

Creating A "Citizen-Friendly" Arkansas General Assembly

Fusing the Disconnect Between Citizens and their Legislature

Wes Hance, Hendrix College



ARKANSAS POLICY
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PHOTOGRAPHY BY GERARD MATTHEWS

Executive Summary

Confidence in the Arkansas legislature has been declining over the last few decades. Though negative public perception has plagued the Arkansas General Assembly since it was first run by the state’s political elites in the 1830’s¹, recent figures have shown that only about six percent of Arkansans feel they can trust the legislature to do proper work, with 83 percent of those polled feeling “cautious” about rating the legislature’s work as efficient (Whistler 2010). In 2015, the General Assembly received a 35 percent approval rating, in contrast to a 24 percent disapproval rating. Data from the 91st General Assembly showed the disapproval rating increased by 20 points from the previous two years, giving the legislature a dismal 44

percent disapproval rating (Brock 2017). This hints at a bigger problem than just ongoing negative perceptions of Arkansas politicians; it suggests the disconnect between the citizens of Arkansas and their state legislature is growing.

This is deeply concerning. Public interaction with the legislature is crucial to the well-being of Arkansans. State government affects practically every facet of an individual citizen’s life, including the ability to attain a quality education, access to affordable health care, and protection of individual rights under the law. For this reason, it is vital that Arkansas citizens stay engaged with the actions of their government and make sure the legislature represents their interests.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN CHILSON

This paper analyzes the accessibility and “citizen-friendliness” of the legislature with an eye toward improving political engagement. The overall “citizen-friendliness” will be determined by investigating three different aspects of the public’s interaction with the General Assembly: (1) the ability of citizens to come in contact with legislators and participate in the legislative process; (2) the availability to access resources that allow citizens to empower themselves; and (3) the role of schools, news media, and the legislature itself in providing quality civics education to the public so it may better understand and appreciate the legislative process. Some steps have already been taken to increase citizen input and interaction with the legislature. Facilities have been updated, technological advancements have been utilized, and accesses to educational resources has been improved upon. However, in order for the Arkansas legislature to reach a level of accessibility that improves the public’s confidence, there needs to be further updates to some of the archaic facilities and user resources offered today. Reform efforts in other states show that much more can be done.

This report will conclude with suggestions for ways the legislature can become more accessible to the public. Though creating a more accessible General Assembly may not intrinsically cause higher approval ratings for the body, easier access to state government can provide an avenue for increased civic engagement and create a more informed citizenry.

Comparison of the Arkansas General Assembly with other State Legislative Bodies

The Arkansas General Assembly, which proudly embraces the label of “Citizen Legislature,” has historically represented a state which values a populist political ideology (Whistler 2010). This populist culture can be seen in the state motto, “Regnat Populus,” which translates to “the people rule.” If the state embraces a political culture of citizens taking part in government, then that government should be accessible to Arkansans who want to be part of the process. But is it?



PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN CHILSON

Interactions with Legislators and the Legislature

Whether in session or during the interim, Arkansas legislators are generally accessible to those constituents who seek them out. Every senator and representative's email and telephone number are available on their respective Senate and House websites (the user-friendliness of this information will be covered in detail later in the paper.). Elected officials at the Capitol are known to be approachable after committee meetings or just in passing.² Personalized messages such as emails, telephone calls, or handwritten letters are the most effective way for an Arkansas citizen to contact their state legislator. Elected officials in Arkansas work and live alongside the citizens they represent, and are most receptive to direct input during and out of session.³

Personalized messages are especially effective when there is a bill in the House or Senate about which voters in a legislator's district feel strongly. The critical mass of constituent messages necessary to affect how a legislator will view proposed legislation is not hard to meet (Blair and Barth 2005). Arkansas legislators, therefore, are generally receptive to constituents who are trying to get in direct contact with their offices. In the executive branch, Governor Asa Hutchinson's creation of a "MyIdea" hotline for constituents has provided an opportunity for increased citizen input on the affairs of state government.⁴

Town halls and interim meetings held away from the Capitol are another opportunity for personal interactions between legislators and constituents. Town hall meetings in a legislator's hometown are an effective

way for representatives to get input from constituents who are unable to travel to Little Rock.⁵ However, after a recent spate of combative town halls held by national political figures in Arkansas, it is unclear if legislators will be willing to host these types of events for fear of political opposition (Sutton and Schor 2017). Legislative committees that wish to meet outside the Capitol can arrange for interim meetings in any area of the state and have staff join to make a record of the event. Interim meetings away from the Capitol are not mandatory; if a meeting is to occur, it is decided by the committee chair as to when and where it will be.⁶

Constituents who want to do more than just call or email their legislator have the option of testifying personally at committee hearings. These hearings are the only meetings where non-legislators have the ability to share their position on proposed legislation and are therefore critical in allowing citizens access to the legislative process.

