



*Better parliaments,
stronger democracies.*

GLOBAL PARLIAMENTARY REPORT



*Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.*

The changing nature of parliamentary representation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



“Public pressure on parliaments is greater than ever before.”

The focus of this first Global Parliamentary Report is the evolving relationship between citizens and parliaments.¹ The intention is to analyse how citizens’ expectations are changing, and how parliaments, politicians and parliamentary staff are responding.

There are three dominant pressures facing parliaments. Each is playing itself out in different ways and at different speeds in specific countries and regions. But there are common themes in the greater public desire for:

- information and influence in parliamentary work
- accountability and responsiveness to public concerns
- service and delivery to meet citizens’ needs

The report uses the experience of institutions and individual politicians to illustrate the challenges and the variety of initiatives aimed at enhancing parliamentary representation in different parts of the world. It aims to help parliaments and politicians understand the pressures better, identify some of the tensions that they need to manage and provide examples of good practice which might offer insight, inspiration or emulation.

In 2012 parliaments are more prevalent than ever before. 190 of 193 countries now have some form of functioning parliament, accounting for over 46,000 representatives. The existence of a parliament is not synonymous with democracy, but democracy cannot exist without a parliament. Although varying hugely in power, influence and function, almost every political system now has some form of representative assembly.

Parliaments provide a link between the concerns of the people and those that govern. The existence of a public forum to articulate citizens’ concerns is a prerequisite for the legitimacy of government. A global opinion poll in 2008 found that 85 percent of people believed that the ‘will of the people should be the basis of the authority of government’.²

The events of the Arab Spring since the beginning of 2011 reinforce the central role of parliaments in the quest for greater political voice and democracy. In countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, the role and powers of the parliament have been pivotal in the discussions about the shape of the post-revolution state. Similarly, in countries such as Yemen, Jordan and Oman, the promise of genuine legislative and oversight powers for the parliament are key reforms in response to public demands. Parliaments are a key element in, and a symbol of, the creation of a representative state.

Public pressure on parliaments is greater than ever before. The growth in the size of government has increased the responsibilities of parliaments to scrutinize and call to account. The development of communication technology and saturation media coverage of politics has increased the visibility of parliaments and politicians. The expansion in the number of parliaments around the globe has been accompanied by increased public expectations of what they can and should deliver.

¹ NB: Throughout the report, we use the term ‘parliament’ as a generic label to cover the range of legislative and representative bodies that exist throughout the world. We recognize, though, that the term obscures a huge variety of bodies that differ significantly from one another in their roles, make-up, power and function.

² World Public Opinion.org, 2008.

In many parts of the world there are fundamental questions about the effectiveness of parliaments in holding government to account. The representative role of political parties – central to parliamentary functioning – is, in many countries, weak and poorly rooted in society. With the flourishing of civil society and new forms of participatory democracy, citizens have many routes to representation and redress. Where parliaments were once the single most important way to articulate public concern, now they are competing with a variety of alternatives.

Yet parliaments have never been more vital. Parliaments remain the only bodies that exist specifically to collate and articulate the interests of the nation as a whole. There are strategic roles that parliaments alone can perform, such as making and repealing laws, and calling government to account. The challenge facing parliaments in all parts of the world is one of continual evolution, ensuring that they respond strategically and effectively to changing public demands for representation.

Analysis

1. Genuine public influence over the parliamentary deliberations is limited. The promise of greater influence must result in greater influence.

Chapter II examines the wide range of initiatives being employed by parliamentary institutions to improve information, understanding, and engagement with the public. These measures tend to fall into two broad categories, and seek to:

- provide more information and improve public understanding of parliament
- consult and involve the public more in the work of parliament

Parliaments are using increasingly inventive techniques to provide more access and information, from Open Days and Visitors' Centres to parliamentary broadcasting and websites.

And they are finding an audience – demand and supply appear to be increasing exponentially. Yet, there is, to date, little sense of how much such strategies have improved the public perception of parliament, enhanced understanding or improved legislative outcomes.

Even where parliaments seek to assess their effectiveness, the problems they are trying to address (public understanding, trust and perceptions of parliament) have multiple causes. A parliamentary strategy is likely to have only a partial effect and separating the impact of a successful outreach strategy from all other possible causes is difficult. Nevertheless, the absence of clear, identifiable objectives against which to judge such programmes remains a continuing problem.

