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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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The development of public engagement as a core institutional role for parliaments[1]

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ABSTRACT
Public engagement has become a noticeable activity for parliaments across the world. However, we lack understanding of its role despite considerable developments in scholarly work on public engagement in the sciences and on deliberative and participatory democracy by social scientists. This article provides a framework to understand the significance of parliamentary public engagement and to evaluate its effectiveness. It explains how parliamentary public engagement has emerged because of a representational shift in *who* is doing the representing in parliament and in *what* is represented, following key societal changes. We define parliamentary public engagement, showing the importance of differentiating between the activity, its effects and broader democratic ideals. We identify information and education as the types of engagement activity most developed by parliaments, with much still to do in consultation and participation activities. The article finishes with a discussion of seven key challenges in developing and implementing effective institutional parliamentary public engagement practices.

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Introduction

For as long as parliaments have existed, they have served a linkage role between a collective of people and governance. That is, after all, why they are assembled: to discuss, check and agree upon decisions affecting society at large – thereby creating or adding legitimacy to decision-making – and contributing to trust in the political system. What has changed recently is the way in which this linkage has developed into an explicit and distinct role: public engagement has become a visible institutional activity in many

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parliaments, pursued besides the other core functions (legislation, scrutiny, representation) to supplement and support these. This is reflected in the expansion of services and staff covering areas such as communications, education, participation and, indeed, engagement. This, in turn, has led to a mushrooming of activities in this area.

The very existence of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) *Global Parliamentary Report on Public Engagement* (IPU & UNDP, 2022) indicates this trend, too, firstly recognising public engagement as a significant activity by parliaments and secondly showcasing the variety and range of activities led by parliaments across the globe; with the topic for the report itself emerging from a global consultation of key priorities for parliaments.

This article aims to act as a framework introduction to this special issue, providing an overall contextual understanding of the role of public engagement performed by parliaments today. It draws from the authors' extensive research in this area, as well as from their practice working closely with practitioners. Both authors advised the *Global Parliamentary Report on Public Engagement* and Leston-Bandeira is the co-founder and chair of the International Parliament Engagement Network (IPEN), which supports and disseminates research and practice on parliamentary public engagement across the world.

This article first steps back to discuss the concept of the role of public engagement based on classical approaches to parliamentary and representation theory (the first section) to then explain why recent societal changes have led to the development of public engagement as a key institutional role for parliaments (the second section). We then discuss what parliamentary public engagement entails, showing the importance of differentiating between the activities of public engagement, its effect on citizens and broader democratic goals (the third section), identifying the types of parliamentary public engagement that have expanded the most. The article finishes with an outline of some of the central challenges to successful engagement by parliaments (the fourth section). We conclude by providing an outlook for future practice and research.

From classic linkage to the representational shift embodied in parliamentary public engagement

Parliaments have provided the linkage between political decision-making and society in two ways. A traditional perspective stressed the representative aspect which puts the electoral connection at the centre: that representatives are elected for a fixed term and are then required to submit themselves to another election if they want to continue their service. This is seen as the primary mechanism of a competitive democracy as conceptualised by Joseph Schumpeter. Accordingly, 'individuals acquire the power to decide

by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote' (1942, p. 269). Anthony Downs modelled this understanding as an 'economic theory of democracy' (Downs, 1986 [1957]).

Such approaches have certainly proven helpful for the analysis of the political process. But one needs to remember that even in a classic understanding of representative democracy the continuous connection between representatives and the represented has also been stressed. Edmund Burke is one of its strong proponents and his famous speech to the electors of Bristol is often quoted for the independent judgement that Members of Parliament (MPs) owe to their voters once elected. But in the same speech, Burke also argued:

> It ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinions high respect. (Burke, 1856 [1774], p. 95)

Almost a hundred years later, Walter Bagehot laid out a catalogue of the functions of parliament in a democratic system. He argued that the elective function is its most important one, but also stressed others: fulfilling the 'expressive function', that the House of Commons articulates 'the mind of the English people on all matters which come before it' (Bagehot, 1993 [1867], p. 154). Bagehot also said that Parliament does not just 'pick up' what is already there; instead, it must 'teach the nation what it does not know' (Bagehot, 1993 [1867], p.154). And on top, parliament also channels 'the grievances and complaints of particular interests' as part of its 'informing function'.