In the House and Senate, citizens who wish to testify will follow this general process:

First, they must find the location and time of the committee meeting they wish to attend by visiting the Arkansas General Assembly web page to find a time and meeting place. House committee rules state that meetings are to be scheduled at least 18 hours in advance. However, meetings can be scheduled two hours in advance provided that two-thirds of the committee members approve.⁷ Senate meeting times are determined each session by the Senate Rules Committee.⁸

Second, the citizen must determine the designated Capitol meeting room and sign a form putting him or her on the schedule to testify.

Third, when/if the bill is being considered that day, the citizen may be able to testify in front of the committee when the proposed legislation of interest is being discussed.

While citizens can attend committee hearings and schedule a time to testify, this does not guarantee that a citizen will be able to provide their input to legislators on the committee that day. Bills in the Arkansas legislature can be pulled by either the sponsor or the committee chair for any reason they deem fit. Though there are instances in which a bill is pulled for further editing or amendments before it can be

testified against, legislators can and have used their authority as the sponsor of a bill to manipulate when their bill is presented in committee in an effort to avoid opposition from interest groups or citizens.⁹ Also, since the chair of the committee determines the length of debate for proposed legislation, it is not guaranteed that a citizen will be able to speak before testimony is curtailed. Before each committee session, the committee staff creates an agenda listing all the bills that could be potential subjects of debate (without listing a specific order or timeframe) which creates uncertainty as to which bills will be discussed on a given day. This presents challenges for citizens or interest groups who may travel from across the state to provide input on proposed legislation only to find the bill is not “running” on the scheduled day or is subject to a shortened debate time, preventing them from testifying.

Citizens can also utilize interest groups and lobbyists to work for legislation on their behalf. Many Arkansans working in business, agricultural, or automotive industries and dealerships have utilized lobbyists to contact the legislators of their respective districts to vote on key issues that affect them directly (Whistler 2010). Lobbyists, therefore, do not work on behalf of the general public but rather individual Arkansans with the economic means to afford their services. While there are many lobbyists present at the legislature, citizens can still make a meaningful impact via interest groups that argue on behalf of groups of constituents. Interest groups depend upon active citizen members, and in recent years progressive interest group coalitions have been quite successful at achieving social changes in Arkansas (Barth 2012).

How other States Increase Communications

Many legislatures across the United States have realized the importance of linking citizens to state government in order to legitimize legislative procedure. This has led to some innovative advancements in the ways citizens and legislators communicate. In fact, according to a National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) report, there are nine state legislatures that require a

public hearing on all bills before the legislature votes on them. This ensures that citizen input is given (Kurtz 1997b). Also, the legislatures of Minnesota, Missouri, Louisiana, Washington, and West Virginia are known to hold frequent public hearings and interim committee meetings outside of their respective Capitols (Kurtz 1997b). Though Arkansas legislators do this occasionally, these states enforce policies requiring meetings and hearings outside the Capitol. Legislatures that implement these rules find that it allows citizens who may not be able to travel to their State Capitols the opportunity to see and understand the legislative process. The Louisiana, Minnesota, and Utah State legislatures found these meetings outside their capitals to be so successful that they implemented legislation which designates two to three different locations around the state where the legislature encourages committees to meet in what are known as “mini sessions” (NCSL 2001).

A few legislatures have also found a way to allow citizens to attend and testify at committee meetings via the internet. The legislatures of Nevada, Wyoming, and Alaska allow citizens to testify before committees via satellite; similarly, the Texas State Legislature provides video conferencing resources at district offices so constituents may be able to personally talk with their legislator from a location more accessible to them than the Capitol (Kurtz 1997b). So a trend is emerging of legislatures across the United States actively utilizing modern technology to better communicate with citizens who want to participate in the process.

Availability and User-Friendliness of Resources

A state legislature may have resources for citizens to learn more about the legislative process or contact their legislators, however, when discussing accessibility it is important to evaluate whether these resources truly are readily available and manageable for citizens.

The Arkansas General Assembly website provides useful information during and out of session. Citizens can access a few significant resources via the homepage of the website. These include:

An agenda of all legislative meetings that will be held at or away from the Capital on that day;

A bar at the top of the page designated for manually searching bills by House or Senate code, bill number, and Act;

A sidebar to the left which allows users to look up legislators, a list of committees, and a calendar of legislative events;

A sidebar to the right which provides users with other resources such as looking up other state agencies or learning more about the work done by the Bureau of Legislative Research; and

Tabs located at the top of the page to access the Senate or House websites.

