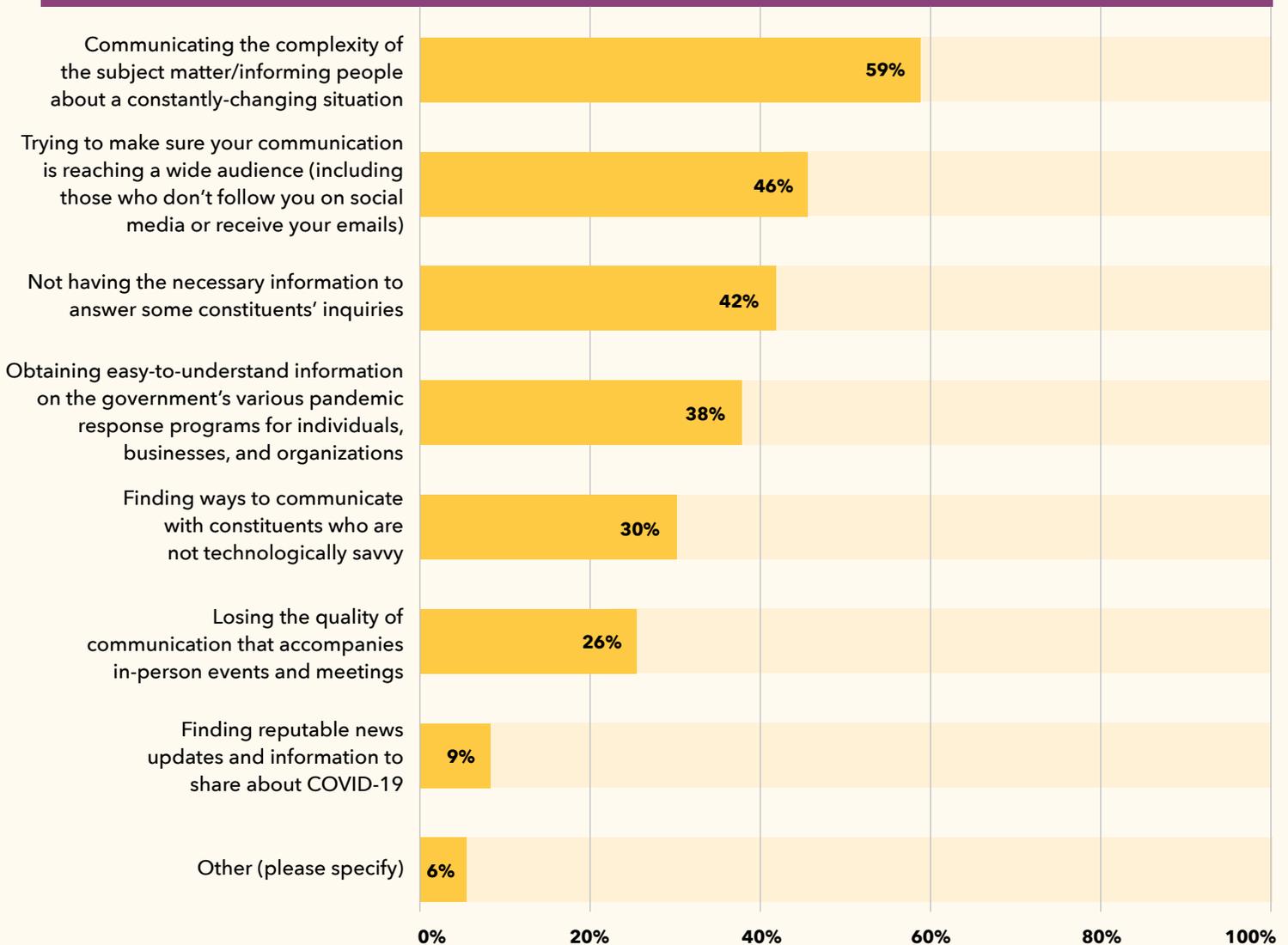
The early months of the pandemic significantly altered MPs' usual roles. Emergency House of Commons sittings were infrequent and exclusive, and only a handful of committees were operating, which significantly reduced MPs' capacities to act as legislators.⁶ An onslaught of public health and program announcements turned MP offices into broadcasters of important information of developments on Canada's response to the pandemic. MPs struggled with how to stay in touch with their constituents in a time when shaking hands and kissing babies was no longer permissible.

Communication challenges

Some of the challenges encountered by MPs will be familiar to others who also had to make a hard shift to remote work with little notice: becoming familiar with new audio/visual technologies; speaking and presenting without the usual cues, like an audience's body language; not having employees and colleagues physically present for real-time support.

But MPs also faced unique struggles. Overnight, they became sources for the latest reliable news about the pandemic and government programs. It is perhaps not

Greatest communication challenges for MPs and their staff when engaging with constituents during the first six weeks of the pandemic (MP could select up to three options)



surprising, then, that the most-cited communication challenges involved MPs' ability to obtain and transmit complex information.

The second-greatest communication challenge experienced by MPs in the first couple of months of the pandemic was reaching a wide audience, including those who weren't connected online. A number of MPs also mentioned how their ability to communicate (and more importantly, their constituents' ability to access services) was affected by their region's limited access to quality internet. One MP, expressing their dismay, shared:

Communicating with people that have no internet, cell phone coverage or free TV... [these are things] I thought all Canadians had. Rural Canada has some gaping hole[s] in our connectivity plans.

MPs were also likely to mention how the sudden end to social events in their communities made it difficult to stay connected and consult with people in their riding. A few MPs specified the challenges of "the inability to meet face to face with constituents" and "not being among the public makes it hard to keep a finger on the general pulse." Another noted:

[The] biggest challenge—and success—was in conveying the problems and program gaps being experienced by my constituents in real-time to relevant government ministers and officials with suggestions for program fixes. It was a very intense period, [but I'm] very proud of the work accomplished in record time.

Tech innovation in a hurry

The pandemic forced MPs to alter the ways they com-

municated with their constituents. Not only was there more information to transmit, and more questions to answer, but practically none of it could be done in person. MP respondents shared how they both relied on tried-and-true techniques more frequently—including email newsletters, social media, and the contact forms through their website—but also how they took up new technologies. More on how specific types of communications were deployed, and which ones were a favourite, can be found in the table below.

Types of constituent communication, by date implemented and frequency of use

	Began using during the pandemic	Are using more frequently during the pandemic	Have used previously, with no change during the pandemic	Don't use
Email newsletter	11%	32%	30%	26%
Twitter	2%	32%	52%	14%
Facebook	2%	55%	42%	0%
Interactive live videos (e.g., Facebook Live or webinars)	27%	42%	13%	18%
Instagram	3%	20%	55%	23%
YouTube	3%	8%	34%	55%
WhatsApp	7%	16%	10%	68%
WeChat	1%	6%	6%	88%
Telephone town halls	22%	23%	16%	39%
Pre-recorded calls ("robocalls")	4%	8%	10%	79%
"Drop in" telephone hours	3%	9%	10%	79%
A contact form through your website	4%	15%	54%	28%



Videoconferencing by Zoom, Webex, MS Teams, etc.

Videoconferencing was used for town halls, constituency group meetings, drop-in coffee hours, caucus meetings, targeted dialogue with other levels of government, farmers, small businesses, the tourism sector, and more. MPs often noted these online meetings or events had higher attendance than they would usually receive in person, and that meeting remotely can sometimes be more efficient for amassing a geographically diverse group of stakeholders (local mayors across a large riding, for example).



Social Media MPs' social media platforms were where a lot of information about the virus and government's response were broadcast.

MPs posted real-time updates on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, often posting short explainer videos in a shareable format. MPs used Facebook Live to livestream their video feed and respond to live questions and comments in the chat box while filming.



MP Websites Certain MPs mentioned how they had set up specific webpages or resources on their website for specific audiences. For example, one MP published a “Quick Access Guide” that included all the government services available to individuals and businesses. These guides were revised as changes were made to government programs.



Special Email Newsletters Besides Zoom calls, email blasts were often cited by MPs as the most effective way to get information out. Especially for the first few months of the pandemic, several MPs developed daily newsletters to communicate details of—and the numerous updates to—federal financial aid programs. Many observed a spike in newsletter subscription numbers.



Snail Mail The mailing privileges for MPs were restricted during the first couple of months of the pandemic, and some MPs expressed frustration that they were not able to access these services, or that their messaging was very out of date when the mail was eventually posted. Still, some MPs mailed information cards and physical newsletters, citing the need to reach older constituents.



Telephone Town Halls A number of MPs voiced how pleased they were to use a “tele-town hall.” It enabled them to reach many people quickly, and they often featured guest speakers such as other elected representatives or a provincial chief medical officer. However, these town halls were far too expensive to employ frequently.



Good ol' telephone Many MPs mentioned how they had been placing call after call to reach all their usual stakeholders. Others said they proactively called all the businesses and non-profits in their riding to inform them about government programs relevant to their organization. Other MPs simply voiced how they preferred phone calls, as private messages through social media proved difficult to track.



