



**Office of the Clerk of the
House of Representatives**

Te Tari o Te Manahautū o Te Whare Māngai

Australian Study of Parliament Group conference paper

Leveraging Relationships for Civic Engagement

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1. Introduction: why civic engagement matters

Civic engagement in the 21st century is an issue facing parliaments across the world. It is a fundamental part of building and maintaining strong democracies.¹ There is substantial evidence that democratic polities enjoy better economic and social outcomes, leading to overall high levels of wellbeing.² On the one hand, groups of citizens are seeking change – and big change at that – from their civic engagement and social action. On the other, there is a widespread lack of knowledge around the core functions of Parliaments in the democratic process. An understanding of Parliament's role is hindered by declining engagement with traditional forms of media (e.g. radio and newspapers) by citizens wanting to stay informed.³ The growing reliance on social media as a source of news can exacerbate this issue by creating online 'filter bubbles'.⁴ These bubbles can limit people's exposure to alternative perspectives, making it more difficult for information outside their existing views and interests to reach them, and thus resulting in disengagement with the democratic process and the work of Parliament.

To assess the public's perception and experiences of engaging with Parliament, New Zealand's Parliamentary Service and Office of the Clerk⁵ conducted a Parliamentary Engagement Research project in 2025. People across the motu (country), from a range of social groups, were asked about Parliament – what it is, what it does and how engaged they felt. The research highlighted significant gaps in civic understanding, particularly among young people, many of whom were uncertain about the role of Parliament, how it functions, and how elections work. With the 2026 General Election on the horizon, these findings underscore the need to equip young people with the knowledge and confidence to understand and participate in the democratic process.

The results of the Parliamentary Engagement Research project were stark. They showed a huge gap of basic knowledge about Parliament in the community at large. These gaps present a significant challenge for democratic institutions looking to preserve, protect and strengthen public trust, engagement, and active participation.

This paper explores how the Parliamentary Education Team used the research findings to shape its work ahead of the 2026 General Election. It argues that relationships are a critical tool for civic engagement. By working with trusted organisations that share similar goals, parliamentary agencies can extend their reach, strengthen public

¹ (Blakely, 2016, pp.99-100)

² (Acemogly and Robinson, 2012)

³ (Pullar-Strecker, 2017; Radio New Zealand, 2013)

⁴ (Kriebel and Tavich, November 2017 p.61).

⁵ The Parliamentary Service and Office of the Clerk are two independent agencies that jointly support the legislature and members of Parliament. The Parliamentary Engagement team is a combined team comprised of staff from both the Office of the Clerk and Parliamentary Service. The team is responsible for both internal and external communications, accessibility, education programmes, Te Reo Māori initiatives and translations as well as the Inter-Parliamentary Relations programme.

The Education Team is responsible for onsite education programmes for both kura and tamariki (schools and students), public servants and the members of Parliament. They also provide outreach visits to different regions across New Zealand as well as educational resources both in print and digital form.

understanding, and make democratic participation more relevant and accessible.

2. The research approach

The Parliamentary Service and Office of the Clerk commissioned the Parliamentary Engagement Research Project to better understand how to empower people engage with Parliament and its processes. The research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the public perceives Parliament, identify barriers to engagement, and inform strategies to enhance Parliament's relevance to New Zealanders' lives.

The approach taken by The Research Agency (TRA) was two-phase.

Phase One

The objective of the first phase was to inform design, language and question style of the Phase Two survey.⁶ The aim was to ensure that everyone understood what they were being asked. The format was a six-person 60-minute online wānanga (discussion) style session over Zoom. Participants were a mix of youth, Māori, Pasifika, disabled communities and new migrants. There was a mix of no, low and moderate engagement with Parliament and didn't include rejectors of government or parliamentary authority. This first phase ensured that the subsequent quantitative survey was culturally relevant, accessible, and effective for all New Zealanders, while aligning with Parliamentary Services' strategic objective.⁷

Phase Two

Using the outputs from Phase One, TRA designed an effective quantitative survey based on the objectives of the project, input from Parliamentary Service, and learnings from Phase 1 participants. The survey was conducted online with 1,033 New Zealanders and was representative of the national population.⁸ Key topic areas were:

- Participation and awareness of the democratic process
- Barriers and motivations for participation with Parliament
- Perceptions of Parliament

Phase One had revealed that people could be easily confused about the role of Parliament, therefore the survey began with an introduction of what Parliament actually does.

"This survey is about Parliament and how you interact with it. Before we start here is some information that may help you complete the survey. Please read this information

⁶ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p3

⁷ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p4

⁸ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p5

before clicking through to the next screen. Parliament and the Government are different things.”⁹

Parliament:

Parliament makes laws for New Zealand and holds the Government to account for its policies, actions, and spending. Every time there is a general election, we elect people to represent us in Parliament. These people are known as members of Parliament or MPs. Parliament includes the Government and the Opposition.