In her notable study, published another hundred years later, on *The Concept of Representation*, Hanna Pitkin concluded that substantive representing means 'acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them' (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209). Explicitly, this does not mean that there must be 'constant responding' but 'a constant condition of responsiv*eness,* of potential readiness to respond' and thus 'institutional arrangements for responsiveness' are necessary (p. 233 - italics in the original). Pitkin concludes her study by writing of the 'continuing but not hopeless challenge: to construct institutions and train individuals in such a way that they engage in the … genuine representation of the public' while making sure to stay sufficiently critical of both in order to be 'always open to further interpretation and reform' (p. 240).

The tension between public opinion and political decisions – the need to sense demands and moods, grapple with them, and transform them into decisions in an ongoing communicative process – is, in other words, at the very core of modern parliamentarism – and also at the core of theories about it for well over 300 years. Some of this may have been lost along the

way in the analysis undertaken by a political science built on rational choice models that oversimplify conditions in the real world. But it has never stopped being part of the nature of parliamentary representation.

Even if modern-day parliaments are often primarily understood as 'machines of law-making', representation is of course still their core role and directly relates to the relationship between them and citizens. Representation occurs from the moment a parliament exists; elected or nominated members of parliament come together to represent specific issues, interests and constituents in the work they perform. As the vast modern literature on representation shows (eg Brito-Vieira & Runciman, 2008; Celis & Childs, 2020 Saward, 2010; Urbinati & Warren, 2008), representation is multifaceted and the way it expresses itself has changed considerably over time. Two shifts in particular are significant in understanding the extent to which public engagement has become an explicit role for parliaments, and how this has happened: the development of the institutional representation of parliament, besides political representation (Judge & Leston-Bandeira, 2018); and the reaffirming of symbolic representation (Leston-Bandeira, 2016), beyond descriptive and substantive representation. This is translated into, firstly, *who* performs the representation associated with public engagement; and, secondly, *what* is transmitted in the representative act of public engagement activities.

Let us first turn to the 'who' element. Traditionally conceived as a political activity, representation is seen as being performed essentially by MPs and political parties. They have a mandate, usually through elections, to represent specific political views on whatever matters they deal with. This is an act of *political representation* that expresses and pursues specific *political views*. The *institutional representation*, by contrast, is a politically neutral type of representation, which is mostly undertaken by parliamentary officials, elected for institutional roles such as the president of a parliament, or more commonly parliamentary staff (Judge & Leston-Bandeira, 2018). Institutional representation occurs when officials and staff speak for parliament and represent it collectively, as in the abstract collective of the institution, not a specific group, person or idea beyond the role and activity of the institution.

Architecture, traditions and rituals are important conveyors of institutional representation, but this type of representation also takes place in concrete actions, noticeably in parliamentary public engagement activities. Such activities have been developed in the main by parliamentary staff – that is, those from the parliamentary administration. They often have a status similar to that of civil servants, staying in parliament for a much longer time than the elected MPs. Engagement activities, from visits to parliament to online consultations, are usually conceived, planned and implemented by parliamentary staff. In leading this type of activities, staff (re)present the institution of parliament to the public.[2] Up to the

development of institutional public engagement as a distinct role for parliaments, staff would not usually have had this direct interaction with the public, and were instead focused largely on internal interactions and support activities for the political process. But as public engagement has grown into a more explicit role, the institutional representation of parliament has become more visible.