Traditional media Public statements, press conferences, columns or interviews in a local paper, and paid radio or newspaper advertising were all avenues used by MPs to raise awareness of federal programs or to advocate for their constituents. For example, one MP mentioned how he had turned to traditional media in order to broadcast his concern for how the virus could spread throughout prisons in his constituency.



Taking the temperature of the Commons

In the first months of the pandemic, the House of Commons largely ceased its regular operations. After all parties agreed to suspend Parliament until at least the end of April, several one- and two-day sittings occurred to pass emergency measures, and a small selection of committees were allowed to meet remotely.

From late April until mid-June, a Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic met regularly. We asked MPs to evaluate those House of Commons sittings, the special committee meetings, and to generally assess the health of the Commons during the crisis.

What was the Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Through a motion adopted by the House of Commons on April 20, 2020, the House of Commons was adjourned, except for any exceptional emergency sittings, until the end of May (this date was later pushed back). The motion also struck the Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic, which was composed of all Members of the House and could meet while the House was adjourned. It met three times a week in late April and May and four times a week for part of June, until it ended on June 18. Though it was often

referred to as “virtual Parliament,” it did not have the same powers as the regularly functioning main chamber of the House of Commons. The committee could consider ministerial announcements, and allowed Members to present petitions and to question ministers (including the Prime Minister), but it could not debate or pass legislation. Those powers reside with the House of Commons, which sat just 14 times through the spring and summer, after adjourning in mid-March with the start of the pandemic.

The Commons versus the Special Committee

The sittings of the House of Commons and meetings of the special committee in the spring of 2020 were two very different beasts. The House sittings, in which massive relief measures were passed, at times, in a single day, consisted of a small in-person gathering of approximately 30 to 40 MPs from all parties. The special committee meetings consisted of MPs making statements and presenting petitions, followed by Question Period-style exchanges with the Opposition parties grilling the Government on its pandemic

response. For the first month, the committee met once a week in person in the House, and twice a week virtually. On April 20, a motion was passed for the special committee to meet four times a week until June 18, with a mandate that included topics that were not directly related to the pandemic. These last two weeks also saw the committee use a type of hybrid parliamentary model—MPs could tune in and participate remotely while a core group of MPs met in the House.

As a whole, MPs felt more satisfied with the special committee meetings than with the small, in-person

Timeline

March 24-25 House of Commons sits, passes emergency legislation to give the government further spending powers (Bill C-13)

April 20 House of Commons returns (since the initial agreement to adjourn had run out without political parties reaching an agreement). Motion passes for 32 MPs to meet in the House once a week, with up to two virtual sessions added per week

April 29 House of Commons sits, passes changes to student benefits (Bill C-15)

May 13 House of Commons sits, amends the Canadian Dairy Commission Act (Bill C-16)

May 25-26 Government adjourns the House until Sept 21 (except for possible emergency recalls), and votes to continue the special COVID committee until mid-June with an expanded mandate, and to schedule four special sittings over the summer

May 27 Special All-Party Committee on COVID-19 starts hybrid meetings four days a week, and is no longer restricted to issues related directly to the pandemic⁸

June 17 House of Commons sits, passes supplementary estimates (C-18, C-19) (confidence vote)⁹

July 18 Special All-Party Committee on COVID-19 ends

July 21 PROC report published, outlining recommendations for House sittings this fall

August 12 House of Commons sits – third special summer sitting day

March 13 All political parties agree to suspend Parliament until at least April 20 and to give the government extraordinary spending powers until June 23 (pass Bill C-10, C-11, Bill C-12)

April 11 House of Commons sits, passes an expansion to the wage subsidy program (Bill C-14)

April 28 Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic begins, meets three days a week (one day in the House, two days virtually)

May 11 MP Survey launches

May 16 Motion passes to schedule four special summer sittings, and to cease special committee by mid-June⁷

May 26 PROC asked to study the implementation of a remote voting system, report by June 23

June 10 House of Commons sits, introduces legislation for additional COVID-19 measures (Bill C-17)

June 18 Extension of PROC study deadline to July 21

June 26 MP Survey closes

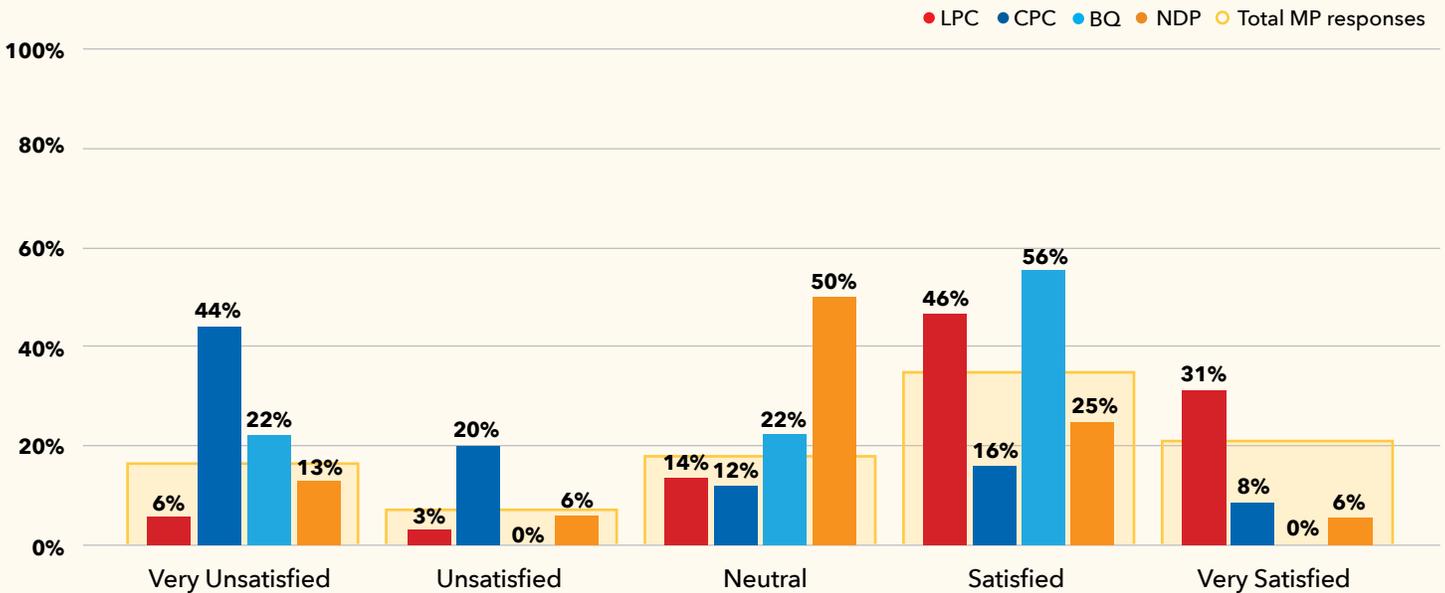
July 8 House of Commons sits – first special summer sitting day, economic snapshot presented

July 20-21 House of Commons sits, passes additional COVID-19 legislation (Bill C-20)

July 22 House of Commons sits – second special summer sitting day

August 18 Parliament is prorogued until September 23 (cancelling a fourth special sitting day on Aug. 26)

Satisfaction with in-person meetings of the House of Commons, as a forum for scrutiny and representation

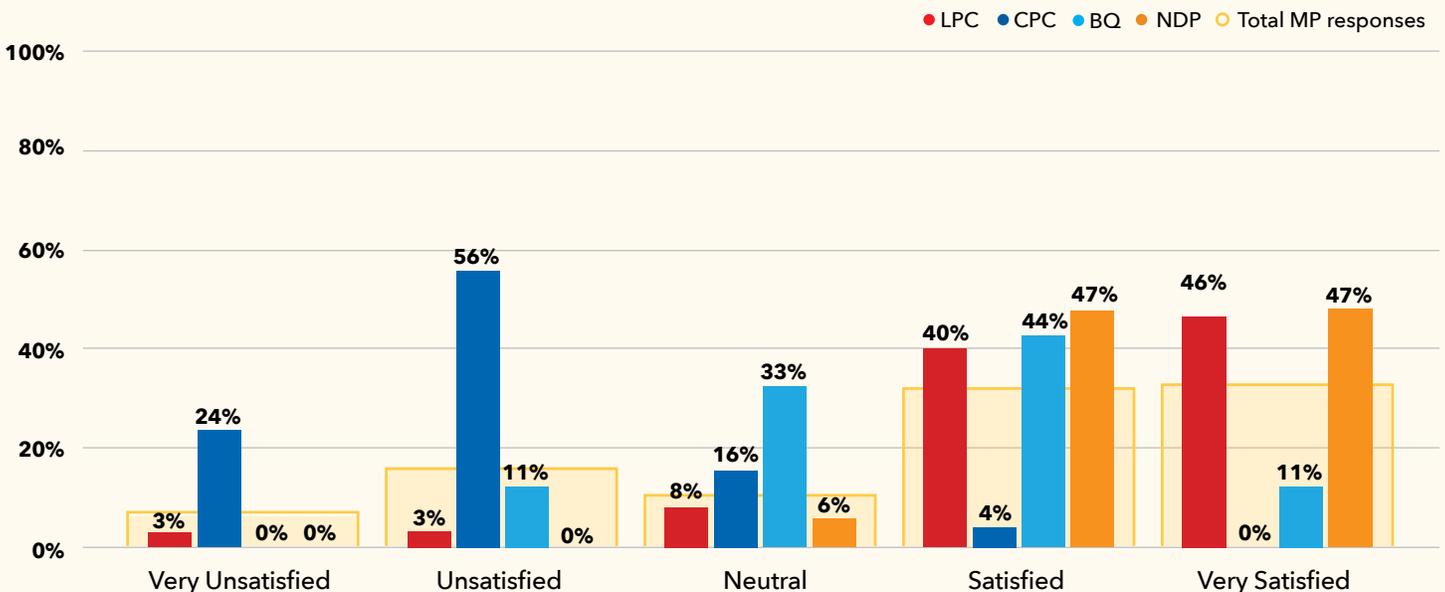


Note: Green MPs answered "unsatisfied" and "very satisfied."