Source: <http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/assembly/2017/2017R/Pages/Home.aspx>

The General Assembly website is serviced by programmers at the nonpartisan Arkansas Bureau of Legislative Research (BLR). These programmers go through web-design training and attend national conferences such as the NCSL to gain further expertise on user-friendly web design.¹⁰ Programmers are constantly updating information provided on the website, such as the daily agenda or new legislation. Yet, the design of the General Assembly's website appears archaic when compared to other states' legislative websites.

The bill-tracking feature of the General Assembly website, provided by BLR, can be used during the session by interested constituents, as well as media, to follow proposed legislation of interest. Users of the service can create an account and select specific bills to track. The user will then receive an update on the status of the bill each day at midnight.¹¹ Many have found this service to be advantageous, including citizens who want to keep up with proposed legislation and journalists who need updates for accurate reporting.

The House and Senate websites are each run separately from the General Assembly page developed by BLR staff. The House website offers the same resources

found on the Assembly page along with House committee announcements, Twitter updates, and a website specifically for children to learn more about the legislature. There is also accessibility to a video library in which the House has all committee and chamber hearings available in both live-stream and audio formats.¹² The Senate website, however, does not provide as many resources as the House or General Assembly pages. Citizens can follow Senate-specific updates on the website and learn more about the Senate in general, but the Senate does not provide a database of live-streamed meetings since it purportedly lacks the capability to do so. All that is accessible to the public via the internet are audio recordings of meetings, and even then there are many committee meetings which have no audio.

While websites serve as a way for citizens to learn more about the legislature and the services it provides, their ability to understand proposed legislation is another form of "accessibility" worth review. Bills are drafted following a manual which is displayed on the BLR branch of the General Assembly website. Bills undergo an editing process carried out by BLR editors and attorneys which varies in length based on the scope and substance of a bill.¹³ Historically, legislators have enacted a large volume of bills, and some have argued this could incentivize citizens to become involved since the likelihood of their proposed legislation passing is relatively high (Blair and Barth 2005). However, in 2001 the NCSL conducted an assessment of the General Assembly and found that this high output of legislation leads to poor craftsmanship and ultimately creates confusing and misleading bills (NCSL 2001). For constituents hoping to understand what legislation is being proposed and passed at the Capitol, this is problematic.

Another primary resource that all Arkansans can utilize are "constituent services" provided by both the House and Senate. Constituent services are used to handle casework, letters of recommendation, thank you letters, and the general inquiries of constituents on behalf of their representative. They can be reached directly through the House or Senate websites; otherwise, constituents are transferred to constituent services by

their state legislator. Constituent services provide two staff members for every 20 representatives in the House and two staff members to cover the entire Senate.¹⁴ Many legislators appreciate the work done by this branch of the legislature since it allows them to focus more on lawmaking while also helping constituents in their district.

Utilization of Resources in Other States

Several legislatures around the country have realized the importance of developing strong, ongoing communication between the legislative body and their constituents. An understanding of the importance of constituent input has led many legislatures to implement measures which provide citizens with access to helpful and easily accessible resources.

As more citizens in the U.S. use the internet for accessing information, state legislatures have designed advanced websites to better meet the needs of those citizens. A perfect example of this adaptation to a modern citizenry is the Virginia legislature's website which is run by its Legislative Information Services (LIS). This website includes:

Easy to use web design with access to meeting schedules and recent news;

A search engine for bills which includes an executive summary of each bill along with a filter for committee, subject, day, House, Senate, sponsor of bill, and whether a piece of legislation is currently running or has been passed;

Access to learning tools for students and teachers along with information resources to gain better insight on the legislative process; and

A bar across the top of the page for easy access to a bill tracking service and legislator search.

Source: <http://virginiageneralassembly.gov/>

All of this information can be found directly on the Virginia legislature's homepage, and the organization of tabs and information on the page is user-friendly and allows for easy access. While the Arkansas House and Senate have their own independent sites with data and resources, all information and news regarding the different chambers of the Virginia General Assembly are synthesized into one page and regulated by Virginia's LIS. Having a single website makes the information more accessible. The Tennessee General Assembly website also combines General Assembly, House, and Senate pages to one URL with advanced design. The website is exceptionally organized with advanced search engines that enhance user experience.¹⁵

State legislatures have also taken steps to increase access by improving the availability of live broadcasts of the legislative process. Constituents of the Washington legislature are able to access legislative debates, committee hearings, and other public government meetings through live-stream audio and video (Kurtz 1997b). State legislatures that are demographically comparable to Arkansas, such as Utah and Tennessee, also provide audio or visual access to all House, Senate, and joint committees via a streaming library on their respective websites.¹⁶ This has proved to be an easy and efficient way for legislatures to provide access to the public.