We now turn to the 'what' element in the representational shift portrayed in the public engagement role. Besides this turn towards staff performing a distinctive representative role, the public engagement role has also emphasised the importance of symbolic representation in the relationship between citizens and parliament. Ever since Pitkin (1967) published her fourfold approach to representation – formalistic, descriptive, symbolic and substantive – attention from empirical scholars has focused mainly on descriptive representation (do representatives reflect society's socio-demographic make-up?) and on substantive representation (do the issues represented in parliament reflect those that matter in society with decisions made serving the common good?). But parliamentary public engagement activity highlights the importance of another facet: symbolic representation. Public engagement activities, particularly when led by staff, tend to avoid politics, as staff need to be neutral. This means that this type of activity often 'aims to develop among the public a sense of connectivity that relies on more collective and symbolic forms of representation, which seek to present the institution detached from its actors and politics' (Leston-Bandeira, 2016, p. 498). This symbolic representation therefore often focuses on generic ideals such as democracy and nationhood, rather than specific issues, which inevitably will have a political side to them. This explains, for instance, why many parliaments ascribe much importance in their public engagement initiatives to historical and cultural activities, and why many shy away from a more issue-based form of political engagement, which is unavoidable in consultation and participation types of initiatives.

Public engagement is now therefore a distinct institutional role for parliaments, even if it is still very patchy across the world in the extent to which it has developed, as the *Global Parliamentary Report on Public Engagement* illustrates (IPU & UNDP, 2022). Whilst linkage functions between parliament and people have always existed, the last couple of decades have led to a representational shift that has consolidated the importance of the role of public engagement for parliaments.

How societal changes explain the recent development of public engagement by parliaments

What has led to the development of public engagement into a key role for parliaments? The answer lies essentially in key societal and technological

changes, which have in turn led to a different set of public expectations in the relationship between citizenry and political decision-making. As painstakingly mapped by scholars such as Cain et al. (2003), Dalton (2004, 2017), Mair (2013) and Norris (1999, 2011), the public's attitudes and expectations regarding politics and decision-making have changed dramatically from the 1970s onwards; more recent scholarly work shows the impact of this trend on the rise of anti-politics (Clarke et al., 2018). With rising levels of education, and of access to information, we have witnessed the rise of what has been termed as the 'critical citizen' (Norris, 1999). Critical citizens accept less lightly decisions from those in power and are more willing to critique governance, according to their own individual preferences and life circumstances. With it comes an expectation that 'elite-provoking' activities will rise (Inglehart, 1983, p. 435). Critical citizens have educational and informational competences to form their own opinions, relying less on those in power for their views on specific issues. These developments have been further intensified with the expansion of the Internet at the cusp between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and beyond (Margetts et al., 2016). Today's pervasiveness of digital tools facilitates the access to a mind-blowing amount of information and of views on specific issues. Relatedly, expectations towards governance, transparency and standards have also increased considerably, whilst levels of trust in political institutions have declined in many political systems (Dalton, 2004; Van der Meer, 2017).

This societal mobilisation has also led to a weakening of parties as a consequence of their new competitive strategies, often as 'catch-all parties' (Kirchheimer, 1966), resulting in weaker bonds between voter groups and particular parties. The resulting volatility of voters has contributed to a higher fragmentation of the party systems in many countries around the globe and a breakdown of party membership (Mair, 2013; Van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014).

Simultaneously the concept of participatory democracy has gained traction (Pateman, 1970), being translated since into the empirical implementation of countless participatory democracy initiatives around the world. This would eventually lead to the deliberative democracy turn and the popularisation of participatory deliberative mechanisms such as citizens' assemblies and other democratic innovations (Elstub & Escobar, 2020; Rosenberg, 2007; Smith, 2009). Accompanied by an ever-expanding civil society, this has led to far more voices expressed in all societal and political sectors, from health to defence, from global to local. In short, comparing today's context with, say, up to the late 1960s, we have far more critical publics, rising expectations towards governance and transparency, an increasing demand to have a say other than simply through voting in elections – and a pulverisation of voices in politics.