House sittings. But there was a profound partisan difference on satisfaction levels. Only 5% of Conservative MPs were satisfied with the special committee, compared with 94% of the NDP and 90% of Liberals.¹⁰ Bloc MPs were split—55% of them were satisfied.

For the short in-person sittings of the House of Commons, 77% of Liberal, 56% of Bloc, and 31% of NDP MPs were satisfied. Conservative MPs assessed the House sittings more positively than the special committee meetings, but barely, with only 24% satisfied.

Satisfaction with online meetings of the Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic



Note: Both Green MPs answered "very satisfied."

Some MPs found there was greater civility during the special committee meetings than during House of Commons debates. Others, including the House of Commons Speaker Anthony Rota, preferred the full five minutes provided for each speaker to ask questions instead of the usual 35 seconds allotted in the House.⁷ Generally, positive reviews mentioned that, considering the circumstances, the special committee was a “satisfactory and appropriate” mechanism for performing Parliament’s accountability functions.

But the main criticism—and many MPs commented on this—was that neither the emergency sittings of the House of Commons nor the special committee meetings allowed for adequate opportunities for parliamentary scrutiny of the Government’s response. Opposition MPs indicated they no longer felt like they had a way to do their job:

The focus only on the COVID-19 Committee of the Whole has been used to circumvent proper scrutiny of the government’s actions and spending. It has in effect silenced many of the rightful tools of the Official Opposition to hold the government to account and for

individual Members of Parliament to fulfill their duties and privileges, for example [by using] Supply Day Motions, Emergency Debates, full access to all Committees, Private Members Bills, etc.

Several MPs no longer felt like they could adequately represent their constituents, given the infrequent sittings of the House and the limited subject matter of the special committee.

I became a Member of Parliament because I believed that I would be the voice of my constituents. The seat I sit in, belongs to them not me. I am that voice for them. Even as Opposition within the last Parliament (whether I liked it or not) I always had a way that I could speak on behalf of all my constituents. For the first time within my career as an MP I have felt that with this present set up (the way the present Government has basically dissolved Parliament by putting us into a committee) that my constituents do not have a voice. This is the most upsetting and discouraging part of what has happened to this Parliament. This Government has taken that privilege away.

How was legislation passed during the emergency sittings?

Normally, after a bill is introduced to Parliament it must pass through several stages over weeks or months. At most of those stages, MPs have an opportunity to examine and debate the contents of the bill, attract public attention and, if necessary, mobilize opposition. In the first emergency sittings after the pandemic hit, a very different process was followed. If unanimous consent was given—meaning no single MP objected—MPs could bypass the usual rules and pass legislation in a single step. In practice, bills were

negotiated between the party leaders behind closed doors, and then passed almost instantaneously in the House of Commons.

As one MP described: “All bills are introduced to the party leadership of other parties, and changes are negotiated secretly. In a minority [government], negotiations would happen anyway in committees, but this method makes public criticism difficult and facilitates horse-trading.”

Other MPs, however, pushed back on criticism that the Government had unduly limited opportunities for debate:

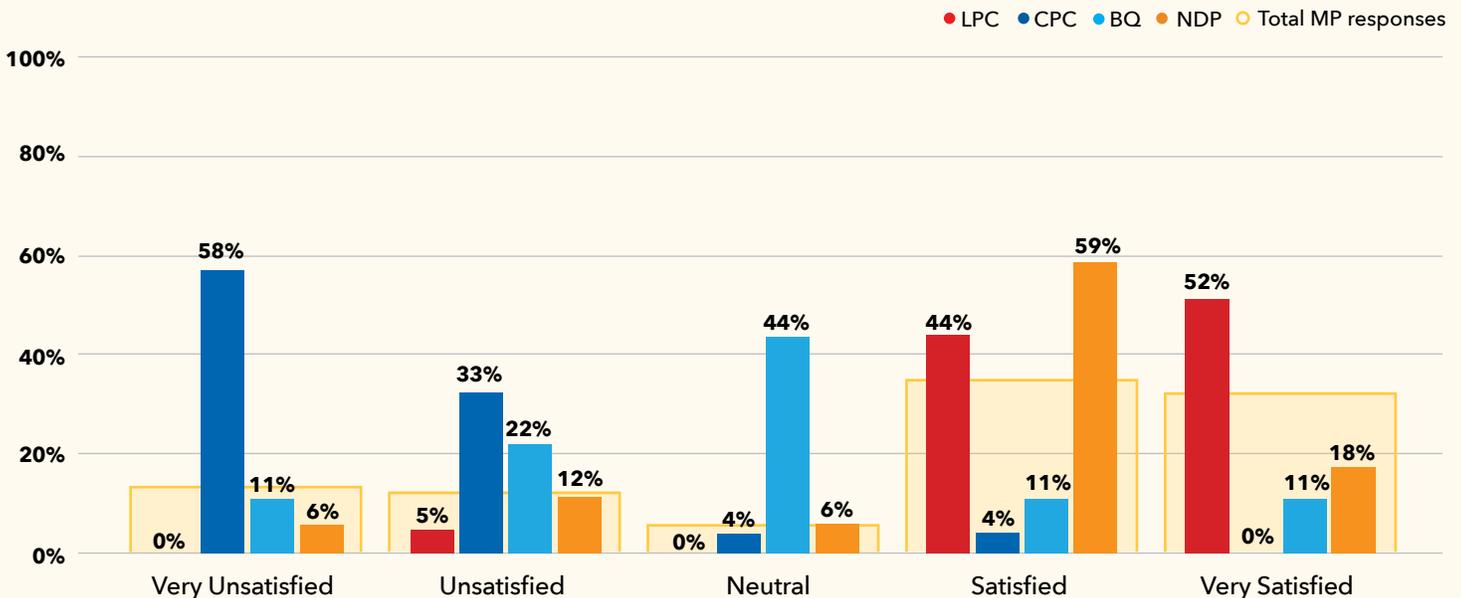
This is a very short term emergency measure. The notion of Parliament being shut down is poppycock. [The adjournment from] March 13 to May 24 was [passed through] unanimous consent. In the absence of the pandemic, Parliament would have normally sat for five weeks. We have had a good combination of accessibility by all members and a chance to negotiate matters to "make Parliament work for Canadians" in very difficult circumstances, what with travel and health restrictions in place.

Balancing oversight and urgency

In the short time that the House sat, hugely consequential legislation was passed. This was done, at least initially, with cooperation from all parties, in recognition of the urgency to pass relief measures. But did the House strike the appropriate balance between oversight and urgency?

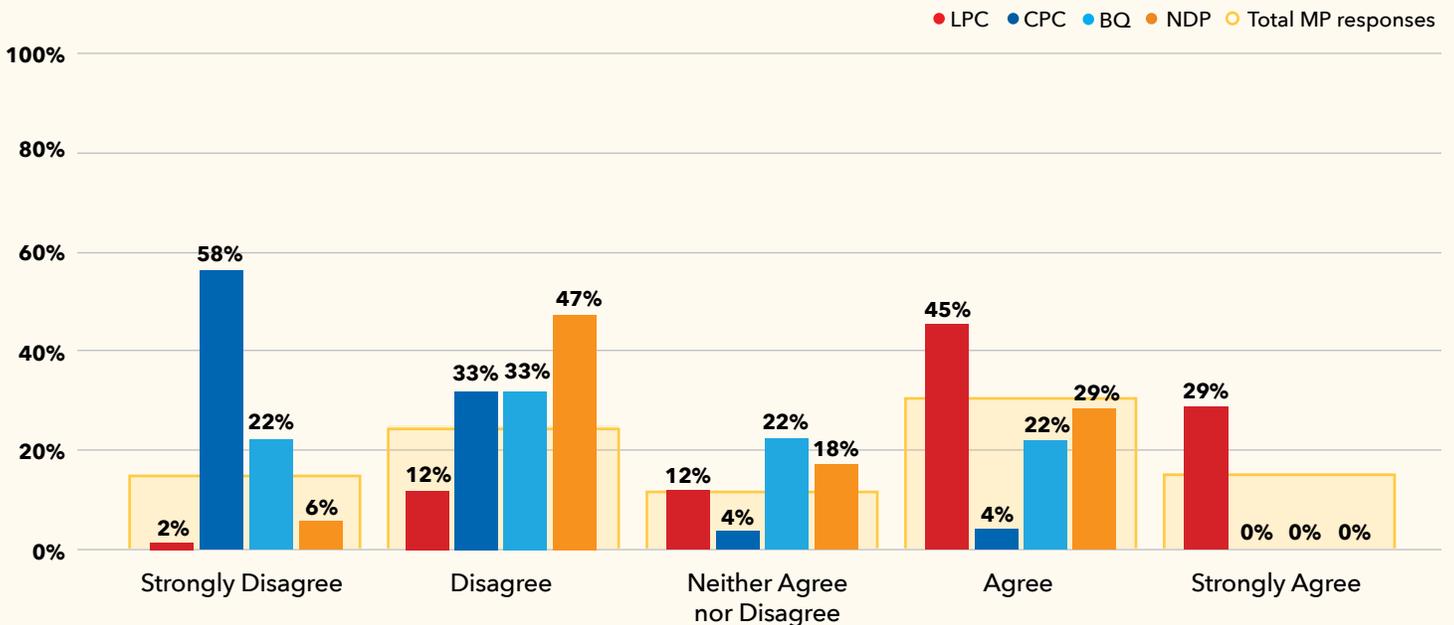
About two-thirds of MPs said they were satisfied with the balance between the scrutiny and rapidity of passing new measures. But once again, when broken down by political party, the results reveal a large chasm between Liberals and NDP on the one hand

