

Revised version

26 May 2021

Conference Report

Democracy and the changing role of parliament in the twenty-first century

Introduction

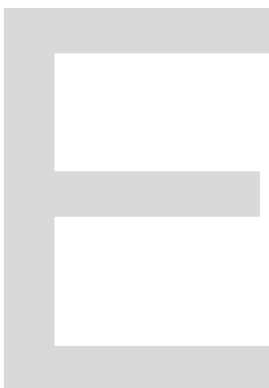
Parliament's fundamental role is enshrined in the constitution of almost all countries. In practically every context, it is based on the core functions of representation, law-making, holding government to account, and the budget cycle. These universal core functions have evolved over centuries with the historical development of parliaments. Yet, parliament's role cannot be understood through this lens alone.

Society changes; technological evolutions generate far-reaching modifications in the world of work and the individual's place in society; the machinery of government is becoming more complex; the new challenges arising before the international community are causing new forms of international cooperation to emerge.

Today's parliaments are, in many ways, based on the model that was often codified in the nineteenth century. However, this model is not set in stone; it has been evolving. As the institution most responsive to the will of the people, parliament changes constantly, in both its societal functions and the ways in which it carries out its mandate.

Parliaments are increasingly taking on some roles that, historically speaking, had not been within their realm. For example, they are interacting with the public, informing and educating, or are playing a role in the international political arena much more intensively than before.

This report identifies some of the changes in parliament's role in democracy – changes that have taken place, are underway, or may yet occur. It is intended as a background paper to the Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament.



Parliaments and democracy

Democracy is still by far the preferred form of government in all continents,¹ and is the basis for good governance. The principles of democracy, as set out in the IPU's 1997 Universal Declaration on Democracy² were vigorously reaffirmed in 2017 by the IPU at its 137th Assembly in St. Petersburg.³

Democracy aims to protect and promote the dignity and fundamental rights of the individual, instil social justice, and foster economic and social development. It presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society. As a form of government, democracy is the best way of achieving these objectives; it is also the only political system that has the capacity for self-correction.

In 2006, the IPU identified five core objectives of a democratic parliament: to be representative, open and transparent, accessible, accountable and effective at the national and international levels.⁴ These objectives were codified almost word-for-word in 2015 in Targets 16.6 and 16.7⁵ of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which recognize that effective institutions are essential for achieving progress in all facets of sustainable development.

However, the approach to and practice of democracy sometimes appear to generate disappointment and disillusion. Across the globe, the share of citizens who are dissatisfied with the performance of their democracies is rising – from 47.9 per cent in the mid-1990s to 57.5 per cent in 2019.⁶ Only half of the global population surveyed believes their country is currently democratic, ranging from 78 per cent in Switzerland to 20 per cent in Venezuela.⁷ In the European Union, a clear majority of citizens agree that their “voice counts in the EU” (56%), yet only one third (34%) trust national parliaments.⁸

In the present age, “when democracies are called on to grapple with forces that often seem beyond their control, affecting their security, their economies, and the livelihoods and well-being of their citizens”,⁹ parliaments are expected to address the key reasons for public disillusion in the performance of democracy and public institutions.

The Declaration adopted at the 2015 World Conference of Speakers of Parliament reaffirmed that “Parliament is the central institution of democracy through which the will of the people is expressed”. At the same time, the Conference participants underlined their concern regarding “public scepticism and a disconnect with politics” and stressed the need to enable “the diverse components of society to participate in politics”.

As the world moves into the third decade of the twenty-first century, it is imperative for parliaments to reassert themselves vis-à-vis the global societal changes that constitute a new international reality. Parliaments are being challenged in various areas to find appropriate responses and regain public trust. In a world that is changing faster than ever, affecting people's lives in so many ways, the role of parliaments is changing too.

Many of these challenging issues have been particularly brought to light by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many parliaments are not functioning or are operating in a very limited way, and this is affecting accountability and representation at a critical moment. Some elections have had to be postponed, some courts have only dealt with urgent cases, individual freedoms have been curtailed in many ways

¹ International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise* (Stockholm, 2019): <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/global-state-of-democracy-2019>

² IPU, *Universal Declaration on Democracy* (1997): <https://www.ipu.org/our-impact/strong-parliaments/setting-standards/universal-declaration-democracy>

³ IPU resolution, *Sharing our diversity: The 20th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Democracy (137th Assembly)*, 2017).