Parliament’s role includes:

- Making new laws and updating old laws
- Representing the people
- Examining and approving Government taxes and spending
- Holding the Government to account for its policies and actions.

Government:

The Government is made up of the political party or group of parties (e.g. coalition) that have over half the people (MPs) elected to Parliament. The Government runs the country and makes day-to-day decisions on how and what NZ should spend its money on. It suggests laws to Parliament, and decides which policies get put into practice. The Government is accountable to Parliament.

Select Committees:

Select committees are groups of MPs from different political parties that focus on a specific subject areas (e.g. environment or health). They consider issues in their area in detail, and report back to the whole Parliament.

Submissions:

Written submissions are a way for you to present your opinions, observations, and recommendations on an issue or proposed law to a select committee. Written submissions are made through the Parliament website or the post. You can also ask to talk to the committee in person.

Petitions:

Parliamentary petitions are petitions that ask Parliament to take a specific action, such as changing a law or policy. People can both start petitions and sign them to show support.

⁹ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p6

3. What the research told us

The Good

80% of respondents agree that New Zealanders share their views with Parliament on what is important to them. The survey results showed that New Zealanders believe their country values the sharing of views as part of the Parliamentary process.¹⁰

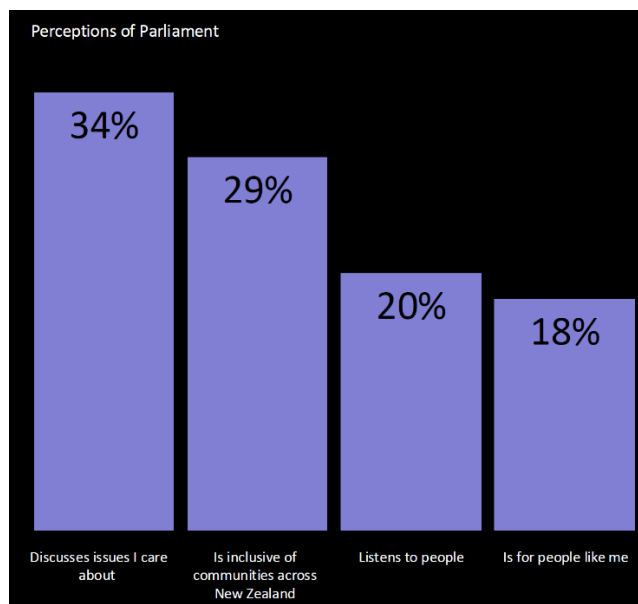
75% of respondents have voted in a general election at some point.¹¹

The results also showed that the majority of New Zealanders are happy with their current level of engagement with Parliament. Only 34 percent of New Zealanders would like to have more engagement with Parliament.¹²

Based on these scores it is possible to conclude that people are generally knowledgeable and trusting of Parliament. However, when the data is examined through the lens of trust and relevance, a different story emerges about perceptions of Parliament

The Bad

Parliament is not seen as a place that is inclusive, that listens or is relevant to most New Zealanders.¹³



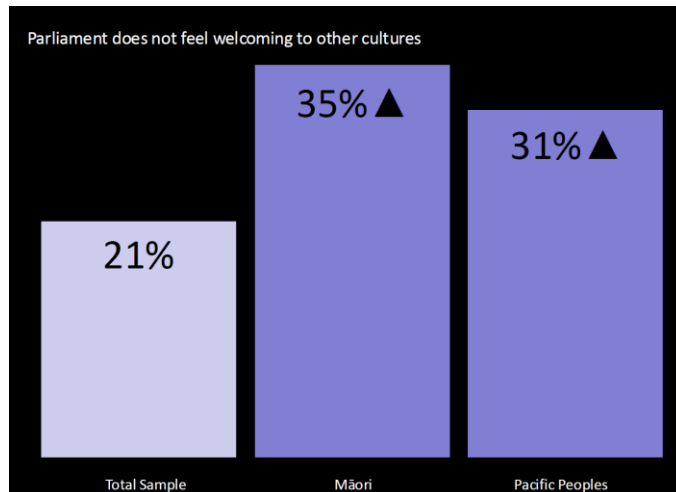
¹⁰ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p9

¹¹ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p9

¹² Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p10

¹³ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p13

Māori, Pasifika and Asian New Zealanders are less likely to feel welcome at Parliament.¹⁴



Parliament is a poor communicator with only 19% of respondents saying that it is easy to understand what Parliament does.¹⁵

New Zealanders do not have high levels of trust in Parliament. Levels of trust in Parliament are comparable to levels of trust in local councils and significantly lower than trust in institutions such as the Reserve Bank of New Zealand and ACC.¹⁶

The Ugly

57% of respondents confused the role of Parliament with government.¹⁷

What the role of Parliament is – open ended responses coded

We analysed all the verbatim comments where people were asked about the role of Parliament. From this we can see substantial confusion.