All of this makes for the context of what we term the *mediator parliament* (Leston-Bandeira, 2016, p. 502) following from a transformed perspective on the role of the state in governance (Mayntz, 2016). In characterising the relationship between citizens and parliament across time, Leston-Bandeira identifies a move from the *gentlemen's club* parliament of the nineteenth century, when there was a very limited electoral franchise and no real linkages to the rest of society, to the *representative parliament* in the twentieth century, 'concomitant with the development of mass parties and the expansion of the franchise' (2016, p. 502) when political parties become the main unit mediating the relationship between citizens and governance, and representation becomes tightly associated with elections – parliament's core focus being the relationship with the executive. The *mediator parliament* emerged in the twenty-first century. This is a parliament that is not just focused on the relationship with the executive but plays an important role also in mediating between publics and governance within an increasing volatile and fragmented political sphere. For this modern parliament to remain relevant, it needs to invest in public engagement endeavours, to explain both its role and its need in a democratic political system, but also to act as an effective bridge between the public and governance. In a world with so many competing voices and reduced linkage stability through political parties, parliaments need to build these bridges to stay relevant to citizens.

Parliamentary public engagement started to develop as an explicit institutional role at the turn from the twentieth century to the twenty-first. One may date this start with the introduction of the Scottish Parliament in 1998. The constitution of this parliament was guided by four founding principles (openness, accountability, the sharing of power, and equal opportunities – Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament, 1998, Section Two), which have underpinned this parliament's strong commitment to openness and participation from its very beginnings. This would become embedded throughout its procedural and physical fabric (including having glass walls for meeting rooms to promote – and symbolise – transparency of decision-making). Soon this Parliament would introduce the first known instances of parliamentary outreach community engagement – that is, engagement with the public within local communities, rather than at the parliamentary building (Modernisation Committee, 2004, Q70–79; Seaton, 2005).

Since then, public engagement services and activities by parliaments all across the world have expanded, particularly over the last decade, even if with very considerable disparities between different jurisdictions. This development has happened as a reaction to declining levels of trust, hoping to redress these, but also as a realisation that parliaments cannot simply 'be' in today's societies. They need to connect with the public throughout their tenure – that is, during the period between elections also –to stay relevant

to their publics. However, as we consider next, this development has been very patchy.

What parliamentary public engagement entails

Despite it being a buzzword used by many organisations, including of course parliaments and parliamentarians, it is not always clear what people mean when referring to public engagement. This matters as it shapes how engagement activities are developed.

In their study of Leeds city council, Coleman and Firmstone (2014) identify officials' differing perceptions of what engagement entails and how these lead to different expectations. Indeed, the term is used interchangeably to refer to all of the following (and more): providing information, communicating, consulting, educating and participating. And yet, all of these refer to different types of activities; importantly, they assume various types of involvement from the public and institution. But engagement is often also used as a proxy for broader democratic terms such as 'openness', or its effect on citizens such as 'involvement'. Importantly, the actual term of engagement does not translate that well beyond the English language. Ever demonstrating their adaptability, Brazilians have adopted the English term, converting it into a hitherto non-existent word in the Portuguese lexicon (*engajamento*). But more often than not the term is translated simply into 'participation' – and sometimes just communication. Both are clearly very important elements of engagement, but they are only an element, not the whole, and it is important that parliaments understand public engagement as a broader phenomenon in order to develop effective initiatives.

Despite its clear connection to politics, the most well-developed literature and complex practice in public engagement actually comes from the arts and, in particular, the sciences (Devonshire & Hathway, 2014, Meehan, 2012, Shein et al., 2015). Perceived as subjects for the elites, professionals within the arts and sciences have long understood the need to reach out to the public to explain their relevance. As Sanders and Moles state, the concept and practice of public engagement 'is often credited as emerging from the sciences where, since the 1970s, there have been concerted attempts to nurture public understanding of science' (2013, p. 24). This literature is supplemented by the 'public participation' literature, particularly visible within urban studies, with the often-cited 'ladder of citizen participation' by Shirley Arnstein (1969) being an emblematic reference still today. This literature talks of different levels of involvement from the citizen, discussing for instance whether being a recipient of information can in itself be classified as engagement, or whether engagement entails a more active role (Davies, 2013). Other works in the literature have pointed towards the need for dialogue and interaction between citizen and organisation for engagement to

happen (eg Fox, 2009; Prior & Leston-Bandeira, 2022). And typologies of engagement try to identify what type of activity it entails, for example by breaking it down into public communication, public consultation and public participation (Rowe & Frewer, 2005).