⁴ IPU, *Parliament and democracy in the twenty-first century: A guide to good practice* (2006).

⁵ United Nations (2015): <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg16>

⁶ R.S. Foa and others, “The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020” (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy, 2020): www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk

⁷ Dalia Research, “Democracy Perception Index 2019: Global State of Democracy” (2019): <https://daliaresearch.com/blog/global-democracy-overview-2019>

⁸ European Commission, “Spring 2019 Standard Eurobarometer” (August 2019): https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_4969

⁹ IPU, *Parliament and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: A guide to good practice* (2006): <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/handbooks/2016-07/parliament-and-democracy-in-twenty-first-century-guide-good-practice>

and several governments have taken emergency measures in order to slow down the spread of the coronavirus during the pandemic. In times like these, parliament's oversight role is becoming more important again to make sure that the measures taken against the spread of the coronavirus are being used in a proportionate and time-limited way and do not infringe fundamental rights and the rule of law.

Our citizens call for transparency and accountability and, in order to abide by these principles, it is necessary to strengthen anti-corruption and control efforts and identify the most effective mechanisms to this end.

After the pandemic, it is essential that parliaments work again to defend people's freedoms and human rights. If democracy was already threatened by a lack of citizen trust, it will now be essential to rebuild the relationship with citizens, without playing on people's fears, giving more powers to governments or undermining democratic freedoms.

Parliaments and the people

Parliaments play a major role in ensuring the full participation of everyone in public decision-making and political life. The people give members of parliament their mandate. Members of parliament have a duty to engage with their electorate and uphold the trust placed in them.

The gap between representatives and the represented – those who govern and those who are governed – is becoming a widely shared challenge. One of the consequences is the decreasing voter turnout,¹⁰ with significantly lower voter turnout of people aged 25 or under.¹¹ When voter turnout in parliamentary elections is low, the legitimacy of parliament and its capacity to represent the people and decide on their behalf can be questioned.

A strong democratic parliament should seek to foster a vibrant civil society and to work closely with it in finding solutions to people's problems and needs. A recent study shows that "higher levels of Effective Parliament and Civil Society Participation appear to effectively prevent the start of a backsliding process, make continued backsliding less probable and reduce the scope of backsliding".¹²

There is a strong need for more robust efforts to bring parliament closer to the people, especially to young people and women, which is crucial to achieve a true democracy. Parliaments need to be more open to the public, they need to explain the essential features of democracy and to promote an understanding of democratic decision-making and the legislative process.

Establishing closer links with the scientific community, academia and pioneers of research and innovation can provide parliaments with knowledge and expertise in various areas, which is particularly valuable for parliaments with limited resources.

Fair and inclusive parliamentary procedures are crucial in this endeavour. Fostering an interactive relationship with the public requires parliaments to introduce initiatives which encourage participatory democracy and bolster pluralism.

Such initiatives have to be considered in the light of new digital technologies, which are having a transformative effect on society.

Parliaments and the new technology environment

New information technologies create tremendous opportunities for communication and collaboration between parliaments and the people. Two thirds (66.77%) of humanity have a mobile device.¹³ More than 50 per cent of the world's population is now online;¹⁴ roughly one million more people join the

¹⁰ According to the World Bank's 2017 [World Development Report](#), election turnout is declining across the world. Over the last 25 years, the average global voter turnout rate dropped by more than 10 per cent (see in: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2017>).

¹¹ International IDEA, *Voter Turnout Trends around the World* (Stockholm, 2016):

<https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf>

¹² International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise* (Stockholm, 2019): <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/global-state-of-democracy-2019>

¹³ Ash Turner, "How Many Smartphones Are in the World?" (Bankmycell, 2019):

<https://www.bankmycell.com/blog/how-many-phones-are-in-the-world>

¹⁴ International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2019* (Geneva, 2019): <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2019.pdf>

internet every day.¹⁵ On the other hand, this also means that almost half of the world's population is not online; in the least developed countries only 19 per cent of the population is online. In all regions of the world the internet is accessed more by men than women.

Technology empowers people to be more informed than ever before. They demand that their voice be heard and respected and they no longer accept their "pre-digital" era role – to be called on only to vote once every four or five years. They do not want to wait for the next parliamentary elections to have a chance to say, once again, what they think and need. People now ask for immediate answers and wish to take part in public decision-making.

The internet influences democracy in multiple ways. The positive impacts include things such as enhanced access to information, new channels for freedom of expression and association, new forms of political participation, a more direct contact between the people and their representatives. The sum of human knowledge is without precedent, and accessible within a few clicks, thus multiplying the possibilities for education.