57% Confused with Government

25% Mentions some correct elements of role of Parliament

15% Other wrong interpretation

3% Don't know

¹⁴ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p13

¹⁵ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p14

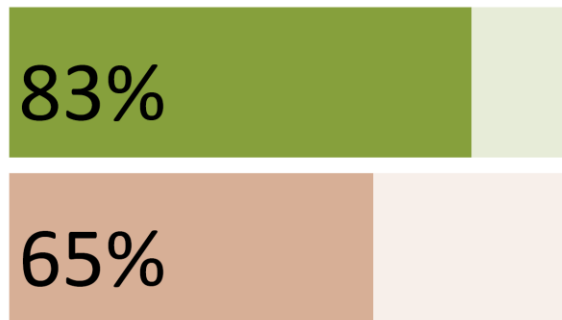
¹⁶ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p15

¹⁷ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p18

Only one of the 1,033 respondents was able to describe the role of Parliament. Notably, their response closely reflected content published on Parliament's website, suggesting that it may have been copied and pasted.

This result is concerning given that knowing what Parliament actually does increases positive perceptions and can lead to a higher level of trust.¹⁸

Has at least one positive perception of Parliament by knowledge of Parliament



■ Mentions some correct elements about the role of Parliament
■ Wrong about what Parliament does

Parliament Trust score by knowledge of Parliament



Implications

There is no single solution to increasing trust. The issues are complex and interconnected, requiring action on multiple fronts.

The survey results show that New Zealanders:

- Feel that Parliament is not inclusive, connected or relevant to them,
- Can feel confused about how Parliament communicates,
- Are confused as to what Parliament is and what it does,
- As a result, they lack trust in Parliament¹⁹

Learning that most New Zealanders didn't understand the role of Parliament was confronting. Helping people comprehend Parliament's role is a core function of the Parliamentary Engagement Team, and the findings suggested that our message was not getting through. However, the research also pointed to a clear path forward.

- 1) Trust can be earned through improved communication. Trust in Parliament is connected to knowledge and communication. Ease of information access is a key motivator. Simple language, accessible to all and overly explicit where necessary.²⁰
- 2) Build knowledge and literacy by being specific; using basic explainers with simple examples. Concentrate on the difference between Parliament and government.²¹ Repeat the same messages without assuming prior knowledge.
- 3) Reach people where they are. Social media is an increasingly important

¹⁸ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p20

¹⁹ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p21

²⁰ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p34

²¹ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p35

messaging tool. Ensure ease of access of information and resources. Focus on the core groups that want to participate more than they currently do. In New Zealand, this is the 18-34 years age group and Māori.²²

- 4) Enhance the sense of emotional reward for participation. This can be by acknowledging that people's views have been heard and showing examples of how. Additionally, by providing individual receipts or communication acknowledging participation and outlining next steps.

These strategies aim to foster a sense of transparency, empowerment, and responsiveness, making it easier and more rewarding for New Zealanders to engage with Parliament. The findings of TRA's research have different implications for different teams within the Parliamentary Service and Office of the Clerk. The House Office, which deals with complex business of the House, will need to approach the findings in a different way to the Select Committees team for example. They will have different priorities and will find different challenges facing them as they look to improve their communication, use of language and explainers about their work. For the wider Parliamentary Engagement Team, improving communication both in terms of language used and messaging has been a focus particularly for our Social Media Content Advisor. The TRA research has been invaluable in shining a spotlight on the impact of the Parliamentary Engagement Team's work. The findings have encouraged teams to pause, take stock of the current landscape and consider if we need to redirect our efforts. Additionally, it has emphasised the importance of our work and allowed us to define our focus. The true measure of success will come when we repeat this engagement research and assess whether perceptions of Parliament have shifted.