To more clearly establish an understanding of what public engagement entails in the context of parliaments, we propose one should differentiate between *the activities that make for public engagement* (eg information, education, participation), *the effects engagement has on the citizen* (eg feeling listened to, valued, frustrated, disillusioned) and *the broader democratic outcomes* that explain the need for engagement (eg trust, openness). By unpacking these three dimensions of public engagement, we are better able to understand what parliamentary public engagement may entail and how to assess its effectiveness. Bearing in mind these three dimensions, we define parliamentary institutional public engagement as an activity (or a set of activities) that facilitates interaction between citizens and a legislature with the potential to empower the citizen and enhance legislation, scrutiny and/or representation.

Crucially, one should acknowledge that engagement can derive from different types of activities – such as simply informing the public, for example through a parliamentary website, or deeper forms of involvement such as participating (say) by submitting a petition or by being part of a deliberative initiative such as a citizens' assembly – but also that these types of activities are interconnected. For example, information and education shape participation; consultation is based on information, which may itself lead to participation; and all are underpinned by communication activities. Importantly, by distinguishing engagement activities from the potential effect on the citizen, one is acknowledging that just because an activity exists, this does not mean that it will result in citizens feeling engaged. This is the difference between output and impact. Citizens may, in fact, feel further disillusioned; their trust in politics may be further knocked back. But they may also, of course, feel listened to and valued – that would be the sign of an effective public engagement initiative. Individual impact may translate into stronger or weaker trust in the political system and its institutions, or better or worse legislation, as an outcome of engagement.

The next section discusses some of the challenges inherent to the way parliaments have been developing public engagement activities. But before we focus on that, let us outline the types of public engagement activities that parliaments have developed; since it is still early days to consider the effects of these on citizens or the broader democratic outcomes. The *Global Parliamentary Report on Public Engagement* (IPU & UNDP, 2022) provides an illustration of the types of activities developed by parliaments across the world. The report organises engagement activities according to five main

types: information, education, communication, consultation and participation.

Information is clearly the main type of engagement activity developed by parliaments, facilitated in particular by the advent of new technologies and the Internet. Whilst the mere availability of information does not signify it is accessible and understood by the public, there is no doubt this is the main area that parliaments feel most competent in developing, using an ever-expanding panoply of channels from TV and radio broadcasting, to social media, podcast series, guides and simply the parliament website (IPU & UNDP, 2022, p. 22; see also IPU, 2021). Closely linked, but assuming a two-way dialogue between citizen and institution, *communication* activities have also expanded considerably, with many parliaments now having large communications departments. *Education* practices have a long history in parliaments, although their development has been more present since the 1990s. Today this is often the main activity area that parliaments showcase as their 'engagement' offering. From resources to teachers and school children, to visits to parliaments, youth parliaments, simulations and games, parliamentary education activities have expanded considerably (see for example the New Zealand Parliament). Again, this does not speak to how effective they are, of course, with particular areas of concern relating to how wide-reaching they are beyond elite groups, and the extent to which they link to parliamentary business and lead to further involvement.

With consultation and participation, we get to the higher rungs of the ladder of engagement. Whilst many parliaments have had *consultation* practices for decades, often a constitutional provision such as the need to consult organisations like trade unions for specific types of legislation (for example in Portugal), these have not necessarily developed that much in style, with many practices of consultation being very legalistic and focused mainly (if not only) on experts rather than the public as such. However, there are clearly exceptions, as the *Global Parliamentary Report on Public Engagement* (IPU & UNDP, 2022) illustrates, and we have seen innovative practices expand such as hearings outside the parliamentary building (for example by the National Assembly of Serbia) and calls for lived experience from the public (for example by the Canadian House of Commons).

In relation to *participation*, the right to petition parliament has been present in some parliaments for centuries, often being the only institutional participation mode envisaged, with increasing numbers of parliaments now introducing e-petitions (for example the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, but also all of the following: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Portugal, and the UK).