Constituent services and facilities at State Capitols are an essential resource that legislatures should make available to all citizens, especially those with special needs. While most legislatures simply offer information to contact one's legislator and legislative staff, the California and Maine General Assemblies have taken extra steps to ensure all constituents can participate in state government. Each assembly's website offers a section with information on accessibility to the legislature which includes staff members to contact for wheelchair and walker accommodations, information on sign language interpreters, locations of ramps around the State Capitol, and a list of planned initiatives, such as Maine's plan to launch a Braille

production service.¹⁷ Others, such as the Florida General Assembly, produce constituent services manuals for legislators. These manuals educate lawmakers on how to properly handle constituent casework and provide contact information for constituent services staff if a citizen needs to be transferred to a specific government agency (Kurtz 1997a).

The Role of the Legislature, Media, and Schools in Civic Education

Education is crucial when discussing accessibility. A state's citizenry cannot become involved with the legislative process if it is not informed about the functions of state government. As noted by Donald E. Whistler, in order to maintain a healthy democracy, citizens need an adequate background of civic knowledge to utilize government programs (Whistler 2010). If this report looks to analyze how accessible the Arkansas legislature is, there must be an examination of its role in informing both citizens and legislators on the workings of government.

The Arkansas legislature has taken steps to expand civic education within the state. Currently, state legislators can go through a program provided by the NCSL called "Take Your Legislator to School Month" in which lawmakers are able to visit schools across the state, providing insights to the inner-workings of state government as well as answering questions students may have (ASBA 2015). For students and teachers looking for resources to learn more about Arkansas government, the Secretary of State's website has a section dedicated to providing activities and presentations on civic learning. The website also has links for those wanting to witness the legislature by scheduling a visit to the Capitol.¹⁸ While these are important initiatives taken by the legislature to ensure a better understanding of state government, there have been obstacles to a better civic education curriculum being passed by the legislature. House Bill 1539, requires Arkansas public school students to pass the civics portion of the naturalization test in order to graduate from high school, passed both chambers and was signed into law as Act 478. Representatives

in the 91st General Assembly introduced the bill to help alleviate citizen disengagement with state government (Pettit 2017). But the bill faced scrutiny from both ends of the political spectrum. Some read it as a form of government intrusion. Others cited a lack of evidence to support the effectiveness of the naturalization test. The law provides no new education on state government's workings, including citizen interaction with the legislature, and there is still uncertainty about the effectiveness of the written naturalization test. Much of the other legislation that was intended to make meaningful civic education reforms has made little legislative progress. This includes implementing co-curricular activities to support civic engagement, updating formal Social Studies curricula and assessments, and teaming up with civic education organizations to improve state standards on civic education.

The Arkansas State Legislature should also be held accountable for providing new and experienced legislators with the necessary information to do their job correctly and efficiently. New legislators participate in an orientation to educate them on their elected positions. The House holds its orientation over a span of three to five days in December after an election cycle; the Senate orientation, due to smaller turnover than the House, is at most three days. Newly-elected representatives go over basic procedures, learn how to work with the BLR in the bill drafting process, listen to members of the media and lobbyists to understand how to interact properly with both, and learn how to work with constituent services.¹⁹ This program provides new legislators a way to better understand their duties so they may become more efficient in their work with both constituents and the legislature. No matter how much experience a legislator has, the BLR serves as an indispensable educational tool for legislators to stay informed on proposed legislation and services by providing research and data.

While the legislature serves an important role in educating both legislators and the public, Arkansas citizens get an increasing amount of information on the legislature from local media outlets. Through media, such as the widely-circulated *Arkansas*

Democrat-Gazette, citizens can learn about what is happening at the legislature without having to spend excessive time or money traveling to the Capitol. State media have access to many facilities at the Capitol, and there are frequent press meetings during sessions at locations such as the Capitol steps, the Governor's conference room, and the old Supreme Court room.²⁰ Reporters generally have easy access to legislators. It is generally easier to access House proceedings, which are live-streamed via the internet. The Senate does not provide the same access. For elected officials that hope to provide information to their constituents, the legislature provides a weekly synopsis during the session for legislators to distribute to news outlets in their home districts. The legislature also helps direct legislators to radio shows in their districts to provide recaps on what is happening at the Capitol each week.²¹ Legislators have also begun utilizing social media as a form of direct contact to report events in the legislature and gain input from constituents on the issues at hand. Social media, however, can also harm the public perception of legislators since it puts their message and image on a more visible platform. Several Arkansas Senators have undergone scrutiny from constituents due to their posting of offensive rhetoric and their blocking of users who oppose their views (Brantley 2017).

Civic Education in Other States

Improving access and the quality of civic education is an important principle that all state legislatures should share. Therefore, an analysis of how other legislatures promote and implement civic education through curriculum, the media, and information resources is important to understanding how different lawmaking bodies value educating citizens.