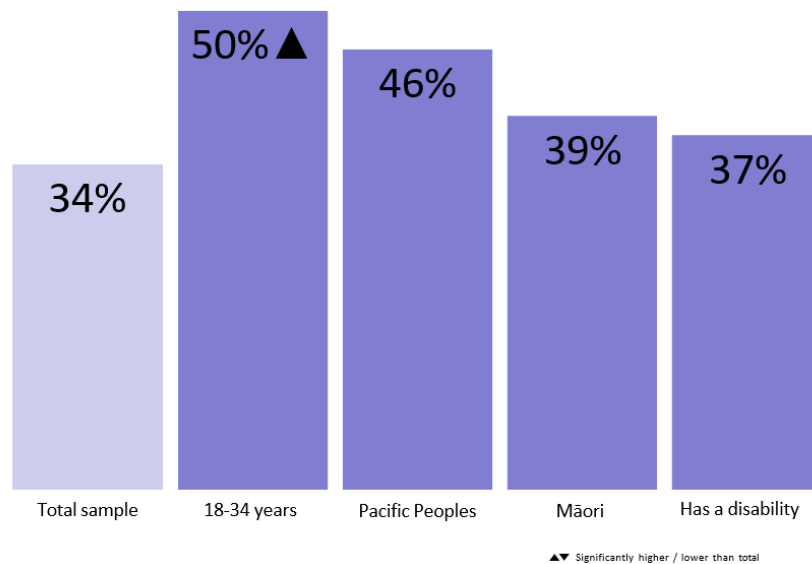
4. Turning research into action

New Zealand's voter turnout in general elections has increased from 77% in 2014 to 82% in 2023. However, the trend for 18-24-year-olds over the same period shows that this percentage is lower than the core turnout.²³ The Education Team works directly with young people to educate them about the core functions and purpose of Parliament. Our overall aim is to increase engagement and participation, which in turn is indirectly reflected in the voter turnout every 3 years. The 2026 General Election has been a key focus of the Education Team's current work programme.

²² Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p36

²³ <https://elections.nz/democracy-in-nz/historical-events/2023-general-election/voter-turnout-statistics>

New Zealanders who would like to have **more** engagement than they currently have



The TRA survey data tells us that our youth would like to have more opportunities to engage with and understand the work of Parliament²⁴. More opportunities to understand the difference between Parliament and the Government of the day. More ways of engaging will support keeping our democratic way of life alive. Scholars have highlighted the importance of communication and ties across civic organisations for democratic resilience; the importance of network-building cannot be understated.²⁵ This prompted members of the team to think about relationships, partners and collaborators. Who can support our work and our message? Who occupies the same politically neutral space? Who will help increase our engagement and help paddle the waka (canoe)? As we considered who might join us on this journey, the Electoral Commission was a natural place to start.

Case Study 1: Electoral Commission | Te Kaitiaki Take Kōwhiri

The New Zealand Electoral Commission is an independent organisation responsible for running parliamentary elections, managing voting stations, counting votes and maintaining the electoral rolls. They also play a key role in civics education and are responsible for educating New Zealanders about the electoral system: how it works, how to enrol, and how to participate. Through its outreach programmes, the Commission works directly with communities to build knowledge and encourage participation. They too engaged in a research project looking into the 2023 General Election. They found that young people often seek additional information about voting ahead of election day and consider the Electoral Commission website a useful source, indicating a desire to engage when given accessible and trustworthy

²⁴ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p3

²⁵ (Haggard, S. Kaufman, R 2021).

resources.²⁶ However, when surveyed about election communications, 49% of people surveyed said they saw advertising about the 2023 voting process. While this is in line with 2017, it is a significant decrease from the 72% of people who saw advertising about the 2020 General Election. All priority groups saw a significant decrease in advertising awareness in 2023 when compared to 2020.²⁷ These findings matched some of the outcomes in the Parliamentary Engagement Research project.

Among non-voting youth (18–29), many report having put little or no thought into their decision not to vote, suggesting that disengagement may stem from a lack of understanding rather than apathy.²⁸ The Report into the 2023 General Election found that younger people are less likely than average to rate their understanding of the voting process as very good (39%) and more likely than average to have a good understanding (47%).²⁹ Additionally, 48% of people feel that even if they do participate, what they say won't make a difference, underscoring the importance of fostering a sense of agency and civic responsibility.

This made the Electoral Commission the ideal partner for the Education Team's 2026 mahi. There was a shared engagement goal: to provide education and opportunities for young people to learn about the electoral system that chooses our representatives at Parliament and, by extension, ensure young people enrol to vote so that they can have their voice heard. For those young people who can't yet vote, providing information about the pathways to having a voice and the importance of using that voice when they do reach voting age, was another shared goal. Being independent from the Government of the day also meant that parliamentary agencies occupied the same politically neutral civics space as the Electoral Commission.

What we did

The Education Team reached out to our contact at the Electoral Commission to organise a hui (meeting) to discuss a proposal to collaborate on Elections in the form of online modules. Since 2024, the Education Team has been using Articulate software to build our own interactive learning modules on the Learning Module System (LMS) platform, Thinkific. Online learning resources had become a key focus due to the increasing shift in use of technology in the classroom. The modules are self-paced, subject specific and easy to access for students and teachers. A UNICEF paper focusing on Exploring Civics Education found that interactive approaches and active engagement, rather than passive viewing, are crucial in this space.³⁰ Modules that combine direct instruction, discussion points and practical activities showed the best results. Agreement between the Education Team and the Electoral Commission was reached to use online modules

²⁶ Report into the 2023 General Election, Verian May 2024, p26 & p36, 37

²⁷ Report into the 2023 General Election, Verian May 2024, p27

²⁸ Report into the 2023 General Election, Verian May 2024, p72

²⁹ Report into the 2023 General Election, Verian May 2024, p16

³⁰ (Teixeira, Exploring civic education p.6)

as the main vehicle for delivering election information in 2026.
The team therefore set out to develop a three-part series.