However, recent decades have seen considerable innovation in this area well beyond petitions. To note for instance the development of citizen legislative initiatives (for example the Danish Folketing), online portals through

which citizens can comment on legislation considered by parliament (for example Chile), and a limited number of deliberative democracy initiatives (citizens' assemblies, for example the UK House of Commons). Still, this is certainly the area with the least development, among the five types of engagement activities, with many parliaments often offering no, or very limited, participation opportunities. Again, the mere availability of participation opportunities does not signify in itself that citizens feel engaged and/or that it results in better legislation, scrutiny or representation. Key issues affecting this type of initiative include the extent to which it actually informs parliamentary business, whether those who participate are simply 'the usual suspects' – often urban, from the main ethnic group, and with higher social class and levels of education. Another issue is whether those who participate feel their views have been considered. The next section explores some of these challenges in more detail.

Seven challenges ahead in parliamentary public engagement

Having established the context for the rise of parliamentary public engagement, what this entails, how one might best understand its effectiveness and the main types of activity developed by parliaments, we now focus on seven key challenges that parliaments have to face in developing and implementing public engagement: (1) structural constraints, (2) accessibility and inclusion, (3) linkage with parliamentary business, (4) closing the feedback loop, (5) adverse effects of engagement, (6) evaluation and lesson learning, and (7) being a drop in the ocean. This is not an exhaustive list; many more challenges can be added and some of these obviously overlap. But they point to problems in existing public engagement practice and areas with which parliamentary staff struggle particularly. The identification of these seven specific challenges is informed by our discussion so far and our own practice within IPEN, interacting with parliamentary officials from around the world and in a wide range of contexts.

(1) Many *structural constraints* shape parliaments' development of public engagement. Public engagement cannot be understood in a vacuum; it is developed within the constraints of its context, its building, its country and its people. We highlight four core structural constraints: availability of resources, legal frameworks, organisation of parliamentary services and the parliamentary space(s).

First of all, parliamentary public engagement is not to be had for free. Depending on which instruments are used, it may take up significant amounts of *resources*, either internally from parliamentary staff or from external contractors and consultancies. Democracy has its costs, to be sure, but this makes it all the more necessary to properly target and evaluate

the effectiveness of engagement. So the starting point should always be a general analysis of the specific challenges in a particular political system and its parliament. As explained above, public engagement is a new role for parliaments. Although linked, it does not in itself constitute traditional core business and therefore requires investment in new resources, staff and time. This means that those parliaments with fewer resources and in lower income countries may often struggle to develop provision in public engagement. This requires skills in areas that parliamentary staff may not have, as they are traditionally recruited for their clerkly competences to process matters pertaining to legislation and scrutiny. Effective public engagement practices require skills in areas such as communications and education, or indeed in engagement. Those parliaments that have developed their public engagement provision considerably have done so in many cases on the back of considerable investment in new staff (Leston-Bandeira, 2014, 2016), although the *Global Parliamentary Report on Public Engagement* also offers plenty of case studies of innovative engagement practices developed with scarce resources (IPU & UNDP, 2022).

Parliaments are structured around specific *legal frameworks*. These matter for many reasons, particularly to maintain the legitimacy of parliamentary work. However, more often than not, legal frameworks such as Rules of Procedure and constitutional provision exist for entirely different reasons to public engagement. As we see below, one of the main challenges in parliamentary public engagement is to link it to parliamentary business. However, this is often difficult to do, if not impossible, due to procedures in place. On the other hand, public engagement is often developed without considering its legal consequences, which can bring many problems to the activity itself. Some parliaments, such as South Africa's, have legal and constitutional provisions that embed the need for public engagement in parliamentary activity; this tends to be the exception, however. Plus, having legal provision on public engagement does not mean in itself that this interacts harmoniously with legal provision in other areas, such as scrutiny.

Parliamentary services often work in silos. This is a substantial issue for effective parliamentary public engagement, as it hinders meaningful public engagement activity. Many parliaments have separate education or other engagement type services, which have little, if any, connection with core services such as committee business. This tends to lead to engagement activity that is detached from core business and therefore less effective. In this instance, smaller legislatures such as the Tynwald tend to adopt a more holistic approach to engagement, as staff and services are less likely to be specialised.