Satisfaction with the balance struck between ensuring thoughtful scrutiny of government action, and the need to quickly pass new measures



Note: Green MPs answered "satisfied" and "very satisfied."

MPs were given sufficient notice about the content of the bills passed at the emergency sittings in March and April



Note: Both Green MPs answered "disagree."

and Conservatives on the other. A full 96% of Liberal MPs and 79% of NDP MPs were satisfied (as were both Green respondents), compared to only 4% of MPs from the Official Opposition. The response from the Bloc Québécois was more evenly split.

When asked more concretely if they had time to consider what was passed, support from NDP members faded. Only a (smaller) majority of MPs from the Liberal party (74%) agreed that there had been enough time, while the majority of NDP (53%), Bloc (55%), and Conservative MPs (91%) disagreed (as did both Green respondents).

Only a small number of MPs—around 10% of the House—attended the emergency sittings in person

after physical distancing protocols were put in place. Reducing attendance was necessary to adhere to public health guidelines, but some MPs voiced uneasiness that "whips select which MPs will attend the limited House sittings." One glaring illustration of how this could lead to the exclusion of certain independent-minded MPs was when one Member showed up at the House against his party's orders for the second emergency sitting, citing his firm belief that the latest draft of the bill he'd seen was not one he was willing to pass.⁸ A previous Samara Centre study also found that regional and gender representation wasn't prioritized when MPs were selected to attend the early emergency sessions.⁹

Cross-party collaboration

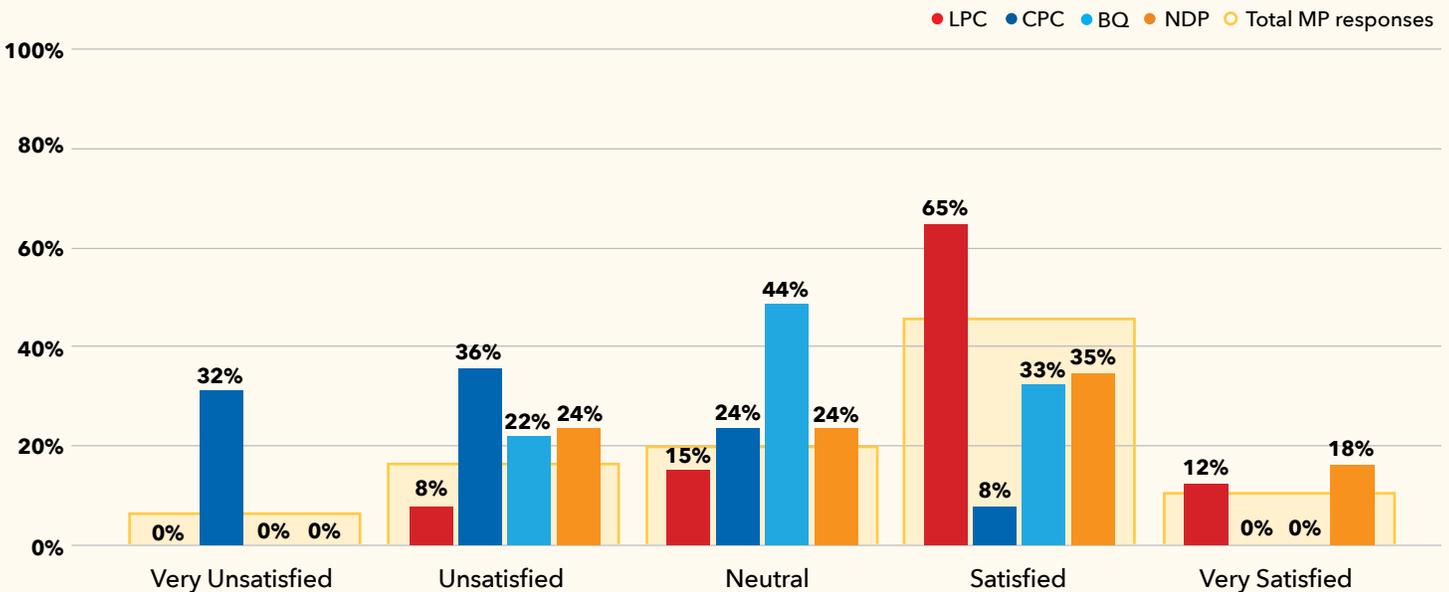
A few members of parliament [are] playing politics throughout this crisis situation. Trying to create a negative narrative to discredit efforts by the government to stabilize situations/circumstances Canadians are currently finding themselves in. Unfortunately, some tactics include dispersing misinformation.”— Member of Parliament

Early in the pandemic, some MPs mentioned publicly that collaboration across party lines was “off the charts,” and that the pandemic had reduced negative partisanship.¹⁰ But by the time MPs were surveyed by the Samara Centre in May and June, this opinion

seemed to have dissipated, at least in some quarters. When asked to assess collaboration across party lines, MPs once again demonstrated a deep divide. A majority of Liberal and NDP MPs were satisfied, while a full 68% of Conservative MPs were not. According to one MP: “I find it hard to give one check mark for collaboration. It was better in March and April, and now in rapid decline.”

At the beginning of the pandemic, all parties unanimously passed a motion that granted the Government wide spending powers without having to pass the motion by Parliament. Many MPs from all parties agreed that the Government required extraordinary financial powers to deal with the pandemic.

Satisfaction with the collaboration across party lines



Note: Green MPs answered “satisfied” and “very satisfied.”

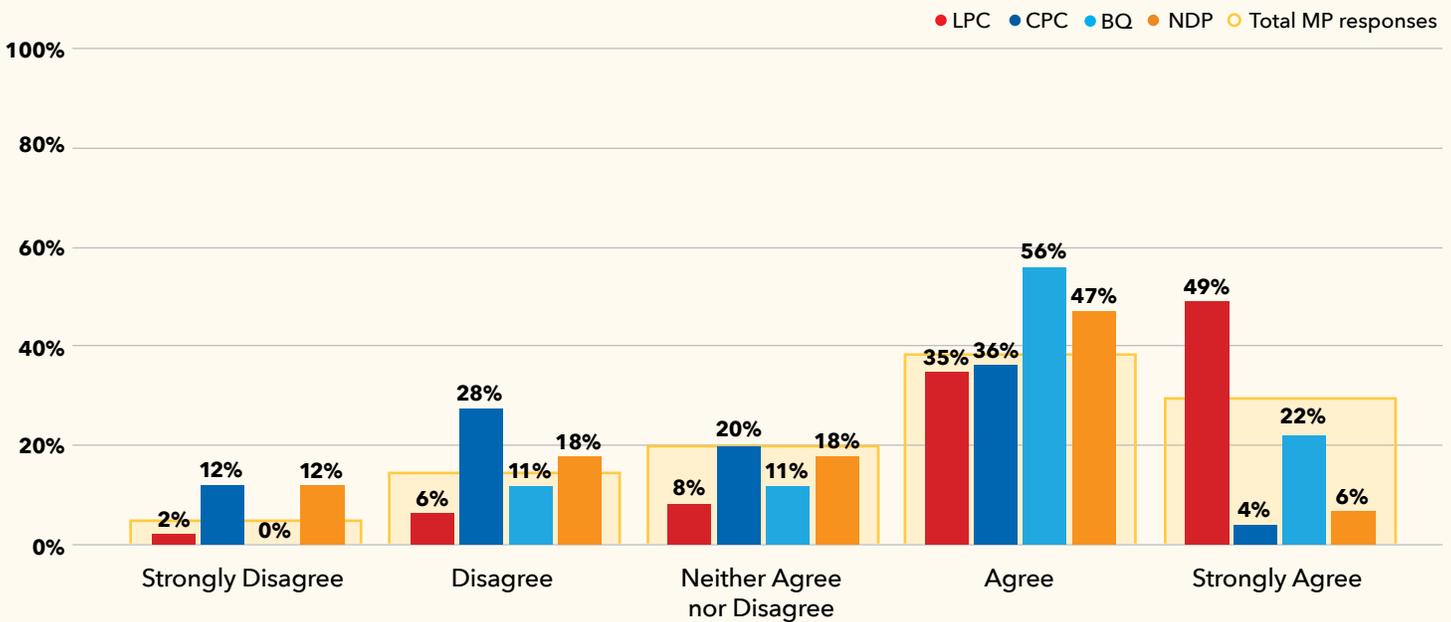
One MP noted that the greatest challenge for them during this crisis has been “the stupidity of partisanship” and reiterated the need to “keep working together during a pandemic.”