The first of the modules was co-written by both organisations with a focus on the messaging of the Electoral Commission, including using their wording and branding. The *'Your Voice, Your Vote, Your Parliament'* title linked the idea of following your voice through the electoral system and its impact on Parliament. We wanted to make that link an obvious one. The activities and videos linked back to the TRA's advice: make the explainers simple, use digital media and use easy to understand language. The inbuilt interactivity meant that young people using the module would have to repeat the information learnt to be able to move through the module. We ensured that the modules were available in both English and te reo Māori linking with priority groups from the research and ensuring accessibility.

The subsequent two modules followed on from the election to the establishment of a new Parliament highlighting the timeline, the main players and significant events. The modules were aimed at intermediate / high school students accessed through the LMS with marketing and promotional information shared through various channels, emailing schools directly and social media. The first module – Your Voice, Your Vote, Your Parliament – was released on 20 July 2026. Since the release, the Education Team has seen 78 new users register for the LMS platform to access the modules. Usually, we see an average increase of 15 new users in a similar timeframe.

The second module – From Election to Parliament – was released in September 2026 to coincide with Term 4. The third module – From Parliament to Power – is due to be released after the election in November.

Through this collaboration, both the parliamentary agencies and the Electoral Commission were able to further their reach and connect with different audiences. Recognising that digital media creates a central source of information for young people and social media can be used to counter misinformation, a comprehensive communications plan was developed. The plan relied heavily on social media channels and has been crucial to the success of our mahi (work). The parliamentary agencies have been able to advertise the modules using Electoral Commission channels, and the Commission have been able to advertise their Kids Voting programme through the Education Team's communications with schools.

Community Engagement Opportunities

Another way the parliamentary agencies and the Electoral Commission could support each other was through community engagement events. The Electoral Commission's Community Engagement Adviser played a crucial role in identifying appropriate shared events.

The first was Te Rā o te Raukura festival; a major community and cultural festival held in late January in the Wellington region. The whāuau-friendly (family-friendly) event

celebrates Māori culture, wellbeing, and education. As part of the Public Programming Working Group, representatives from the Parliamentary Engagement team were able to champion this opportunity and worked alongside the Electoral Commission and the Children's Commissioner to connect to the public. This provided the opportunity to engage with a community who identified in the survey as having limited engagement with Parliament, and who also felt that Parliament was not welcoming them.³¹ Working alongside our key contacts at the Electoral Commission, united by a shared vision, created opportunities to support enrolment conversations while naturally extending discussions to the role of Parliament, the makeup of the House, and the work Parliament does. The confusion between the Government and Parliament was clear, but these interactions provided valuable opportunities to build a better understanding of the distinction between the two. This linked back to the path forward highlighted by the TRA research.

Parliament's Engagement Team were able to replicate the above offering at the Orientation Day for Victoria University, again alongside colleagues from the Electoral Commission. The result was over 200 enrolments to vote, one of the highest they'd had! This highlights the positive outcome of our partnership approach - students saw the obvious link between their vote and the seats in the House of Representatives.

The collaboration is continuing, with further community engagement opportunities planned for October, targeting youth groups. The New Zealand Parliament's Public Programming Working Group are designing and hosting events aimed at reaching more diverse audiences. One such event, *'From One Parliament to the Next'*, was held in August and featured colleagues from the Electoral Commission. Together participants were guided through the electoral journey including the steps leading up to the General Election, the process on the Polling Day, subsequent counting of votes, through to the opening of a new Parliament.

Outreach programme

Another key piece of on-going work undertaken by the New Zealand Parliament's Education Team is the Outreach programme. Data is collected from our visitation bookings each year. This is used to compile a research report using mapping software that highlights key electorates and regions of New Zealand where engagement with Parliament is low or non-existent. This then informs the focus of our Outreach visits for that year.

On 5 May 2026, two educators and seven cross-party members of Parliament visited schools in Tokoroa, Taupō. Our colleagues from the Electoral Commission were invited to attend and talk about the importance of voting, how the electoral system of Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) works and what to expect when you reach voting age.

