

How public engagement has become a must for parliaments in today's democracies

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of public engagement for parliaments has been increasingly recognized in recent years. In a generalized context of decline in trust in politics, increase in populist politics and expansion of misinformation, public engagement is often seen as a way of addressing some of the contemporary democratic malaises. However, there is also a lot of misunderstanding and suspicion in relation to public engagement and therefore associated resistance to developing effective practices that enable meaningful engagement. This short text outlines why public engagement should be seen as a core activity together with parliaments' other core roles such as law-making, scrutiny and representation. I explore the societal and technological changes that have led to the emergence of public engagement, to then identify why public engagement is a must for parliaments today. I finish with a very short outline of what public engagement can entail and on core effectiveness factors.

The structural and institutional frameworks of parliamentary institutions draw still today predominantly from those deriving from the liberal representative wave of the 19th and early 20th century that institutionalized the principles of representative democracy: a governance that is undertaken on behalf of citizens, who confer it legitimacy through elections. Members of Parliament are elected for a period of years, during which they act on behalf of their voters to enable and scrutinize government. And up to the turn of the 20th to the 21st century, this seemed a settled and perfectly appropriate institutional framework. However, we have witnessed major societal and technological changes over the past decades, which all explain why representative democracy institutions need to adapt and integrate new practices that facilitate a more continuing dialogue with citizens. Mandates acquired through elections are of course

at the core of a working democracy – after all it is an efficient way to undertake governance on behalf of millions of citizens – but they need to be supplemented by other processes; those often referred to generically as public engagement, or more specifically sometimes as participatory democracy.

FIVE CORE CHANGES THAT EXPLAIN THE NEED FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Change is complex and it is often difficult to single out individual causes. However, I identify five core changes that explain the need for public engagement by parliaments today: the rise of the so-called ‘critical citizen’; the rise in expectations towards politics namely in relation to transparency and accessibility; the rise of the internet; the decline in trust; the modern trends of political participation.

- **The rise of the ‘critical citizen’:** many authors refer to this idea, which is neatly encapsulated in the concept of ‘critical citizens’.¹ This concept refers to how a rise in levels of education and in access to information has led to citizens being better equipped and more confident in making their own judgements, rather than delegating this to others, such as local elites or representatives; making citizens more likely to question and critique governance decisions according to their specific circumstances and experiences. One of the consequences of this is that whereas say in the 1950s citizens may have been more willing to delegate decisions to their representatives, today they are more likely to have their own views on a wider range of issues and not necessarily agree with their representative.
- **The rise in expectations in politics namely in relation to transparency and accessibility:** associated with the previous point, research shows that citizens’ expectations of standards of governance have also risen. But, in particular, expectations in relation to transparency and accessibility are now much higher. This is partly because we now live in digital societies, where data and information are key and easier to disseminate; in part also due to considerable action globally towards promoting principles of transparency, openness and accessibility. This is

¹ P. Norris, *Critical Citizens*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

reflected in the introduction in many countries of freedom of information requests laws, for example, and in movements such as Open Government.

- **The rise of the internet:** when most of our day-to-day actions are mediated by the internet, it is easy to forget the impact this has had on the relationship between citizens and governing institutions, namely parliament. However, this is perhaps the main change between 20th and 21st century representation. The existence of the internet explains, for example, why a Member of Parliament in the 1950s may only be contacted by their voters every so often; and why an Member of Parliament in 2022 will likely be contacted by voters every single day, multiple times. It has an impact on the type and volume of information made available to citizens, the ubiquitous nature of digital information and communications, but also in the possibilities of interaction both from representatives to voters, and vice versa, and even between voters. More broadly, it has consequences to our expectations and ability to interpret politics without mediators.
- **The decline in trust:** in great part as a consequence of the phenomena we mention in the previous points, namely more critical minds and higher expectations, the levels of trust in political institutions, and consequently on parliaments, have generally declined over the past few decades. There are of course counter-trends to this, particularly in the case of new emerging democracies where trust in political institutions may be associated in trust in new institutions. But, overall, trends portray a general decline of trust in political institutions.
- **Modern trends in political participation:** forms of political participation have also changed very significantly since the 1970s. It would be impossible to identify here all of those changes, but it is important to identify the following specifically, as they have a direct impact on parliamentary representation: lower voter turnout rates (though accompanied by more, and more frequent, elections, in line with more complex multi-level governance structures, and the more frequent use of referendums); electoral volatility (meaning that citizens are more likely to change their vote between elections); a more active civil society and of non-party political politics and movements; an expansion of non-representative forms of democracy, such as participatory and deliberative democracy (for example, participatory budgets or citizens assemblies), particularly at local level. These changes in modern trends in political participation can be summarised to a decline of formal participation accompanied by an expansion of non-conventional forms of participation.