Many parliaments have established mechanisms for public consultation – primarily driven by their professional staff and administrative service (invariably with the backing of politicians). But, the implications of greater consultation are overtly political. While the organization of a consultation exercise may be administrative, the impact of that consultation and how far it influences policy is ultimately a decision for politicians.

The danger for many parliaments is that the promise of greater influence heightens public expectations. Failure to meet these expectations undermines faith in the parliamentary process. In short, the promise of greater influence must result in greater influence.

2. Politicians are obliged to account publicly for their actions more regularly and routinely.

Chapter III examines how public pressures for more accountability are manifesting themselves in the representative role of a parliamentarian. Debates about the 'proper' representative role of the MP go back centuries, but there are few definitive answers and little agreement among either politicians or citizens. Being an elected politician remains one of the few professions for which there is

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no job description, and there are few guides as to whom, how or what a politician should represent.

That political freedom to decide representative styles has been seen as a strength, reflecting flexibility and responsiveness, and a dangerous source of public uncertainty about political roles. The report identifies three separate trends, whose collective impact is gradually restricting the traditionally broad parliamentary mandate.

(a) The role of political parties is changing in many regions of the world. Through parliamentary groups, political parties are the organizing blocs around which parliamentary activity is built. Parties’ effectiveness largely determines the effectiveness of any parliament. In democracies old and new, parties are increasingly seen as impediments to effective representation, rather than facilitators of it. The challenge for parties and politicians is to demonstrate that they are responsive to public attitudes yet retain enough cohesion to offer the collective representation on which parliaments are based. Finding that balance between public responsiveness and party coherence continues to elude many parliaments.

(b) A number of institutional changes are limiting the scope within which politicians can operate. Reforms tend to fall into three broad categories, which aim to:

- **limit the length of the parliamentary mandate**, either by preventing re-election or making politicians subject to public votes of confidence, or recall
- **remove potential conflicts of interest** by confining extra-parliamentary activities, particularly outside earnings, and identifying incompatibilities with public office
- **introduce codes of conduct**, which aim to set standards for parliamentary behaviour and further regulate the behaviour of MPs

The motive behind such initiatives is to make MPs more accountable to those who elect them. In many cases, they are popular responses to

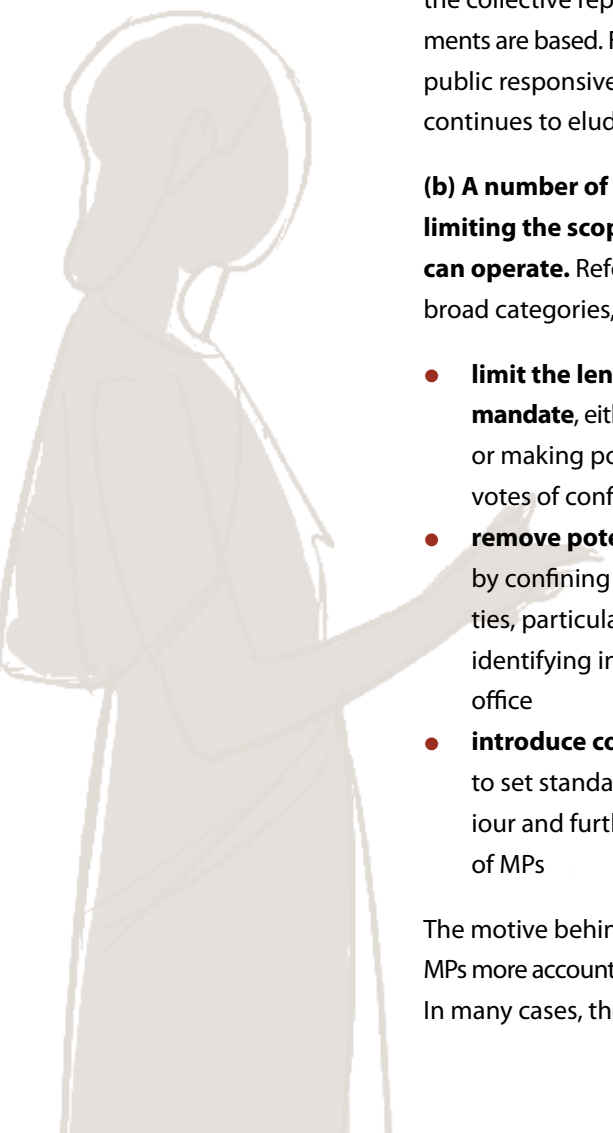
issues of low political trust. It is perhaps inevitable that they tend to involve either greater regulation of, or restrictions on, what MPs do. Although MPs are accountable to the public at elections, the tenor of these reforms suggests that the electorate increasingly regards the ballot box as an insufficient mechanism of control.