A couple of respondents’ comments shed some light on why cross-partisan collaboration might have deteriorated. A small number of MPs voiced frustration that the governing party had taken advantage of the increased amount of time in the spotlight. One MP complained, “The House of Commons never sits,

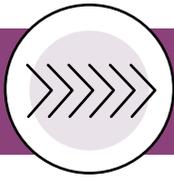
so Justin Trudeau’s daily pressers at Rideau Cottage give him a monopoly on media attention.” Others commented on the important loss of in-person interactions between MPs.

I very much miss the ability to meet colleagues in person... nothing can match the critical human, person-to-person interactions that make Parliament work, that help diffuse misunderstanding and aid the cohesion....

The government needs extraordinary financial powers to deal with the pandemic



Note: Both Green MPs answered “agree.”



Moving forward

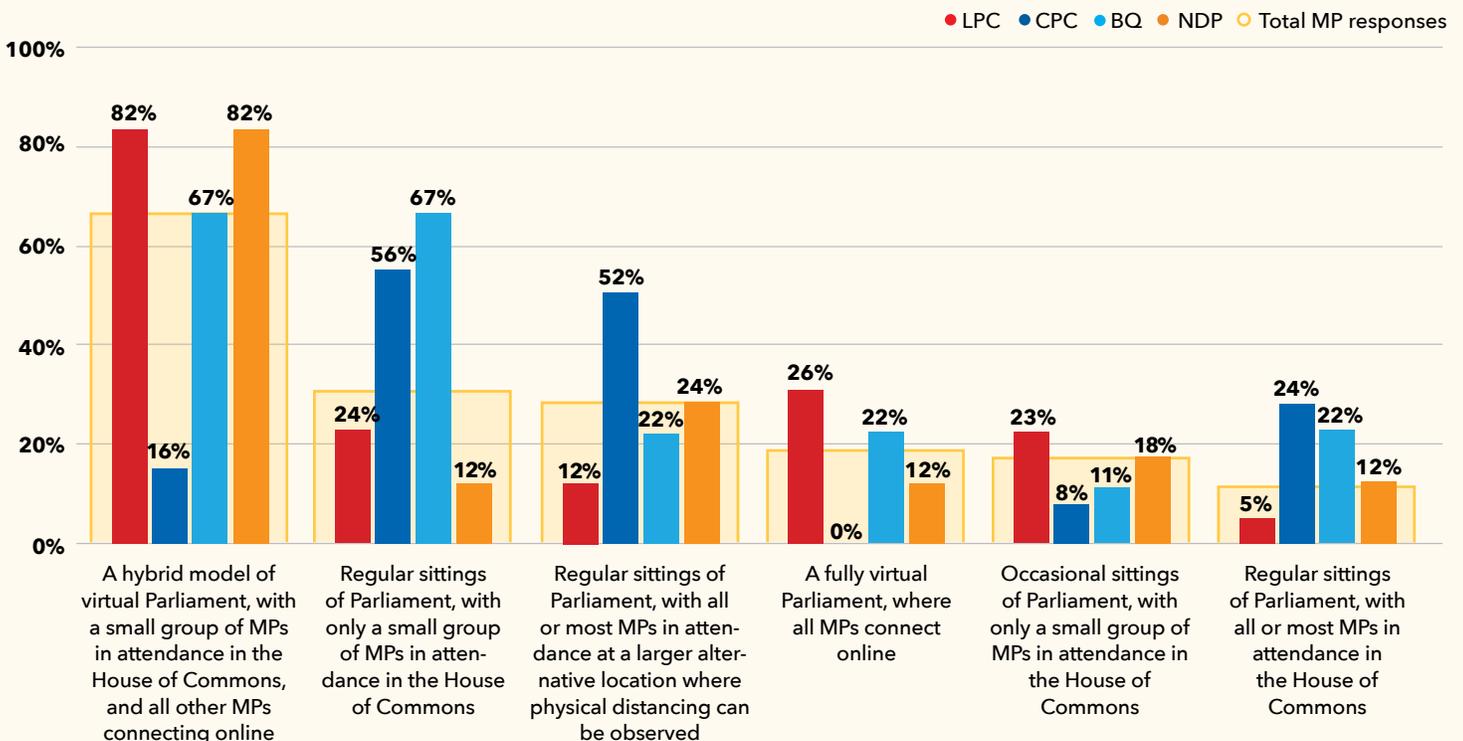
If political parties collaborated closely during the early days of the pandemic, it appears that much of that common ground disintegrated. Nowhere is that clearer than over the question of how Parliament should function in the pandemic. The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs (PROC) has hosted dozens of witnesses and published reports on how parliamentary duties can be maintained during the pandemic.¹¹ The Speaker of the House of Commons, with the support of the House of Commons administration, has published two briefs, one on the considerations relating to the remote and electronic voting for MPs, and another on the options for in-person voting while maintaining physical distance.¹² But the governing party and Official Opposition, in particular, remained deeply at odds with just days left before the beginning of the new session

of Parliament. More than six months into the pandemic, the question of how the Commons can meet and vote—without excluding most Members or violating public health guidelines—has been bedevilled by deep polarization among the MPs.

Debates on the physical arrangements for the House of Commons

Being [an MP who lives close to Ottawa], I am obligated to go to the House of Commons physically even though I am not comfortable and there is no real ability to physically distance. I do not have a choice. This is wrong, when we are asking Canadians to stay home to flatten the curve. — Member of Parliament

Support for different House of Commons arrangements during physical distancing protocols (MPs could select multiple options)



Note: Both Green MPs answered “hybrid” and “fully virtual,” and one each for “regular sittings at a larger alternative location” and “occasional sittings with only a small group of MPs.”

We asked MPs how the Commons should meet, given the need for more physical distance than the Chamber provides when it is full. Reflecting the anxiety expressed by the MP above, the least popular option—supported by only 11% of all MPs—is regular meetings of Parliament with all or most MPs present.

Other than most MPs agreeing that business as usual is impossible, two more findings can be drawn from MPs' responses to this question:

→ MPs do not want to continue the practice from the spring and summer of occasional sittings, with only a small group of MPs in attendance in the House. Most MPs from all parties recognize the need for a better way.

→ There is no arrangement for regular sittings that appeals to a majority of MPs in each political party.

The most popular option is to use a hybrid model of a virtual Parliament, in which a small group of MPs would attend the House of Commons, and all other MPs would connect online (similar to the setup in the later period of the special committee). But while a majority of

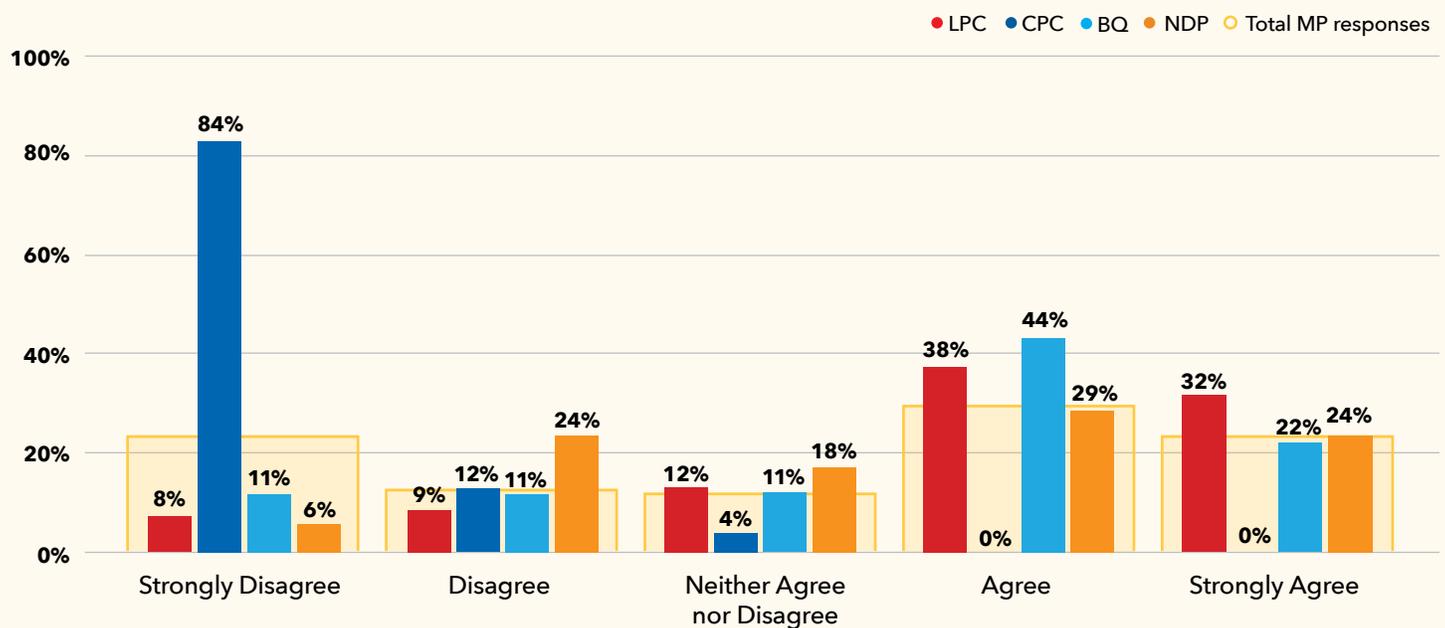
Liberal, Bloc, and NDP (and Green) MPs support this option, it is almost universally rejected by Conservatives, with just 16% in support.