Some legislatures have implemented innovative requirements for high school graduates to receive their diploma. The West Virginia legislature requires prospective graduates to display "citizenship" which can be met by taking formal courses or participating in public service deeds (Kedrowski 2003). State legislatures have also teamed up with organizations to better teach students about the functions of state government. The Minnesota legislature has worked

with NCSL to produce textbooks and brochures to be distributed to schools throughout the state. In Georgia, the Institute of Government at the University of Georgia provides curricular materials and civic education workshops for civics teachers (Kurtz 1997b).

Contemporary research into effective civics education curriculum has also shed light on how to best educate high school students about federal and state government. Based on the findings of political scientists David E. Campbell and Richard G. Niemi, students who attend school in districts which implement "high-stakes exams" required for graduation coupled with civics courses are most likely to absorb the most political knowledge (Campbell and Niemi 2016). The study also found that marginalized groups such as Latino or immigrant students would greatly benefit from this model, shattering the previously conceived notion that this form of civics education only benefits affluent white students (Campbell and Niemi 2016). This data is extremely important for state legislatures to evaluate since it can be used to enhance the political knowledge of young citizens. It is also important for legislatures to be kept up to date on research since it can sometimes be used to counter proposed pieces of legislation. For example, as the idea of administering the civics portion of the naturalization test in high schools has gained momentum, there has been new research warning against this measure. Empirical research examining the effectiveness of the civics portion found that the exam was not a reliable or valid way to measure an individual's civic knowledge. If a high school hopes to truly teach students how to be active citizens, better alternatives should be advanced (Winke 2011). Possible programs for implementation by the Arkansas legislature will be pursued later in the report.

Legislatures have also found a way to better educate citizens by providing accessible information on General Assembly websites. The Oregon legislature offers those who visit their site a tab on the homepage titled "Citizen Engagement." This feature offers links to educational resources as well as pamphlets on how to be an active citizen at the Capitol.²² The Virginia General Assembly web page offers a resource known as "Capitol Classroom" which allows students from

all levels to learn more about the Virginia legislature through activities and information packets.²³ Information from the Capitol Classroom covers topics ranging from programs offered by the House and Senate to basic government functions such as enacting laws and the history of the legislature. Easily accessible civic resources provided to constituents through General Assembly websites demonstrate a legislature that understands the growing importance of the internet as a means to educating the public.

We can also find examples of how other legislatures have adapted their facilities and legislative procedures in order to improve media access and prepare newly elected officials. In Minnesota, while the General Assembly is in session, the House majority leader heads a weekly press conference to inform local media about the House agenda (Kurtz 1997b). The legislature of Arizona, realizing the importance of providing information to the media and the public, releases an annual report which contains frequently asked questions by media with responses (Kurtz 1997b). State media and the legislatures in Arizona and Minnesota are thus able to be in continuous contact and better provide information to citizens. State legislatures also understand the importance of preparing new members. Kentucky, seeing how newly elected legislators had no time to become effective lawmakers before the session, switched their biennial session to even-numbered years. This allowed new legislators to use the interim to learn legislative procedure, how to be active legislators, and how to properly serve their constituents (NCSL 2001). Switching the session to even-numbered years also improved bill drafting since new members had the entire interim to conduct research and figure out which concerns needed to be addressed in their districts. Other biennial legislatures, wanting to give more time to elect heads of committees and prepare for the session, moved their assembly dates back; Alabama realized this benefit and decided to convene in March (NCSL 2001).

Creating a Better Arkansas Government for Citizens

In order for the Arkansas legislature to become more accessible to the public, many changes should be adopted. These suggestions should be carried out through new legislation, updates to legislative procedures, and improvements to resources such as the General Assembly website. While some recommendations may be easier for the legislature to establish, proposals made in this section of the report are all practical solutions to accessibility concerns that have proven to yield a more informed and engaged citizenry in other states.

Improvements to communication

Committee Rules: To ensure citizens who want to participate in the legislative process are given the opportunity to testify for or against a bill, House and Senate committees should modify their respective procedures for their meetings. There should be some means to prevent bills from being pushed around the agenda to avoid opposition. For instance, the Senate and House could adopt rules banning legislators from pulling a bill within a certain number of hours of the bill's hearing. If an amendment to a bill were needed, this could occur after the bill has been discussed in committee. Following the lead of other states, it should be required that all bills be subject to public hearings before coming to a vote in the House or Senate.

Town Halls: Town halls are a way for citizens to directly communicate with their representatives and are essential to a strong representative democracy. Therefore, the Arkansas General Assembly should encourage legislators to hold meetings in their districts to cover issues important to their constituents and the state. It is recommended that the legislature set aside an amount of time during the session, possibly a week, for legislators to hold these town halls in their

respective districts. This would provide constituents with an opportunity to directly communicate with their representatives during a legislative session and encourage citizen engagement with the legislature.