(c) The desire for greater public accountability from politicians is driving the growth of a new breed of parliamentary monitoring organization (PMO). PMOs exist to monitor and often to rate the performance of MPs inside and outside parliament. More than 191 such organizations exist worldwide, monitoring the activities of over 80 national parliaments. Their emergence and growth suggest that the public welcomes the existence of intermediary organizations that can decipher, summarize and assess their political representatives.

This drive toward more openness, transparency and independent external validation cuts across many of the traditional ideas about political representation. Many politicians are wary of such developments, particularly the public commentary role being played by PMOs. PMOs undoubtedly present challenges, but also offer opportunities, provided that parliaments recognize their potential to engage the public.

3. Constituency service is an accepted and expected part of the job and appears to be growing in volume, content and complexity

Chapter IV looks at the growth of constituency service, and public expectations of what politicians should deliver for citizens and their local area. Constituency service is now seen as central to ideas of parliamentary representation by the public and politicians. The challenge for parliaments and politicians is to respond strategically to public expectations in a way that reinforces their role in finding collective solutions to citizens’ concerns.



Constituency service covers a huge range of potential activity, but can be broadly grouped into four categories:

- **support to individuals**, which ranges from helping to find work or opportunities, to more clientelistic patterns of behaviour designed to buy support
- **grievance-chasing**, in which citizens have a particular problem with a government service, welfare entitlement or bureaucracy, with the MP acting as an influential friend to help resolve such problems
- **policy responsiveness**, in which voters try to seek or to influence an MP's opinion on particular issues, especially votes in parliament
- **project work**, in which politicians seek funds for the development of the area or the promotion of local economy, with MPs using their position to secure government funding.

Voter expectations of constituency service appear to differ in developing countries and more affluent states. In the former, the expectation is that MPs will provide materially for their voters and act as the principal development agents for the area, whereas in the latter, citizens tend to want MPs to intercede in grievances and, sometimes, to find government funds for the local area. These representative roles have developed in direct response to the needs of citizens; several politicians commented that they felt obliged to make provision because people had no one else to turn to.

Public demand for constituency service is though only part of the equation. Supply has also increased for two main reasons:

- **Politicians enjoy the work.** Numerous MPs suggested that it was the one area where they could have a tangible and positive effect on people's lives.
- **It has a perceived electoral benefit.** Although evidence is patchy, MPs believe that it can generate a sizeable vote. Polls around the world suggest that voters are much more likely to judge MPs on their

ability to deliver at the local level rather than on legislation or oversight.

In response to the increasing volumes of work – and pressure from MPs – the official resources devoted to supporting these efforts are increasing. Most obviously, the number of countries with constituency development funds (CDFs) has increased dramatically in the last decade, providing a locally administered pool of money designed to support the community and promote economic development.

In many ways, CDFs are an obvious response to local need and often specifically seek to empower the MP in that role. However, here as elsewhere, the obvious response may not necessarily be the best in the long run. Concerns exist about the financial accountability and effectiveness of such funds, about whether they simply reinforce existing patronage networks and encourage corruption and about whether they make MPs into executive decision-makers, and thus detract from their parliamentary roles in law-making and oversight.