Parliamentary spaces shape parliamentary activity and culture. In many instances these spaces have been developed mainly to provide for core business, not with an eye to the citizen and how they may experience the

space. This can be an issue, when parliaments are not built to welcome the public, being built instead to welcome and support members in their work. This can result in very hierarchical and unwelcoming spaces.

(2) *Accessibility and inclusion* are a substantial challenge for developing public engagement effectively in parliaments. Parliaments are hierarchical and elitist institutions by nature. They have – traditionally – often not been developed to welcome citizens. What is more, citizen engagement is markedly an activity carried out mainly by those publics who are already engaged – termed the 'usual suspects' above. If parliaments do not actively develop strategies to reach beyond those groups, they are likely to be talking to those already engaged and, as a consequence, likely to simply amplify the power of specific voices – those already able to make themselves heard. The guidance on diversity and inclusion included in the *Global Parliamentary Report on Public Engagement* is a useful starting point to address this specific challenge (IPU & UNDP, 2022).

(3) A third challenge is *linking engagement with parliamentary business*. The considerable expansion of public engagement since the turn of the century has in the main happened in parallel with the core business. This can be reflected in many ways, from the tour of parliament that talks of architecture, paintings and history, but fails to explain what parliaments and MPs actually do, to the participation initiative that collates many important testimonies and views from the public but then does not use these testimonies to inform parliamentary activity. To be meaningful, parliamentary public engagement needs to link to the institution's purpose and core activity. For, as important as it may be for school children to find out about the history of their parliament, they also need to understand its relevance to their lives. Likewise, there is only value in asking the public about their views on a specific issue if this is going to inform someone within parliament in the implementation of their legislative and scrutiny tasks (Leston-Bandeira & Thompson, 2017).

(4) Linked to the previous issue, it is critical to *close the feedback loop* for consultation and participation activities. When citizens have no sense of whether a comment they submitted is read or considered by someone in parliament, their frustration and disillusionment with parliament is only likely to increase. Closing the feedback loop can be a challenge, but can be done in collective ways, such as the mention of a public engagement activity in a committee report, an MP specifically referring to a comment from the public in their speech, or an online shorthand page identifying key views from the public and how these were addressed. It can simply be done by having regular email communication with participants explaining what is happening next with their inputs.

(5) Public engagement can also have its pitfalls for parliaments, because it may have *adverse effects*. These need to be considered carefully when studying and implementing engagement practices. Public engagement can lead to creating large expectations, especially when it is introduced with aplomb and fanfare as a ‘new thing’. If the ensuing political processes fail to meet those expectations, this can indeed have negative effects on institutional trust and support. Thus, for all engagement practices, the management of expectations from the outset is a crucial component. Parliaments need to make it clear that hearing the public’s positions and concerns does not mean that their wishes will automatically be fulfilled; rather, it means their wishes will be channelled into the political process as one more source of expertise. After all, engagement results are meant not to replace but to enhance processes of substantive representation.

If expectations for public engagement have been set too high and the feedback loop is not properly closed, engagement practices might be perceived as mere symbolism. And indeed, they may be just that. This danger is particularly inherent in establishing engagement practices supported by international development agencies. Where resources for engagement are made available, this may be a sufficient reason to use them, without changing underlying structures. In this case, public engagement activities can be a mere window dressing exercise or even a misleading façade, a Potemkin village of parliamentary public engagement.

Another grave danger that has not been grappled with much so far in parliamentary public engagement is its selective use and articulation by different societal groups – in effect creating not more but less equality. We have mentioned this danger throughout our arguments above. For this reason, engagement should always be inclusive and pay particular attention to marginalised groups. Otherwise, engagement practice might just be yet another channel for those who are already well represented.