The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged with startling speed in early 2020 has served to underline the essential role of the State in protecting the health of the population, and the equally important role of parliaments in holding the government to account and ensuring that human rights are not undermined during times of crisis. While the arrival of the pandemic created enormous challenges for the functioning of parliament, as for all institutions, parliaments were quick to react. As of 21 April 2020, more than half of the 55 parliaments that had reported data to the IPU declared that they were able to meet, either in person in an adapted format, or remotely.

The speed with which parliaments such as Brazil, Chile, Finland, Maldives, Spain and Ukraine were able to establish remote working solutions was astonishing, and is a testament to the political will to find solutions. It is noteworthy that many parliaments were able to move more quickly to holding remote committee meetings than plenary sittings. However, it should also be noted that some parliaments, especially in poorer countries, are struggling to adhere to the WHO guidelines for social distancing as the adoption of virtual parliaments to facilitate the business of parliament has financial and capacity implications which may necessitate emergency external funding. Time will tell whether people will expect or demand the new flexibility provided by these online practices to be incorporated into parliaments' regular working methods once the pandemic has been brought under control.

Negative influences are also easy to identify and range from facilitating the spread of misinformation, providing new vectors for hate speech, to a weakening of the quality of political debates. In particular, social media encourage and reward opinions that are expressed loudly and strongly such as buzzwords and polemics which capture a wider audience than reasoned debate. As a result, the ability to listen to different points of view is threatened. Polarization grows, and the willingness to seek compromise is reduced. This is damaging for the political process and for democracy in general.

Moreover, democracy as a concept has to be extended to include citizens' right of communication with institutions and governments. During the pandemic, this communication was conducted mainly online. It is now essential to put in place the necessary mechanisms to safeguard and promote this right. As concerns are being raised regarding modern technology, in terms of access and dissemination of information, questions dealing with surveillance, fake news and media regulation must be addressed. At the same time, it is imperative to encourage and implement e-democracy. This pandemic crisis provides an opportunity for parliaments, institutions and governments to modernize their approach to technology.

Specific websites could be created in order to provide citizens with the opportunity to express their opinions and positions on issues that concern society as a whole. Additionally, regular contact could be established with interested parties and groups, via electronic consultation, to discuss specific issues. Parliaments are already taking initiatives in this direction, such as the Parallel Parliament and the "House of the Citizens" projects established by the House of Representatives of Cyprus.

¹⁵ Simon Kemp, "Digital 2019: Global Digital Overview", (Datareportal, 2019): <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-global-digital-overview>

Social media have changed the way people, parliaments and parliamentarians communicate, share ideas and share data. Social networks amplify public demands, in particular those of young people. Parliamentarians at the 2018 World e-Parliament Conference¹⁶ confirmed that social media tools are bringing parliaments and parliamentarians closer to the people, and helping them inform, engage and listen. Yet the same tools also generate adverse effects, such as disinformation, “fake news” and abusive behaviour, which challenge parliaments to find appropriate responses.

Parliaments and public engagement

The times we live in also require the establishment of permanent channels of dialogue and communication with the public. Parliaments need to be more open to the public, they need to explain the essential features of democracy and to promote an understanding of democratic decision-making and legislative processes, using direct communication as well as via the media and other channels.

Parliaments all over the world are becoming more transparent, accessible, and visible institutions. Many parliaments are providing the public with various tools and mechanisms supported by new technologies, such as the parallel parliament in Cyprus, the week of open parliament with a citizen session in Uganda, parliamentary open days, and youth and child parliaments in many countries. Nurturing the culture of transparency and accountability, as well as promoting public engagement, are crucial for gaining the confidence and trust of the electorate.

However, creating real and meaningful links between the people and parliaments requires a strategic approach, with clearly defined goals that would ultimately lead to laws and policies that would be better suited to people and reinforce public trust in parliaments.

To make participatory decision-making possible and effective, different forms of public engagement¹⁷ and citizen participation can be defined. These can be adjusted to different contexts and target groups and provided through different channels and tools. Participative and deliberative democracy should not aim to bypass or undermine parliament and political processes but to strengthen them.

The objective of fostering an interactive relationship with the public points to the need for parliaments to introduce initiatives that encourage participatory democracy and bolster pluralism. Such initiatives can be enhanced by the use of new digital technologies, including blockchain technology, artificial intelligence and other innovative and transformative tools.