Interim Committees: The Arkansas legislature needs to make effective use of the interim between sessions since this period of time offers great potential for increased engagement with constituents. As is done in other states such as Louisiana, this report suggests that the legislature promote interim meetings outside the Capitol at designated locations across the state. By promoting this initiative, Arkansas residents who have never seen or participated in the legislative process would have access to committee members. This should be easy to implement, for many legislators would be spending roughly the same amount of time and money to visit places around the state as they already do when meeting at the Capitol.²⁴

Make Better Use of the Internet: Implementing online services such as video conferencing with legislators and facilitating testimony via the internet are a few ways in which the legislature could give citizens better access to state government. These public services could replicate similar programs in Minnesota and Texas mentioned earlier in the report. Legislative Information Services could provide supervision. However, to implement these services, updates to the technological resources offered to legislators - including modernized committee meeting rooms, particularly in the state Senate - would be required.

Better, More Accessible Resources:

Bill Quality over Quantity: The Arkansas legislature, along with the BLR, should focus less on high bill turnout and more on the quality of the bills being drafted. It is imperative that bills be understood clearly by legislators and constituents alike. Thus, BLR should take more time when drafting bills. The addition of summaries attached to bills would be helpful by providing explanations, in lay terms, of the bill's contents.

Pass Limit on Number of Bills Legislators Can Sponsor: Another possible solution to alleviate the high output

of legislation would be to put a cap on the amount of bills each legislator in the Arkansas House and Senate could sponsor. This would push legislators to focus more on introducing legislation which is beneficial to the state and constituents as opposed to drafting countless bills which lack substance and importance. A report conducted by the NCSL on bill limits backs this up. It found the twenty one U.S. legislatures that implemented bill limitations all determined it to decrease the amount of superfluous bills and increase the amount of time legislators have to research pertinent state issues (NCSL 2001).

Add Bill Screening Committees: To produce better quality legislation, the Arkansas House and Senate could create bill-screening committees which would examine bills for clarity. Membership in these committees would include attorneys. The committee would read proposed legislation and decide whether the bill was sufficiently clear and not in conflict current law. The addition of these committees could also incentivize better legislation since legislators would be voting on bills that they were better able and more likely to understand.

Broadcast/Live Stream: The Arkansas Senate should provide live audio/video of committee and chamber meetings just as the House does. The House is able to live-stream their meetings by linking the cameras and audio to microphones used by legislators. When a representative has the floor and turns on their microphone to address fellow members, the designated camera corresponding to that member's microphone turns on and captures the image.²⁵ If the Senate were to adopt the same formal committee procedures as the House and update their facilities to have the live-stream technology, it could also easily provide this service to the public.

Combine Senate, House, and Assembly Websites: To provide information for constituents on a more user-friendly website, the legislature should combine the Senate, House, and General Assembly sites. This design would allow constituents to access all information consolidated to a single domain and ultimately produce a more efficient website. The BLR should handle all information on this improved website; this would

Figure 1

CAPITOL LOGISTICS

SENATE - South end 3rd floor

501-682-2902 In-Session; [501-682-6107 Out-of-Session] The Senate usually convenes at 1:30 PM, Monday through Thursday. Check the Calendar.

HOUSE - North end 3rd floor

501-682-6211 In-Session; [501-682-7771 Out-of-Session] The House usually convenes at 1:30 PM, Monday – Thursday. Check the Calendar: sometimes it is in the morning.

When a Chamber is In Session

The House and Senate usually meet afternoons to vote at 1:30. Check the Calendar. A good time to catch your representative is while they're in session. Tell the staff in front of the Chamber you want to speak to your representative, and they'll show you how to ask. The public is not allowed in the Chamber. Watch from the 4th floor gallery or streamed live: audio on the Senate website, video on the House.

COMMITTEES

Bills are put on a committee agenda showing when they are supposed to be heard. However, just because a Bill is on an agenda for a certain day doesn't mean it will be heard that day. Likewise, though committees have scheduled meeting times and days, those are subject to change with little notice. While usually held in the morning, a meeting can also be scheduled for late that afternoon. Check the Daily Calendar throughout the day at: www.arkleg.state.ar.us.

The public can attend and participate in hearings. The best way to find out when a bill will

be heard is to ask the sponsor or your representative. House committee hearings only are live-streamed on the House website.

Showing Up and/or Testifying

Usually representatives know how they will vote before a committee meets, but constituents appearing at committees ALWAYS makes an impact, even if you don't speak-so few people do! To speak, sign-up as early as possible: they may not get through the list.