The second most popular option, with over 50% of Bloc and Conservative MPs supporting it (and one of two Green MP respondents), is to hold regular sittings of Parliament with only a small group of MPs in attendance in the House of Commons. However, only 24% from the Liberals and 12% from the NDP support this arrangement.

Going virtual

No discussion is as polarizing—especially between the governing Liberals and the Official Opposition—as whether and to what extent Parliament should go virtual. For example, when asked if most of Parliament's important business can be moved online, a full 96% of Conservative MPs disagree, while a majority of MPs from all other parties agree.

Most of Parliament's important business can be moved online



Note: Green MPs answered "agree" and "strongly agree."

While virtual scrutiny proceedings like the special committee have been tolerated, the major outstanding issue concerns whether MPs should be—for the first time in history—able to vote remotely. As one MP commented, “Voting from teleconference [is] a must before a virtual House of Commons can work. We cannot have full hybrid sittings before full voting from a distance is possible.”

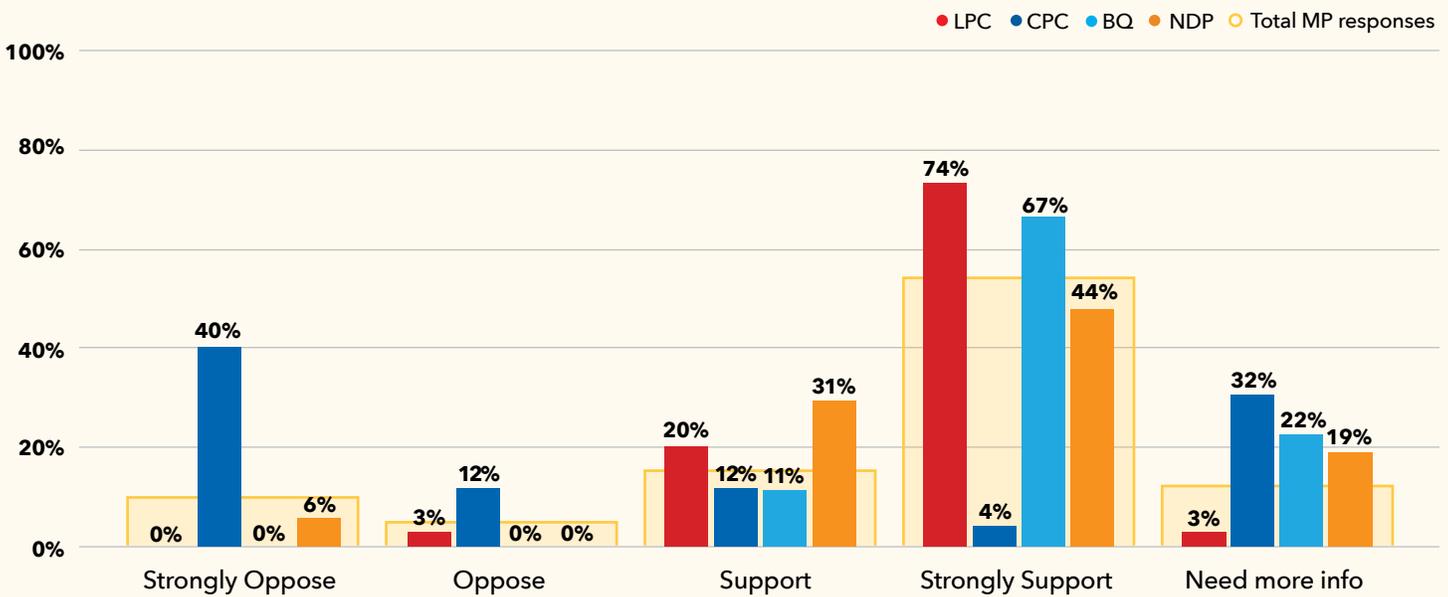
Interestingly, when MPs were asked directly whether they support accommodating remote voting for MPs during physical distancing protocols, some Conservative MPs did show some openness. A slight majority (52%) were opposed outright, but 32% indicated they’d require more information (and 16% supported the idea). Other parties generally support remote voting, although one in five MPs from the Bloc and the NDP

also indicated that they would need more information.

Once MPs are assured it would only be a temporary measure, the hesitations to adopt remote voting revolve around security. Many MPs brought up that they would need reassurance that their votes couldn’t be tampered with, that the identity of the MP could be verified (such as by voting on camera), or that internet problems wouldn’t result in missing a vote. Others simply stated more generally, “it depends on how it was set up” or “no electronics, please!”

Those in favour point to the fact that there is no other way to include all MPs while also limiting travel. MPs from rural communities shared their fear of transmitting the virus to their constituents if forced to go back and forth from Ottawa (even if they met in a large space that could accommodate everyone while

Support for accommodating remote voting for MPs during physical distancing protocols



Note: Both Green MPs answered “strongly support.”

respecting physical distancing). Another supporter argued: “it’s time for Parliament to come into the 21st century and take advantage of the technology that this pandemic has made an imperative.”

Some MPs had thought through some of the smaller details—like standardizing the backdrops for MPs on videoconference, or engineering a way for remote MPs to have access to table officers. For others, virtual parliament is a non-starter on principle. Inevitably, there was a hockey metaphor: “Virtual parliament is a disaster. It does not work. You can’t play ice hockey and not be on the ice or on the bench.”

Cross-partisan alignments

We need a system that does not impinge on MPs’ rights

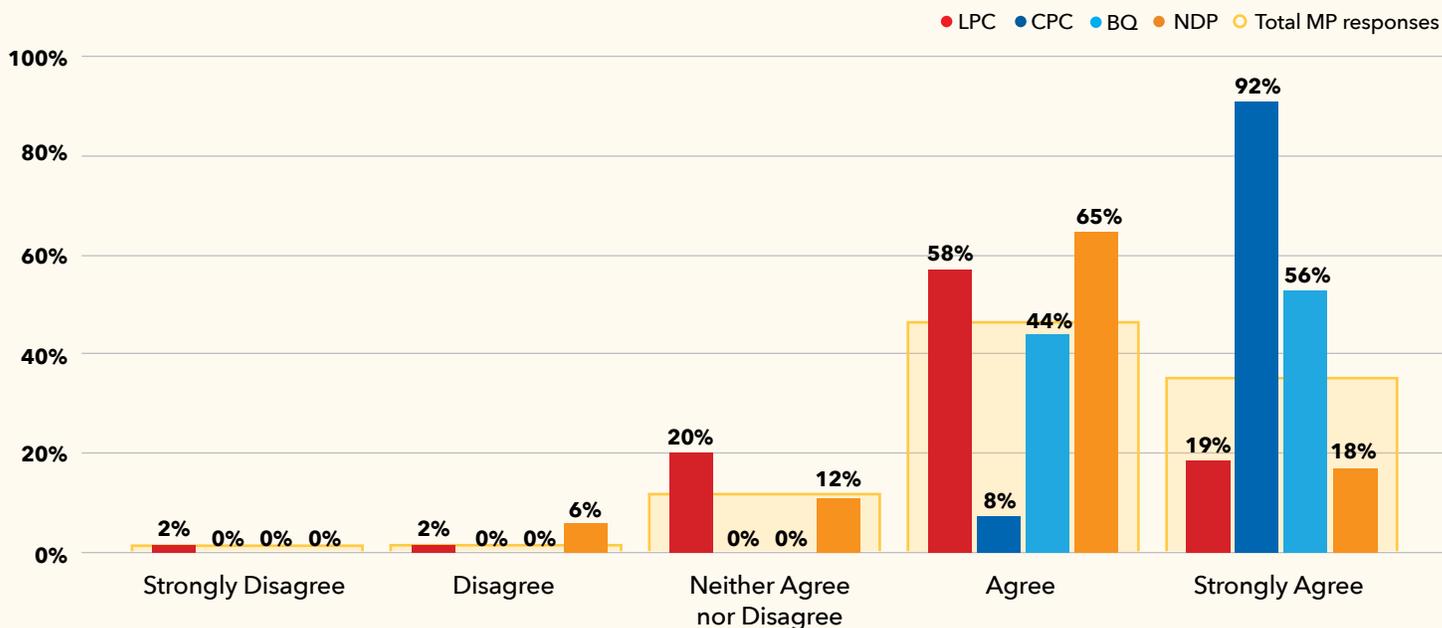
to be safe [or] on our parliamentary privilege to vote on legislation. – Member of Parliament

That’s the dilemma. While physical distancing and limiting travel are recommended, which political values should inform how to proceed?¹³ Do MPs already agree on certain principles, in order to facilitate coming up with a solution that would work for most?