Public engagement should be inclusive, leaving no one behind. If any group of people is excluded, and does not have the chance to be engaged and participate, the democratic values and outcomes of such process become questionable.

Involving the public is not only about providing different tools and mechanisms for people to get engaged in parliamentary work. It is much more about building a long-lasting relationship between parliaments and people. It is about listening to the public and their concerns and responding to them, by undertaking parliamentary action. A responsive parliament aims to make political processes more inclusive, accountable and participatory.

Parliaments and international politics

Parliaments are, increasingly, making inroads into the international political scene, gaining significant power in the area that was traditionally dominated by the executive.

Parliaments are expected to play a key role in addressing emerging complex foreign policy and international issues that impact every aspect of people’s lives, as encompassed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

A survey conducted by the IPU in 2019¹⁸ found that over half of the 89 parliaments analysed had established mechanisms within parliaments dedicated to SDG implementation. The survey also showed that many parliaments regularly discussed the SDGs. Others had set aside specific budgets for implementing the SDGs in general or the specific goals, such as education or health. However,

¹⁶ IPU, World e-Parliament Conference (2018): <https://www.ipu.org/event/world-e-parliament-conference-2018>

¹⁷ “Public engagement in the work of parliament” will be the theme of the next Global Parliamentary Report. Research for the report is being carried out by the IPU and UNDP in 2020, with a view to publication in 2021.

¹⁸ IPU, “Institutionalization of the Sustainable Development Goals in the work of parliaments” (2019): <https://www.ipu.org/file/7639/download>

oversight of government action and budgetary allocations for delivering on the SDGs were less systematic, although several parliaments had called their governments to account on SDG implementation.

Critical to this direction is an efficient multilateral system based on more solid and mutually agreed rules, as the rule of law and international legality necessitate, with a strong United Nations at its core. Parliaments need to engage and support the initiative of the United Nations Secretary-General and the UN75 – which will encourage people to participate in the biggest global dialogue – and define how enhanced international cooperation can help make the world a better place, including through the achievement of the 17 SDGs. There is a need for IPU committees and working groups to be linked more closely to the United Nations; for stronger linkages between national parliaments and the United Nations; and for parliaments to play an active role in implementing global decisions.

The coronavirus crisis has also shown the importance of solidarity and unity between the countries of the world, and the value of cooperation between nations when responding to a global pandemic.

Conclusion

From one perspective, the role of parliament is constant. Parliament's constitutional mandates to make the law and to hold government to account make it a unique institution with a specific place in a democratic system of government. The principles set out in the Universal Declaration on Democracy – as they relate to the rule of law, human rights, gender equality – should guide the action of all parliaments.

At the same time, the role of parliament continues to evolve in response to changes in society. This role tends to expand; for example, in the ways in which parliaments work increasingly embody the core democratic principles set out by the IPU and the SDGs.

Unexpected events, such as the coronavirus pandemic, pose new challenges for parliaments and democracies around the world. Parliaments in some countries are being marginalized. It is more than ever key for parliaments to be part of the decision-making process, to provide effective oversight and to ensure that the necessary discussions do not destroy the cohesion within their societies. After the crisis subsides, it will be crucial for parliaments to continue to strengthen democracy by reviewing or curtailing emergency measures that were introduced to address the COVID-19 health crisis. Parliamentarians need to understand that people will expect them to address the strong economic needs resulting from the crisis, and it will be essential to develop mechanisms to listen, to integrate people's views into decision-making processes and to design and implement solutions.

In surveying some of the changes that are underway, this paper underlines the fundamental relationship between parliaments and the people, which is at the heart of a system of democratic governance, and which has to be constantly nurtured and developed.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parliament and democracy (update, May 2021)

Since this report was prepared in mid-2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to have a significant impact on parliament and democracy. A number of key developments are outlined in this update. These issues have been researched in the *World e-Parliament Report* and analysed in the IPU's Standing Committee on Democracy and Human Rights.

On remote working methods in parliaments

Parliaments have been forced to innovate by the pandemic. There are signs that, as challenging as this time has been, the pandemic is acting as a catalyst for new and transformational working methods, based on digital practices. Thirty-four per cent of parliaments surveyed for the *World e-Parliament Report* held remote or hybrid plenary meetings in 2020; 66 per cent held remote or hybrid committee meetings.