On 19 June, two educators visited schools on Waiheke Island following a request from

³¹ Perceptions of Parliament, TRA 2025, p3

Auckland Council. As part of this visit, the Auckland branch of the Electoral Commission were invited. In this instance our teams were unable to coordinate dates, but the Electoral Commission will be visiting these schools later in the year. Once again, the focus will be on the importance of explicitly stating the connections between an individual's vote and seats in Parliament, thus helping build knowledge that the engagement research highlighted was starkly missing for the general public at large.

The issue of compulsory civics education in schools is receiving considerable attention in New Zealand, alongside initiatives such as Vote16 (which advocates lowering the voting age to 16). By joining with our colleagues in non-partisan institutions such as the Electoral Commission, we have been able to take a more connected approach to civic education. Helping young people understand the importance of voting, how votes lead to representation and the importance of the work of Parliament is a vital cornerstone for building knowledge and trust in our democratic institutions and processes.

Outcome

Our work with the Electoral Commission this year has focused on clear messaging around the democratic process of elections, how they work under the MMP electoral system and how votes directly link to seats in the House of Representatives. Our partnership has strengthened the relationship between our agencies. The impact of using expert voices to explain the processes that serve and protect our democracy cannot be overstated. By combining our expertise at both the Te Rā festival and the Orientation Day, we have accessed marginalised communities who struggle to engage with Parliament and its processes. This was seen in the number of enrolments that took place at those events. As previously stated, 78 new users have registered for our LMS platform to access the online interactive modules. Interest in election-focused learning has also been reflected in our education programme, with 42 school visits (approximately 1,260 students) booked for our revamped Elections programme at Parliament between mid-June and the end of October. This shows a broad appetite for elections-based tours as there are children from Year 4 up to Year 13s (age 8 to 17) booked in. These students and teachers also receive links to our modules and to the Electoral Commission's Kids Voting schools' programme. The Electoral Commission are therefore able to extend the reach of its education resources through Parliament's established engagement with schools.

In the TRA engagement research, Māori and young people felt disenfranchised but indicated that they wanted to be more involved in civic engagement. Our attendance and collaboration at both community events allowed exposure to these groups. Whilst there is no concrete, quantitative data about the immediate impact at these events, our presence, the conversations we had and the enrolments to vote that were generated show that the appetite for knowledge from trusted sources is there. Our relationship made it possible to run our 'From One Parliament to the Next' tour in August. Without the Education Team reaching out to the Electoral Commission at the start of 2026, putting on an event like this would have been more difficult. The strong relationship developed this year also means that the potential for collaborations in the future is

higher because we have such a close and successful partnership to build on.

Case Study 2: Children's Commissioner | Mana Mokopuna

In November 2025, the New Zealand Education Team hosted the annual Australasian Parliamentary Educators Conference (APEC). The theme of the conference was *Innovate, Connect, Engage: Pathways to Participation*. Potential guest speakers were identified, one being the Children's Commissioner. The Children's Commissioner is the independent advocate for all mokopuna (descendant), whose organisation is Mana Mokopuna. Their remit is to listen to children and young people and carry their voices, perspectives and experiences to decision-makers across government and the community sector. APEC allowed the Education Team to establish a new and fresh connection with an organisation who works with children and young people to ensure they are heard, engaged and know how to share their perspectives and experiences in the democratic system. As with our collaboration with the Electoral Commission, Mana Mokopuna and the Parliamentary Education team had a shared goal: to educate young people on pathways to having their voices heard in the civics space. It should be noted that this was not our first partnership with the Children's Commissioner. The Commissioner had previously used her social media audience to advertise Parliament's youth advisory group *Rito o te Pāremata*. Following the Commissioner's post, we received over 60 additional applications to participate in Rito. This would not have been possible without the Commissioner's reach and extended audience access.

In January 2026, the Education Team scheduled a hui (meeting) with Mana Mokopuna at Parliament with the goal of seeing how our two teams could work together on an engagement project aimed specifically at a youth audience. They were particularly interested in breaking down the barriers to Parliament's physical space for young people. This is something that the Education Team had previously discussed; namely wanting to 'demystify Parliament'. As part of Mana Mokopuna's advocacy work, the Children's Commissioner regularly submits to select committee hearings and usually takes young people with her. The goal was to work collaboratively to support information and engagement with the submissions process for young people. The Education Team provided the opportunity for young submitters to visit the physical space of Parliament prior to their submission date. We also discussed opportunities to develop video and social media content on submitting to a select committee using real life submitters who Mana Mokopuna had worked with previously. This provided authentic messaging from young people who had taken part in the process rather than the Education Team writing scripts for young people.

As part of our *kōrero* (talk) some of the Education Team were able to take the Children's Commissioner to the Education Centre, which is a replica of the Debating Chamber where students can sit and roleplay. We also shared our Social Actions resource with her as this has key information and links on the ways in which children and young people can engage in the work of Parliament. A key feature of this resource is the real-

life examples and experiences of children and young people taking part in democratic processes. Shortly after our hui (meeting), the Commissioner shared positive feedback on this resource and, as a result, connected the Education Team with YouthLaw Aotearoa and their mahi (work) in the civics education space.