Senate Committees and Rooms

At the South end of the Capitol

Education - 207

Judiciary - 171

Public Health, Welfare & Labor - 272

Agriculture, Forestry, etc. - 309

Aging, Children & Youth, etc. - TBA

City, County and Local Affairs - 272

Insurance and Commerce - 171

Revenue and Taxes - OSC*

State Agencies & Gov't Affairs - OSC

Transportation, Technology, etc. - 309

*OSC - Old Supreme Court, 2nd floor

House Committees and Rooms

At the North end of the 1st floor

Education - 138

Judiciary - 149

Public Health, Welfare and Labor - 130

Revenue & Taxes - 151

Aging, Children & Youth, etc. - TBA

Agriculture, Forestry, etc. - 138

Insurance & Commerce - 149

State Agencies & Gov't Affairs - 151

City, County, Local Affairs - "Big MAC" B

Public Transportation - "Big MAC" B

The "Big MAC" building is behind the capitol.

Room B is on the 5th floor.

ENTER: Through the Main Entrance only!

PARKING: Limited. Come early. Metered spaces on Capitol Avenue or side streets. Be prepared to walk, get dropped off, or use the shuttle (see first page).

ELEVATORS: One on either side of the main entrance.

BATHROOMS: Lower Level: Women - North end, Men - South end. 1st floor: Same as Lower Level. 2nd and 4th floor- NONE! 3rd floor - both sexes South end.

FOOD AND DRINKS: No water fountains; bring in enclosed container. Food and drinks in Cafeteria on Lower Level, and 3rd floor snack bar (both, limited hours).

MISCELLANEOUS: Enter through the front. Bags are searched. Signs are allowed, but no sticks, and no signs are allowed in committee rooms.



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VISIT THE ACLU WEB PAGE

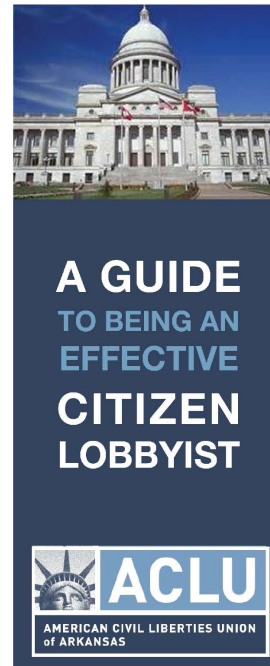
www.acluarkansas.org



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To Get Help: www.acluarkansas.org/get-help

Updated February 2017



Source: <https://www.acluarkansas.org/en/publications/guide-being-effective-citizen-lobbyist-arkansas>

ensure information on the domain is accurate, up to date, and nonpartisan.

Bill Tracking: The BLR should also update the Bill Tracking feature on the website to provide users with easier access to current bills. While the program already updates bills regularly and has some good features, it would be more accessible if the BLR were to add summaries of bills being tracked and additional filters such as "Committee" or "Subject of Bill."

Accessibility Section on Website: The General Assembly page should include a link on the homepage that provides the locations of handicap facilities and directs users to contacts and agencies that provide services to constituents with disabilities. It is the legislature's duty to provide these services since they allow anyone who wants to interact with state government the opportunity to do so. It would be an easy feature to employ.

Add Citizen Engagement Section: The website should also include a tab which covers all the resources available to constituents. The BLR could also draft a manual for constituents wanting to get involved, providing easy access to pamphlets on how to testify at

committee meetings or interact with interest groups. The pamphlets could be constructed along the lines of various advocacy groups' materials and focused on empowering citizens to be effective advocates (See Figure 1).

Switching the Fiscal and Legislative Sessions: To provide a longer period for newly elected legislators to learn their responsibilities and allow more time for legislative research, the Arkansas General Assembly would benefit from switching the fiscal and legislative sessions. This has shown to be an effective means of better educating legislators about state budgets as well as improving the quality of proposed legislation (NCSL 2001). A suitable alternative to this measure would be for the General Assembly to push the session start date closer to March. This would provide more time for new legislators and give a longer window for research on key issues facing the state.

Improved Education and Media Relations:

Pass Civic Education Legislation: The legislature should pass bipartisan legislation that addresses the need for an improved civics education curriculum. Working with state education agencies, the Arkansas legislature

should adopt programs which have been shown to provide better civic education curriculum. Examples of such programs are those produced by the National Council for the Social Sciences (NCSS) or Center for Civic Education. Each of these organizations provides state-specific education reform recommendations that could be used by education committees of both the House and Senate.

Relocate Educational Resources to Improved Website:

According to the Department of Education, Arkansas will be one of the few southern states that will provide internet access to all public schools starting the 2017 school year (Monteith 2017). Therefore, the Arkansas legislature should make sure all its educational resources are available to teachers and students through the General Assembly website. If educational resources were moved from the Secretary of State's website to the improved General Assembly page, teachers would be able to easily access civic education tools and inform students about Arkansas government and their duties as citizens. These resources should be on an independent tab on the front page of the website since this would be the most user-friendly approach.