Together, these changes explain why parliaments cannot simply assume the traditional institutional structures of representative democracy, which rely on legitimacy by voters

every four or five years. More than a potential cure for democratic malaises, public engagement is today an expectation of politics. Citizens have an expectation of being informed about politics and to be able to have a say during the time between elections – they may not wish to have a say, but the expectation is that should they wish to, processes should exist to enable this. Not meeting this expectation is simply reinforcing the perception of a gap between governing institutions and citizens.

Accepting the need for public engagement does not mean though a questioning of the principles of representative democracy. Members of Parliament are ultimately those who take decisions. The need for public engagement is about making sure that in taking those decisions, processes exist to facilitate public understanding and, where appropriate, public involvement to enhance law-making and scrutiny. In fact, when done right, public engagement enhances law-making and scrutiny, by enabling a closer link to the reality where policy is implemented and providing policy-makers with a better understanding of how policy is implemented and its consequences. When done right, public engagement can also lead to stronger trust.

We are still in a transitioning period. Most parliaments are still trying to figure out how to incorporate public engagement practices with the traditional representative democracy processes. This explains why, for instance, most of the development has been in the areas of information and education, rather than of consultation and participation which can be seen at odds with representative democracy. However, in the same token, many parliaments have been developing very innovative practices to enhance the involvement of citizens in parliamentary business – see for instance the wide-ranging case studies include in the recent Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Development Program's *Global Parliamentary Report on Public Engagement*.²

But what exactly does public engagement entail? As I have recently outlined,³ public engagement is ultimately about empowering people in relation to their surroundings. This may be because they feel better informed to follow politics, it can also be because they feel strongly about a policy issue and feel able to get involved in shaping it. In

² Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *The Global Parliamentary Report on Public Engagement*, 2022. Accessed at: <<https://www.ipu.org/our-impact/strong-parliaments/setting-standards/global-parliamentary-report/global-parliamentary-report-2022-public-engagement-in-work-parliament>>.

³ As outlined in Cristina Leston-Bandeira, 'The Public Engagement Journey', blog post for the *Centre for Democratic Engagement*, 2021. Accessed at: <<https://cde.leeds.ac.uk/2021/03/24/the-public-engagement-journey/>>.

order to identify what public engagement entails, it is useful to differentiate between types of activity (information, education, communication, consultation and participation), the effect on the citizen (for example feeling listened to, valued, disregarded, ignored, etc) and a broader democratic aim (including transparency, openness, legitimacy, trust).

Public engagement therefore is not simply just about providing information and/or education; likewise it is not simply about providing opportunities for participation. It is about all five types of activities, which are far more inter-connected than often thought, and, more importantly, it is about how they are implemented and the effect they have on the citizen. But to merely have the 'opportunity' of information or of participation does not mean this will lead to effective public engagement. We finish this short note by outlining some key factors that help enhance the effectiveness of parliamentary public engagement.

TEN FACTORS TO ENSURE EFFECTIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Outlining factors ensuring effectiveness of public engagement would in itself take a whole new article. But, in short, I outline next ten key factors, which need to be considered regardless of the type of activity to develop effective public engagement practices: accessibility; reach of the audience; diversity of the audience; existing divides; use of different means of communication; issue-led rather than process-led; listening rather than broadcasting; closing the feedback loop; linking engagement with parliamentary business; evaluation and reporting of activities.

- **Accessibility.** This includes many elements. From making sure that parliamentary information is accessible to those with disabilities, to the development of resources that speak to audiences with low literacy skills. It is of particular importance when it comes to parliaments communicating with people external to the institution, as traditionally parliamentary language is very specialized and only accessible to very narrow groups of people. Accessibility needs therefore to also consider the language used in any communication with the public.
- **Reach of the audience:** This is at the core of public engagement in the modern parliament, as there is an implication that parliament and representatives engage with a group of people beyond the often referred to as the 'usual suspects'; the 'usual suspects' would be those who would engage with parliament anyway, as part of their work practice. The reach of audience will vary from issue to issue, but it is an important element to be considered, to go beyond what would be traditional parliamentary practice. The reach can be evaluated in many ways, from the

geographical distance from where the parliament is located, to the type of groups it reaches out to.

- ***Diversity of audience:*** Complementarily to the previous two points, diversity of audiences is also very important for parliamentary officials to consider. In activities where the views of the public are asked for, there is often a tendency for specific groups and types of people to dominate responses. Unless parliaments explicitly encourage a diversity of views, this does not happen naturally.
- ***Existing 'divides':*** For example, socio-economic, geographical, digital and/or ethnic divides. In order to be able to promote diversity, it is important to also acknowledge the existing divides within a nation; which groups are most likely to be more powerful, more active and with louder voices? By explicitly understanding and acknowledging key divides of a nation, parliaments can promote more inclusive practices of representation by trying to redress those divides and reaching out in particular to those less likely to be involved. This may take different forms, according to the type of divide; for example, by having transport subsidies to support visits to parliament or those further afield and/or from lower income backgrounds; or, for example, by not relying on digital means of communication for groups who may have poorer digital access and/or skills.
- ***Use of diverse means of communication:*** As a consequence of all the points raised above, it is always important to diversify the means of communication between parliament and people. Parliaments tend to produce a lot of text, typically in long documents. There are many reasons for this, in terms of the way it supports its work and legitimacy. However, when it comes to engaging groups external to parliament, who may be very diverse between themselves, it is important to consider a multiplicity of means of communication that may include invariably text, audio, video, visual, infographics, easy read etc.
- ***Issue-led rather than process-led:*** Parliaments are traditionally process led institutions. As a consequence of this, often initiatives which attempt to engage the public into parliamentary business are very procedural and, as a consequence, fail to actually engage citizens who know little about parliament. As a general principle, the most effective engagement initiatives tend to be issue-led, rather than process-led. Ordinary people are more likely to engage with parliament because they care about an issue, than because they know how a process works.
- ***Listening rather than broadcasting:*** Parliaments have traditionally been very good at broadcasting, that is sending out information about what they do. They are less good at listening, that is providing mechanisms through which citizens can express