Tō Whare, Tō Kainga Outreach programme

Tō Whare, Tō Kainga is a new opportunity for ākonga (students) in the Wellington region to engage with Parliament and learn how they can participate in democracy. We recognise that many schools face significant barriers to visiting Parliament, even within Te Upoko o te Ika a Māui (the Wellington region). To help make civics education more accessible to the communities in Wellington, Tō Whare, Tō Kainga brings Parliament to their own classrooms.

The pilot programme, introduced in August 2026, brings together Parliament, the Electoral Commission and Mana Mokopuna to deliver four interactive learning sessions. Without our previous interactions with both organisations, this local regional Outreach programme would not have been possible. Through these sessions, ākonga explored how our system of governance works, and how they can get involved, share their views, and make their voices heard. Tō Whare, Tō Kainga is designed for ākonga from Year 5 to Year 13 (ages 9 – 17). An initial email went out to schools on 30 June and had 18 responses were received within a week. In total, we received participation interest from 27 schools in the region. For comparison, we may receive two to five responses to regular EOIs to schools for Outreach across regions in New Zealand! Because this is a pilot programme, one school was selected based on the Schooling Equity Index: the higher the score the more socio-economic barriers on average. The school chosen is a Māori immersion school meaning we were able to deliver this to two priority groups identified in the engagement research. For those schools who expressed interest, we delivered Parliament resource packs.



Session One: Elections

Cast your vote in an interactive elections activity run by the Electoral Commission. In this session, you will:

- See how MMP works in action
- Explore why voting matters
- Compare List MPs and Electorate MPs



Session Two: Parliament 101

Take a closer look at how Parliament works with Parliament's Education Team. In this session, you will:

- Break down what Parliament actually does
- See how people across Aotearoa are represented
- Track how a law is made, step by step



Session Three: Debating Roleplay

Put your ideas to the test in a Parliamentary-style debate on a mock bill of your choice. In this session, you will:

- Step into the shoes of the House of Representatives
- Learn the difference between Members' bills and Government bills
- Collaborate and challenge ideas as Government and Opposition



Session Four: Participation

Knowing your mana, knowing your rights. Your voice and your whakaaro have value. Learn to speak up, get involved, and understand what it means to have a say with Mana Mokopuna.

- Discover your rights within Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Unpack what it means to activate your mana and have a say.
- Explore ways to take action on issues you care about.

Outcome

Because of our collaboration with Mana Mokopuna and the Children's Commissioner, the Education Team has been able to reach a larger audience. This supported and led to an increase in applications from young people to be part of *Rito o te Pāremata (Youth Advisory Group)*. It also means that more young people were made aware of the existence of this group and will hopefully apply in 2027 and beyond. The Education Team now has a representative on a working committee on Youth Advisory Groups alongside Mana Mokopuna and others. This enables us to share with and learn from others in the field on how to best engage with young people effectively.

Our work and resources on social actions have been shared with the Children's Commissioner in Australia and the Indigenous Children's Commissioner in the spirit of working together and sharing knowledge. Tō Whare, Tō Kainga outreach has been the most successful outcome from our collaboration. We have been able to run this programme in te reo Māori with an immersion class reaching a much-disengaged social group. The feedback from students and teachers has been overwhelmingly positive, as has been the feedback from facilitators from both the Electoral Commission and Mana Mokopuna. Again, we hope to continue offering a version of this programme in the future.

Our ongoing relationship with the Children's Commissioner also connected us with

another collaboration partner: YouthLaw Aotearoa.

Case Study 3: YouthLaw Aotearoa

YouthLaw Aotearoa is a registered charity and a free community law centre for children and young people across New Zealand. They provide free legal services to anyone aged under 25 who is unable to access legal help elsewhere, or those acting on their behalf. Currently, they are the only organisation operating across New Zealand where children and young people can access free legal services just for them.³²

As part of their mahi (work) in the civics education space, YouthLaw Aotearoa received funding that they used to build a youth-focused civics programme called Waha. In te reo Māori, “waha” can mean gateway, opening, or passage. In this context, Waha serves as an initial spark many students need to begin their civics journey. As a verb, “waha” means rise up, focusing on active participation in the shared task of making Aotearoa the society young people are entitled to expect – inclusive, caring, prosperous and cohesive.³³ The name emerged through conversations with rangatahi (young people), designers and advisors. A small word with lots of meaning, Waha leans into the way young people play with words to create meaning, identify and youthful culture. Several studies have highlighted the challenge educators face in navigating the wide range of civics and citizenship resources available. A more coordinated approach could make it easier for schools and communities to find and access high-quality content.³⁴

The objective of the Waha Programme is to provide information from key democratic organisations - specifically aimed at young people and educators – all in one place. It is built around the idea that young people will engage in civic life if they think it's relevant and their voice will make a difference.³⁵ These shared key audiences and the overarching objective of Waha meant that the parliamentary agencies and YouthLaw Aotearoa had shared goals that we could support each other with. Having improved communication and ease of information access was one of the outcomes of the TRA research.