Selective participation can even go one step further, when specific interest groups use the tools of public engagement to advance their own agendas. This may happen through active political campaigns trying to influence decisions – again, something seen already in instruments of direct democracy. But it can also be a covert activity, following the lobbying approach of ‘astroturfing’, essentially capturing engagement institutions for select interests. Evidence of the coordinated use of engagement does exist with pre-fabricated postcards or emails to MPs, but also in the use of petitions. Engagement institutions can be merely another venue for such political entrepreneurs. And current international crises spotlight the danger of using such instruments for covert activities of unfriendly public diplomacy. Effective safeguards against such capture of parliamentary public engagement need to be in place, even in the form of institutional provisions to stop an engagement process if needed.

(6) Our sixth challenge is *evaluation and lesson learning*. Due to its novelty, there is little understanding still about what works in parliamentary public engagement, and what does not. But often parliaments do not fully evaluate their practices. This is essential in the case of public engagement. It is only by understanding how specific public engagement activities developed, and their effect on citizens and policymaking, that parliaments can enhance their practices. Evaluation and lesson learning should therefore be a key part of implementing public engagement in parliaments, as emphasised by the *Global Parliamentary Report on Public Engagement* (IPU & UNDP, 2022).

Such evaluation needs to be complete and systematic, and various steps must be considered: What is the input into public engagement by parliaments (eg staff, resources) and what does the throughput look like – the processes and technology used? Next to this, the output perspective needs to be included: What has come out of engagement and how does it feed into the regular parliamentary work? But one cannot stop there; the most interesting question is to ask for the impact – and that includes impacts on those citizens involved in engagement activities, but also on those who are not personally part of it, and on parliamentary activity. And, finally, there is the topic of outcomes, eg does engagement really contribute to more support, higher legitimacy, better understanding, more involvement in politics, better legislation?

Along this list, professional evaluation becomes more and more challenging. While it is relatively easy to count engagement initiatives, isolating their effects on the outcome level demands a complex and pricey study design. Much more thinking still must go into this question of how to best evaluate engagement.

(7) For as effective as a parliamentary public engagement initiative may be, one has to be realistic: it is *a drop in the ocean*. Decision-making is shaped by many factors, such as party manifestos, lobbying, priorities, resources, and timings. A public engagement initiative may inform a specific policy, but it is simply one drop amongst many other competing interests. Likewise, in terms of citizen perception, a parliamentary public engagement initiative will be only a one-off instance. People's perceptions are shaped by many other more permanent elements, such as the media and their socialisation.

Conclusion and outlook

Engaging the public in political decision-making is a key prerequisite for modern democratic governance – and parliaments are in a unique position to carry out this important task. Ongoing developments in society have led to the development of public engagement as a key institutional role for

parliaments. This does not replace but rather complements established ways of engagement that run through individual MPs and, most notably, political parties.

Parliaments around the globe have made many attempts and experiments to introduce engagement activities. But, on a practical level and from an academic perspective, they have not yet been fully grasped and understood. The *Third Global Parliamentary Report* by the IPU and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), on public engagement (2022), provides a starting point for the future study of engagement activities because it compiles existing practices from parliaments in many and varied political systems.

An important challenge for better future understanding is a systematic mapping of such activities by parliaments to find out what engagement activities entail, where they are used and how they are evaluated. In that exercise it will be helpful to determine under what conditions engagement activities thrive – or not.

Another question of utmost importance is how engagement makes a difference. Evaluation studies will help answer this question, but they require rigorous analysis and not just – as is often done – a counting engagement exercise; they require an evaluation of what the actual output is and how it relates to policymaking in the policy process. More broadly, studies have to tackle the important outcome-related questions: do engagement activities increase trust in parliaments, do they strengthen democracy, do they facilitate participation of disenfranchised and marginalised societal groups, do they result in better policymaking? And neither practitioners nor academics should close their eyes to the pitfalls and potential adverse effects of parliamentary public engagement.

The activity of parliamentary public engagement is fledgling; the contours are various; the need for research is high. The articles in this special issue provide a helpful opening for future deeper analysis that can not only bring about new academic insights but also inform practical politics.

Notes

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2. Following Pitkin's notion of representing being making present what is absent (1967), (re)presenting signifies this act: to present the thing that is being represented at a different setting and, by doing so, re-presenting it. Representing is therefore (re)presenting something that already exists to a specific audience.

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