their views and feel that their views are being listened to. Parliaments tend to be large abstract entities and citizens will see it in that way, unless they are aware of human side (official/Member of Parliament) on the other side. Feeling listened to is key for citizens to develop trust feelings. It is better to do fewer activities and make sure that listening processes are in place (such as appropriate acknowledgement of inputs submitted or effective closing of the feedback loop). Research has shown that citizens understand that their demands may not be met⁴ – what they often wish is to be listened to and have a fair go at putting forward their point of view and/or lived experiences.

- **Closing the feedback loop:** linked to the previous point, citizens are unlikely to feel it was worth participating in public engagement initiatives if they feel it did not contribute to anything. Closing the feedback loop is about communicating to those citizens who got involved in an engagement initiative in what way the inputs collected informed parliamentary business. This is not always easy to do, but can be done through generic emails for instance, through online shorthand pages which identify what citizens said, and in what way it was considered, or simply by including details about engagement initiatives in a report and communicating this to those who got involved. Closing the feedback loop is about giving a sense that someone did listen, even if not to accommodate the exact demands made. In interviews for related published research,⁵ this sentiment was predominant, as one interviewee said ‘having submitted the evidence, it was as though I had tossed a ball into the ocean. No sign of it.’ In this specific case, the public was not even sure if anyone had actually read their submissions.
- **Linking engagement with parliamentary business:** parliamentary public engagement often develops as a separate parallel activity to parliaments’ main core business, such as law-making and scrutiny. For public engagement to be meaningful it needs to be linked and/or integrated with core parliamentary business. This applies to any public engagement activity. From a simple school visit to a parliament, which should not simply be about the history, the architecture and the paintings of

⁴ C. Carman, ‘The process is the reality: perceptions of procedural fairness and participatory democracy’, *Political Studies*, 58(4), 2010 pp. 731–51; Cristina Leston-Bandeira, ‘Parliamentary petitions and public engagement: an empirical analysis of the role of e-petitions’, *Policy & Politics*, 47(3), 2019, pp. 415-436.

⁵ C. Leston-Bandeira and L. Thompson, ‘Integrating the view of the public into the formal legislative process: public reading stage in the UK House of Commons’, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 23(4), 2017, pp.508-528.

the building, but should also be about what the institution actually does and hopefully some involvement of its actors (such as Members of Parliament). When it comes to a consultation on a bill – if citizens are being asked about a bill, then their views need to be formally and actively linked to the process of considering the bill.⁶ Developing a public engagement activity in parallel with the real world of parliamentary business is at best a missed opportunity, at worst yet another raised expectation not met.

- ***Evaluation and reporting of activities:*** finally, another core element to any public engagement activity is the need for evaluation and reporting. This is often neglected by parliaments, in great part because public engagement is a new activity for parliaments, in great part also because these institutions are not necessarily always great at evaluating and reporting on themselves. But as something about which we are all still learning so much about, it is vitally important to evaluate, learn lessons, and disseminate these to the rest of the institution. This can be implemented through short feedback questionnaires given to citizens attending an event, to an overview of the type of events undertaken for a specific need. Due to its newness element and to the fact that public engagement is about relating to groups outside the parliamentary institution, evaluating practice is particularly important.

CONCLUSION

Public engagement should today be seen as one of parliaments' core roles, to support and enhance its other roles of law-making, scrutiny and representation. Public engagement does not threaten representative democracy, it enhances it. In a 21st century society of 24/7 communication, ubiquitous digital interaction, very active civil society and acute visibility of politics, parliaments need to develop effective public engagement practices to stay relevant and meet public expectations of having a say in the period between elections. And public engagement has become a significant activity for parliaments, but this is still a fledgling activity and often one that is not fully embedded in parliamentary practice. There is still very considerable variation in parliamentary public engagement practice across the world and a lot to learn about

⁶ Leston-Bandeira and Thompson, *Integrating the view of the public into the formal legislative process*, pp.508-528.

what makes for effective practice. This is why a special issue such as this one is very welcome, to encourage reflection, experimentation, sharing and evaluation.