Parliaments and individual MPs need to develop much more strategic responses to the growth of constituency service. Given the level of public expectation and the attachment to the role amongst politicians, constituency service will not disappear. It is, and will remain, an essential element of parliamentary representation. But it needs to be done better, and in a way that reinforces the central roles of parliament. The challenge for parliamentary systems around the world is not simply to provide more resources, but to channel constituency work by moving from:

- **the specific to the strategic:** finding policy solutions to common problems rather than dealing with each case on its own
- **the individual to the collective:** finding responses that benefit a number of people rather than individuals
- **the local to the national:** finding ways of bringing constituency expertise into the parliamentary and policy process much more systematically.

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Conclusions

Parliaments’ resilience reflects their ability to adapt and evolve to public expectations.

Parliamentary change tends to be haphazard and unpredictable, the result of political negotiation and compromise. In many cases, the ability to implement the necessary changes is hampered by a lack of co-ordination, strategy and organization. Rather, change has tended to happen in an ad hoc fashion, as a series of disparate measures rather than guided by a set of overarching objectives. This may be inevitable. The nature of parliamentary institutions may make it impossible to devise and implement an all-encompassing strategy.

However, parliaments need a much more strategic analysis of the causes and sources of pressure for change.

Although many parliaments believe they are doing as much as they can to improve their organization and consult with citizens, their responses to public expectations are sometimes constrained by gaps in their own analysis of the factors driving reform. A fuller analysis is likely to give parliaments a much better understanding of the causes and consequences of public opinion. Perhaps more importantly, it would provide a realistic assessment of what is achievable from within parliament, identify where external support is needed and establish a measure against which success could be judged.

Parliamentary efforts to improve the relationship with voters need to be based on an understanding of how the role of the individual representative is changing.

The MP is the single most important point of contact with parliament for the vast majority of voters. The way that the MP’s role is perceived by the public will do much to determine public attitudes toward parliament and politicians. Institutional reforms will, in turn and often inadvertently, reinforce or shape that perception. A more strategic analysis is needed to harness some of the pressures for change into reforms that reinforce the roles of parliamentary representatives and of parliament itself in the public mind.

Strategic responses could take many forms, but, from this report, three specific challenges stand out:

- **Reforms need to reinforce the role of the representative and improve public understanding of what MPs do, inside and outside parliament.** For example, the provision of greater resources to MPs for constituency work may simply increase public expectations of what MPs will do locally. Demand may constantly outstrip supply unless the additional resources are accompanied by a strategic change in the approach to the work. Responses should seek to shape how constituency work is done in order to reduce the burden and influence public understanding of the MP’s representative role.
- **Reforms designed to improve public understanding and political accountability need to ensure that they strengthen the role of parliament rather than undermine it.** Successive reforms have worked gradually to restrict the scope of the parliamentary mandate, often for very good reasons, and usually in response to public pressure. However, the challenge is to balance calls for greater accountability with ensuring that MPs have enough scope to reflect, deliberate and decide in the national interest. The public expectation is that MPs should account more regularly for their activity, but MPs are elected to act on behalf of voters and reforms need to reinforce that sense of delegated authority.
- **Parliaments need to collaborate more fully with external organizations to strengthen links with the public.** The relationship between parliaments and citizens can hardly be as direct and straightforward as it should be in theory. There are now a host of mediating bodies that summarize and interpret parliamentary activity, broadcast parliamentary proceedings and rate the performance of individual MPs. In short, the process of parliamentary representation is more complex and intertwined with outside organizations than ever before. Such organizations are potential allies in reinforcing the central roles of parliament and drawing the attention of a much wider audience to parliament.



Compared with 50 years ago, parliaments are, generally, more open and accessible, more professionally-run, better-resourced and more representative.

This is crucial for democracy. But citizens are, rightly, more demanding of those institutions and expect higher standards of probity, accountability and conduct than ever before in the institutions' history. Although opinion polls suggest that people have ambiguous views about parliaments, the volume of correspondence, contact and requests for help is increasing rather than decreasing. There are many roles that parliament alone can perform and individuals seem to recognize the significance of the institution. Parliaments are more vital than ever before to the process of political representation.

This resilience is partly due to the fact that parliaments have continued to evolve and adapt. The landscape in which they operate is now more complex and faster moving than ever before. The challenge is to keep up with the public by displaying responsiveness and resilience and continually renew that relationship with citizens. This will be a permanent process of evolution, but the signs are that most parliaments are alive to the size of the task.

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