Among a battery of questions relating to political values during the pandemic, MPs agreed on two clear priorities.

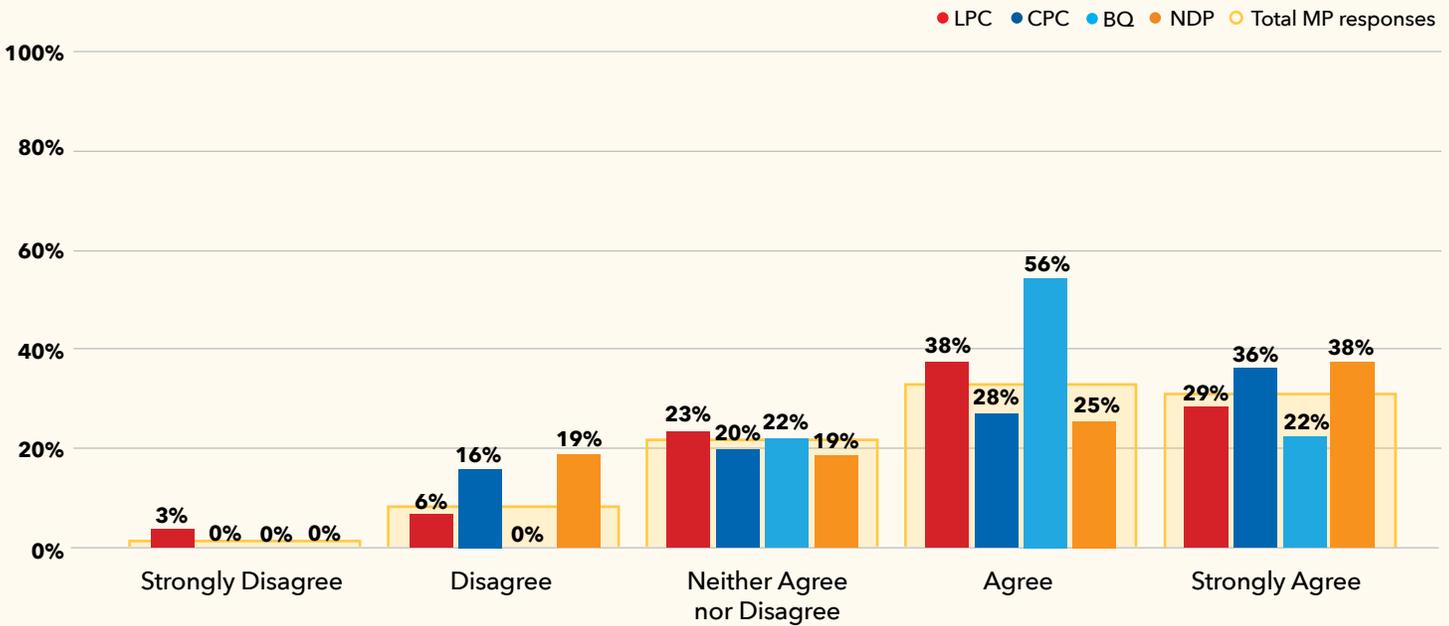
→ A significant majority of MPs from all parties agree that it’s important for Parliament to meet regularly in a crisis to scrutinize the government: 82% of all Members, including 100% of Conservative and Bloc MPs, 83% of the New Democrats, and 77% of Liberals.

It is important for Parliament to meet regularly in a crisis to scrutinize the government



Note: Green MPs answered “neither” and “strongly disagree.”

Important decisions should be voted on by all MPs, not just the small group who have attended the House of Commons during the pandemic



Note: Both Green MPs both answered "strongly agree."

→ A majority of MPs from each political party also agreed with the following statement: important decisions should be voted on by all MPs, not just the small group who attended the House of Commons during the pandemic. Seventy-eight per cent of Bloc MPs agreed, along with 67% of Liberals, 64% of Conservatives, and 63% of the NDP.

In short, MPs across parties do broadly agree on first principles—that the House of Commons should

meet regularly and that all Members should vote on important decisions. The agreement only collapses when it comes to designing practice. Keeping these shared values in mind, the Samara Centre sets out the options for how the House of Commons can operate below.

Recommendations

With cases of COVID-19 currently rising dramatically in some provinces, the prediction from epidemiologists of a second wave still to come, and the uncertain effects of re-opening schools, Parliament needs to adapt for the longer term. Ad-hoc emergency sittings do not make it possible for MPs to conduct regular high-quality scrutiny of Government activity, nor for all Members to have an equal opportunity to voice their concerns and represent their communities. MPs also need more support in adapting to their increased workload and new role in their constituencies, so they can better consult with their constituents virtually. Based on MPs' experiences during the first months of the pandemic, their assessment of Parliament, and their own suggestions for how to move forward, we offer three urgent recommendations.

In the constituency:



Provide digital resources for MPs to engage with their constituents

MPs need to remain connected with their constituents in order to communicate timely information, identify the gaps in new government programs, and consult with them on longstanding, still-urgent issues that have been supplanted by the pandemic response.

MP respondents expressed interest in receiving training on remote office tools, developing a more interactive website, and learning how to most effectively use digital communication technologies. If appropriately resourced, the House of Commons administration or Library of Parliament could make further training available to MPs and their staff to enable them to stay in touch with their constituents and colleagues during

physical distancing. Procuring sophisticated tech tools, like online and tele-town hall platforms, would make such tools affordable and accessible to MPs. The problem of inequitable access to broadband internet may not be immediately solvable, but with support from the House of Commons, some MPs can look for creative solutions for those rural communities where broadband access is an issue.¹⁴

The pandemic has removed many of the traditional means that allow MPs to stay connected with their communities. These means are not likely to be available any time soon. This is a promising moment for MPs to embrace digital engagement in more sophisticated ways, particularly if they are provided with help.



Equip MPs with exceptional access to information

Universally, MPs said the pandemic precipitated a surge in constituency casework. As Canada transitions away from some of the emergency benefits and potentially towards new programs, demand for help from constituents may again increase. In the past, the Samara Centre has strongly argued against the model of MP as constituency caseworker, doing a job that rightly belongs to the public service.¹⁵ But we recognize that in this unique and tumultuous time—and particularly when lockdowns close or limit access to other offices—MPs and their staff will inevitably be called upon as service delivery problem-solvers.

MPs require a direct line to the best, most accurate, and up-to-date information about the federal government's emergency programs, policies, and announcements, in order to respond to the influx of casework. Some MP respondents recommended a literal tele-

phone line to help MPs get in touch with relevant departments, or a knowledgeable team of civil servants capable of providing technical briefings on the fly. MPs have always been resourceful in getting in touch with the public service in order to help constituents. But given the present breakneck pace of change, the government should do all it can to reduce barriers to quality information.

In Parliament:



Finally find a workable compromise now for the House of Commons to meet regularly for the rest of the year, and into 2021

MPs agree on core values that should underpin future sittings of the House of Commons: that the House should meet regularly in order to effectively scrutinize Government decisions, and that all MPs should be able to vote on important legislation. Given the ongoing, undiminished need for physical distancing and travel limitations, this leaves them with a few options to consider:

→ **Hybrid virtual Parliament with remote participation**

The Samara Centre has previously recommended the use of a hybrid virtual Parliament “as the best of not-great options to keep Parliament working while Canada observes physical distancing and limits travel.”¹⁶ The maximum number of MPs that can be permitted while respecting physical distancing would meet in person in the House, and the rest would participate online.

This model would make it possible for all parts of the country to be represented in the decisions being made in Ottawa while allowing for MPs to stay connected with their ridings. Remote voting would need to be part and parcel of this model; the House of Commons administration has stated that this is operationally feasible and that it could be implemented fairly quickly.¹⁷

→ **Cloistering MPs in Ottawa and meeting regularly in person**

If MPs cannot agree on virtual proceedings, the other option is to have them meet regularly in person in Ottawa. This approach would require all MPs to relocate to the capital for an extended period, in order to limit travel and, for some, to avoid repeatedly having to quarantine. Given that only a limited number of MPs could be present in the Chamber at a time, MPs would also have to devise a new method of voting that respects physical distancing while allowing all Members to take part. Several options have already been outlined in a report by the Speaker of the House.¹⁸ Queuing, for example, would involve Members forming a long line that snakes through the courtyard around the Main Chamber, to vote individually at a desk. Shift voting would have Members divided into small cohorts, which would take turns entering the Main Chamber and voting in the usual way.