Press Briefings: It is important to note that the legislature does embrace media relations and has scheduled press releases and designated conference spaces; however, it would be beneficial to the public and media if the legislature were to give weekly press briefings during the session. Weekly briefings would keep local media up to date on events and issues at the Capitol and create a more fluid exchange of information which should improve reporting for Arkansans. This would also provide good optics for the General Assembly and its leaders since it would increase government transparency.

Social Media: Arkansas government needs to take advantage of the impact social media has on constituents. Therefore, the Arkansas legislature should adopt guidelines for how Representatives and Senators can better utilize social media. These guidelines should include recommendations on proper etiquette for dealing with citizens, including not blocking communication with certain constituents. Utilizing

social media provides an excellent platform for Arkansas government to provide information on the legislature to a larger group of residents.

A Better Legislature for the Citizens of Tomorrow

If the Arkansas legislature is to provide the people of this state with a citizen-friendly, accessible government, it must encourage relationships between legislators and constituents, increase the availability of resources that are user-friendly, and focus more on the importance of civic education. While the legislature has taken measures to ensure accessibility, the suggestions for the legislature outlined in this report, if adopted, should improve access to information and foster a better understanding of state government for Arkansans.

The importance of educating citizens on being active constituents cannot be stressed enough. While the General Assembly can make access to information and resources easier, it will ultimately depend upon Arkansans understanding their role as citizens in a representative democracy before those resources and information will be fully utilized. Therefore, an increased focus on civic education from the legislature is vital when discussing ways to improve constituent accessibility.

Over time, the Arkansas General Assembly has made important adaptations to better meet the needs of citizens who desire to be active in state government. If the legislature hopes to continue representing constituents effectively and meeting its role of "Citizen Legislature," access is crucial. In fact, it is essential to a healthy, representative state government. This is the only way the Arkansas General Assembly can produce a state government which truly encourages the people's rule.

Notes

- ¹ The agricultural elite of Arkansas, known as “The Family”, held considerable political power during the formation of the Arkansas General Assembly in the 1830s. Using their education and money to depress the views of the Arkansas majority, “The Family” used political sway to enact the first state banks along with passing other major forms of legislation (Whistler 2010).
- ² Interview with radio journalist. July 13, 2017.
- ³ Interview with Legislator. June 14, 2017; Interview with Legislator. June 16, 2017.
- ⁴ MyIdea is an initiative started by Governor Asa Hutchinson during the summer of 2017. This initiative works as an online suggestion box for Arkansas citizens to provide input on the efficiency of Arkansas government. Suggestions are collected through the program’s telephone number or via the website myidea.arkansas.gov.
- ⁵ Legislator. Interview
- ⁶ Secretary of the Senate, Ann Cornwell. Interview. July 20, 2017.
- ⁷ Arkansas House Committee Rule 60(a)
- ⁸ Parliamentary Manual of the Senate. 2017
- ⁹ Legislator. Interview.
- ¹⁰ Marty Garrity. Director at Bureau of Legislative Research. Communication. July 14, 2017.
- ¹¹ Garrity. Communication
- ¹² Information from <http://www.arkansashouse.org/>
- ¹³ Garrity. Communication
- ¹⁴ Buddy Johnson. Parliamentarian of the House. Interview. July 18, 2017.
- ¹⁵ Information from <http://www.capitol.tn.gov/house/>
- ¹⁶ Information from <http://www.capitol.tn.gov/house/> and <https://le.utah.gov/>
- ¹⁷ Information from <https://malegislature.gov/StateHouse/AccessibilityInitiatives> and <http://assembly.ca.gov/accessibility>
- ¹⁸ Information from <http://www.sos.arkansas.gov/educational/students/Pages/civics.aspx>
- ¹⁹ 41st Institute of Legislative Procedure Handbook; Cornwell. Interview
- ²⁰ Radio Journalist. Interview.
- ²¹ Cornwell. Interview
- ²² Information from <https://www.oregonlegislature.gov/>
- ²³ Information from <http://viriniageneralassembly.gov/capitolClassroom.php?secid=23&activesec=5>
- ²⁴ Johnson. Interview.
- ²⁵ Legislator. Interview.
- ²⁶ During the Summer of 2017, a Federal Court in the state of Virginia ruled that a local public official acted against the First Amendment of the US Constitution by blocking a constituent. The discussion of constitutional limitations on social media has gained much traction following this case, and currently the ACLU of Florida has filed a similar lawsuit against Florida State Rep. Chuck Clemons. (Palazzolo 2017)

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