Mana Mokopuna connected the Education Team with YouthLaw Aotearoa in February this year. At the time, YouthLaw were looking to core institutions to provide resources and information on key democratic processes, organisations and ways of doing things so our connection through Mana Mokopuna was timely. Mana Mokopuna themselves were approached to host content as were the Ombudsman, the Electoral Commission and , finally, the New Zealand Parliament. Currently, over 50 people and organisations have contributed ideas and resources.

Through our ongoing kōrero, we narrowed down our messaging to two core themes: The Work Parliament Does and How to Get Involved. Reflecting on TRA's findings, our goal was to create resources that were accessible, engaging and easy to understand.

³² <https://youthlaw.co.nz/about-youthlaw/>

³³ <https://www.waha.org.nz/about>

³⁴ Tallon, R. (2026) *Citizenship Education Resources Survey*, Wellington: Ministry for Culture and Heritage, Kriebble T & Tavich D *Civics and Citizenship Education in New Zealand: A Case for Change?* Policy Quarterly – Volume 13, Issue 4 – Nov 2017 p.64

³⁵ <https://youthlaw.co.nz/about-youthlaw/>

For example, our social media advisor developed a short reel on 'What is Parliament' featuring two young employees. At just 30 seconds in length, it succinctly explains the core messaging of the difference between Parliament and government. Similarly, an easy to watch 3-minute video provides a simple and engaging overview of Parliament's role and function. We have also promoted our interactive 'Make Your Own Parliament' tool, which visually shows the link between votes and seats which is important in an election year.

Outcome

YouthLaw's Waha programme website launched in July 2026. YouthLaw have had 20 schools sign up and have been busy taking educators through training on how the website is set up and ways it can be used to support teaching and learning. They have also revamped their Waha games and want to host them in the Education Centre at Parliament after feedback from some current MPs who have visited YouthLaw. Because of the distance between Wellington and Auckland, the Education Team's data shows engagement with schools in the Auckland region is low. But by being part of the Waha programme, our resources are now accessible to those 20 schools who have signed up and those who will engage in the future. The Waha site is also a vehicle for advertising our modules, particularly the Elections ones. The shared idea is that Waha builds over time, offering more links to organisations providing a more rounded and complete civics landscape for young people to engage with.

5. Conclusion: the role of relationships in strengthening civic engagement

This paper demonstrates that improving civic engagement requires more than providing information – it requires building trusted networks that make democratic institutions more relevant, accessible, and understandable. Existing relationships should be viewed as strategic assets that can amplify civic education messages, extend reach into communities, and create opportunities for shared delivery. The Electoral Commission case study illustrates how established partnerships can be leveraged to provide consistent, trusted messaging that helps people understand the connection between voting, representation, and Parliament.

The paper also highlights the importance of finding common ground across organisations. Effective partnerships do not require identical mandates; rather, they succeed when organisations identify shared goals such as increasing participation, building knowledge, or supporting young people's voices. The collaborations with both Mana Mokopuna and YouthLaw demonstrate how civic engagement can be strengthened when institutions focus on common outcomes rather than organisational boundaries.

Another key lesson is the importance of being open – to new partners, new ideas, and new ways of working. Some of the most valuable opportunities described in the paper

emerged from conversations, introductions, and a willingness to explore possibilities. New relationships can open doors to audiences, expertise, and perspectives that institutions may not otherwise reach.

The research findings also reinforce that improving civic engagement requires clear and simple communication. Repeated, accessible messaging and basic explainers are essential for building knowledge and trust. Ensuring information is easy to access is paramount. People are unlikely to participate meaningfully in democratic processes if they do not understand the role of Parliament or how it differs from government.

The paper further suggests that civic engagement is most effective when institutions meet people where they are. Community events, social media, outreach activities, online learning, and partnerships allow Parliament to engage audiences who may not otherwise interact with democratic institutions. This approach is particularly important for groups identified as wanting greater engagement but feeling disconnected from Parliament.

Finally, the paper highlights that trust is built through relevance and participation. When people see how democratic processes affect their lives and believe their voices can make a difference, they are more likely to engage. Collaborative initiatives that help people understand not only how institutions work, but how they can participate in them, are an important step towards strengthening democratic resilience.