Both methods of voting are onerous; it is estimated that a single vote would take up to an hour in queuing, and over three hours in shift voting.¹⁹ Members would need to agree to live in Ottawa for considerably longer than they are accustomed, creating significant family disruptions. And with the prolonged time away, MPs would have to take special care to stay connected to their constituencies (digital engagement would help here). But the cloistered approach would enable all MPs to take part fully in House of Commons sittings, without resorting to a tradition-defying virtual Parliament.

As noted above, the Samara Centre has expressed a preference for the first option. A hybrid virtual Parliament is simpler and, given MPs’ typical reluctance to be away from their constituencies for long, more likely to come to pass. It is a major departure from the past, and

only justifiable while full in-person sittings are impossible, but ensures both ongoing scrutiny of Government and representation of all Canadians.

At the same time, we recognize the profound resistance some MPs—particularly those of the Official Opposition—have towards virtual participation. It is never ideal to make changes to the democratic process over strenuous objections of some parties. As a result, all parties need to make a renewed good-faith effort at compromise. If the House moves to implement a hybrid virtual Parliament, it should do so with a clear understanding and public commitment that such arrangements are temporary, meant to be regularly re-instated by the Members and retired as soon as the crisis subsides. The caucuses should collaborate to ensure that the contingent of MPs based in Ottawa is as large as is possible, feasible, and safe in order to preserve the symbolic centrality of the capital and the physical chamber.

Respect for the concerns and values of all parties can also be reflected in the remote voting mechanism that is chosen. The Samara Centre has recommended a straightforward roll call vote, in which Members vote by voice in the House and on screen²⁰—an approach which has now been implemented in British Columbia. Though time-consuming, this approach represents the smallest possible departure from a conventional in-person vote. It would accommodate the uneasiness some MPs feel towards an electronic voting system like an app, and the suggestion by some MPs that there is important symbolic accountability in Canadians (theoretically) seeing their representative cast a vote.²¹ This looks like the most likely approach for the start of the new session, with the Government pushing for an eventual transition to app-based voting. Unless the experiment of roll-call voting goes very badly, it may be worth sticking with voting visibly and out loud.

What is clear is that the House of Commons needs

to begin sitting immediately and regularly.²² Aside from the daily oversight the pandemic response requires, the immense financial, social and medical toll of the pandemic—one that hasn't even been fully revealed—needs attention. Other important issues that have fallen by the wayside, such as medically assisted dying, climate change, reconciliation, and the opioid crisis, cannot wait. Elected representatives must also address new concerns that arise, to limit the potential loss of trust if our democratic institutions seem less responsive and more out of touch.

Jurisdiction	Sitting days, Mar. 16 - Sept. 22
Alberta	47
Prince Edward Island	28
Ontario	29
British Columbia	21
Saskatchewan	17
Northwest Territories	17
Quebec	17
Newfoundland and Labrador	15
House of Commons (Canada)	14
Senate (Canada)	12
New Brunswick	11
Manitoba	9
Yukon	4
Nunuvut	2
Nova Scotia	0

Other jurisdictions have been able to make it work. Since March 16, the week after which the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, the UK's House of Commons has sat 51 times, the New Zealand House of Representatives 41 times, and Germany's Bundestag 34 times. Compared to provincial and territorial legislatures, Canada's House of Commons is in the middle of the pack when it comes to the number of sitting days since the beginning of the pandemic. Of course, Canada's national legislature is uniquely challenged by its enormous geography. It will be harder at the federal level, but there are options.

Conclusion

Our survey asked MPs how long they expected the pandemic’s physical distancing protocols to affect their work in their constituencies, and when they thought the next full, in-person sitting of the House of Commons would occur. It is possible that in the spring, when the survey was conducted, many MPs—like so many of the rest of us—underestimated the pandemic’s longevity.

Six months into the pandemic, with no certain end in sight, the House of Commons is still struggling to land a working consensus on how parliamentar-

ians should be empowered to do their jobs. As the Government presents its Throne Speech and gets back to work this fall, MPs must prioritize collaboration anew—at the very least on the question of how to have a functioning legislature that can make future-shaping decisions. This is 2020: there are no perfect options, but the House of Commons is an essential service. And since MPs agree on first principles, a compromise that sustains our parliamentary democracy is possible.

MPs’ predictions for how long physical distancing protocols would affect the working arrangements for them and their staff

Less than one month	4%
1 to 3 months	27%
3 to 6 months	28%
6 to 12 months	15%
More than a year	10%
Don’t know	17%

MPs’ predictions for the timing of the next full, in person sitting of the House of Commons

Summer 2020	4%
Fall/Winter 2020	43%
Winter/Spring 2021	21%
Second half of 2021	7%
Don’t know	18%
Other	7%

Methodology

This was the fifth time sitting MPs have been surveyed by the Samara Centre. The survey was conducted from May 11 to June 26, 2020. The original deadline for submitting responses was June 5, but it was extended to June 19 at the beginning of June. Late responses were accepted for a week after the deadline.

Due to the pandemic, the survey was conducted entirely online. MPs were prompted nearly each week by email to their general parliamentary addresses while the survey was in the field. All emails included a link to the Survey Monkey version of the survey and, starting at the beginning of June, also included a PDF version of the survey. The survey was anonymous, and it was available in both English and French.

Specific outreach throughout the survey period was made to key members of each party caucus, with a request for them to encourage participation from their colleagues. After a month of the survey being in the field, personalized invitations were also sent to MPs

from parties that were under-represented in the survey sample in order to reflect the makeup of the House of Commons.

Just under 40% of MPs took part in the survey. At the time, 338 MPs were sitting in the House. Of the 130 MPs who started the survey, 123 completed it. These 123 complete responses—representing 36% of MPs in the House of Commons—were used for the analysis in this report. The demographic information of MPs in the House of Commons was obtained from the Library of Parliament's ParInfo website. Additional web searches supplemented some of the missing age information.

The full data set of MP responses has been made public at samaracanada.com/research, with only a few redactions made to preserve anonymity. If you have any questions regarding the survey or the data, please direct them to the Samara Centre's Research Director, Mike Morden, at mike.morden@samaracanada.com.

Acknowledgments

To all the unnamed MPs for taking the time during an especially demanding period to participate in the survey, thank you. To the MPs, provincial/territorial representatives, and others who spoke to us on the phone during the early days of the pandemic, we wish to share how instrumental you were to developing this year's survey. We are also extremely grateful to political staff who passed along our requests and reminders to

MPs, and who helped print, scan, and email the PDF copies of the survey. Thank you also to the Parliamentary Internship Program interns who encouraged the participation of MPs with whom they'd been paired. This year's response rate wouldn't have been possible without the help of our wide community of support within Parliament, and our broader community of volunteers, donors, and supporters.

End Notes

1. The Samara Centre's previous MP surveys have asked MPs for their views on incivility in the House of Commons (Mike Morden et al. (2017), "No One is Listening: Incivility in the 42nd Parliament, and how to fix it,") to evaluate certain parliamentary reforms (Adelina Petit-Vouriot et al. (2018), "The 2018 Member of Parliament Survey: Evaluating the House of Commons and options for reform"), and to review their work—and workplace—in the 42nd Parliament (Paul EJ Thomas et al. (2020), "House Inspection: A retrospective of the 42nd Parliament."). The datasets and reports for each survey can be freely accessed at www.samaracanada.com/research.
2. Terhas Ghebretacle, et al. (2018), "Beyond the Barbecue: Reimagining constituency work for local democratic engagement". Toronto: The Samara Centre for Democracy. <https://www.samaracanada.com/research/political-leadership/mp-exit-interviews/volume-ii/beyond-the-barbecue>.
3. This can represent up to 100 new cases a week, according to the Samara Centre for Democracy 2019 MP Survey. Data file and code book available at <http://www.samaracanada.com/research>.
4. For additional information about the constituency role of MPs during the pandemic, see Royce Koop, Kelly Blidook, and Lesley Anne Fuga, (2020), Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected MPs' Representational Activities? *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 53(2), 287-291. doi:10.1017/S0008423920000566.
5. There were only two survey respondents who identified themselves as Green Party MPs and four MPs who preferred not to share their party affiliation. These responses are not featured in the graphs broken down according to political parties, but are included in the total MP responses—the shaded box behind the columns representing responses from the Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, and NDP respondents. The responses from the two Green MPs are written beneath each of these graphs.
6. Paul EJ Thomas (2020), "Parliament Under Pressure: Evaluating Parliament's performance in response to COVID-19." Toronto: The Samara Centre for Democracy. <https://www.samaracanada.com/democracy-monitor/parliament-under-pressure>.
7. Anthony Rota in Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, 43rd Parliament, 1st Session, Meeting 14 (May 4, 2020), Evidence of Proceedings, <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/43-1/PROC/meeting-14/evidence>.
8. Scott Reid, "Why I am in the House today," *Scott Reid's Blog*, March 24, 2020, <https://scottreid.ca/why-i-am-in-the-house-today>.
9. Paul EJ Thomas (2020), "Parliament Under Pressure: Evaluating Parliament's performance in response to COVID-19." Toronto: The Samara Centre for Democracy, <https://www.samaracanada.com/democracy-monitor/parliament-under-pressure>.
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