There is broad consensus among parliaments that many of the enforced innovations will be kept, even after the pandemic subsides. This is likely to impact not only on the functioning of parliament, but also on the relation between parliament and the people. Remote committee sittings have the potential to enable a much wider range of organizations and people to participate in hearings, thus broadening and deepening the evidence gathered by parliament in legislative and oversight work. Remote plenaries may allow parliamentarians to increase the time spent in their constituencies, closer to the people that they represent, especially in regions that are far from the capital or where travel is difficult.

The *World e-Parliament Report* notes that “Parliaments need to continue embracing this opportunity to modernize their core operations, reviewing their strategic and business continuity planning in the light of their experiences and those of others”. It recommends that parliaments consider a number of ways to build on the innovations made and realize their advantages:

1. **Permanently amend their regulations** or governing legislation so that parliaments can function seamlessly, unconfined to a single physical location.
2. **Continue or expand flexible participation for members and the public**, particularly in committees.
3. **Proactively maintain and adapt efficiency gains**.
4. **Approach ICT more holistically through an institution-wide digital strategy** mainstreamed into the wider fabric and culture of parliament.
5. **Review and update business continuity plans** to capture and embed lessons learned the previous year through enhanced knowledge management practices.
6. **Develop flexible work arrangements for staff and remote participation for members**, determining the ICT infrastructure needed to support them.
7. **Promote inter-parliamentary collaboration** to accelerate innovation, save time and money, share good practices and increase mutual support between parliaments.

On the role of parliament in response to the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a novel combination of challenges for parliaments. As often happens during a crisis, the role of the executive branch of governments has significantly outweighed the role of parliaments. Many parliaments delegated significant powers to the executive; shifting the balance between the branches of government was distorted towards the executive. In some countries, a state of emergency has been declared.

In the current context, the question is how to balance the extraordinary powers that government requires to tackle the health emergency and economic crisis, on the one hand, with adequate and effective controls, on the other. Societies need to be assured that decisions made by governments are in their best interest and aim at the containment of the negative impact and rapid recovery.

Restrictions on fundamental human rights have been made that are unprecedented in scope and nature. It is important that any restrictions should be defined by law, specific and time-bound. In this prolonged situation, parliament should ensure that all decisions are made in the best interest of the people.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the relationship between the State and citizens globally. Never in our recent history have people entrusted their lives, households and future into the hands of the authorities, putting up with heavy restrictions and hoping that the decisions made by their governments are the best possible decisions for them. Parliaments have to lead people through these times of hardship by ensuring openness, engagement and meaningful dialogue.

Having constant dialogue with society is the only way to secure legitimacy of the crisis response measures. Citizens are addressing parliaments with petitions requesting the easing of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions or raising the need of supporting individuals and households during pandemics. Those petitions should be granted proper political attention.

Over one year after the start of the pandemic, parliaments are beginning to define their role in the COVID-19 response from a new perspective. The oversight powers that parliaments enjoy have become more important than ever. It is time that parliaments assess the legality, consistency and, probably most importantly, the effectiveness, of the COVID-19 response actions of the executive.

Parliaments should analyse past actions in response to COVID-19 and contribute to planning further necessary steps in order to manoeuvre wisely through these complex issues and effectively tackle the global challenges faced on diverse fronts, including governance, economic development, healthcare, education, etc.

Parliaments have the means and the institutional potential to dig deep into the roots of the issues and carry out public inquiries in order to identify potential mistakes and guide improvements in tackling the health, economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the scale and breadth

of the direct and indirect consequences of the pandemic on every aspect of social life and every segment of the society in any country, the entire parliamentary structure should prioritize this in their work.

Parliamentary committees are equipped with the necessary mandate and oversight and monitoring tools to supervise relevant operations of the executive in order to have a solid understanding of the consequences of the pandemic. It is critical that these assessments are independent from those carried out by the executive in order for parliaments to make balanced policy decisions.

Parliaments should take a lead in considering appropriate short- and long-term remedies to mitigate the damages of the pandemic. Thematic parliamentary inquiries, post-legislative scrutiny, hearings, summoning officials and other oversight mechanisms are now as critical as ever.

The impact of the virus on public health, economy and its broader effect on society will last long and parliaments now have a critical role and the opportunity to make real improvements in crisis management and in the quality of States' preparedness for any future steps and/or potential crisis situations. Responsiveness and inclusiveness must be an important part of every crisis management strategy. Parliaments need to communicate with people, to demonstrate that they are listening to what people have to say and are addressing issues of public concern.