



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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REPUBLIC OF AUSTRIA
Parliament

Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament

Virtual meeting, 19-20 August 2020
In-person conference, 2021 in Vienna

Panel discussion

Improving governance by bridging the gap between parliaments and the people

Thursday, 20 August 2020, 2.30–3.15 p.m.

Concept note

The panel will focus on ways in which parliaments can forge closer ties with the public, in order to (re)gain people's trust in parliaments and democratic governance. It will address the parliamentary response to rising public expectations to be heard and to participate in decision-making. The session will provide a space for Speakers of parliament to discuss key challenges – including challenges created or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic – and to share their experiences and good practices.

Democracy is still by far the preferred form of government in all continents,¹ and is the basis for good governance. The IPU's 1997 Universal Declaration on Democracy² underlines that 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.

However, the practice of democracy sometimes appears to generate disappointment and disillusion. Across the globe, the share of people who are dissatisfied in the performance of their democracies is rising – from 47.9 per cent in the mid-1990s to 57.5 per cent in 2019.³ Only half of the global population believes their country is currently democratic.⁴

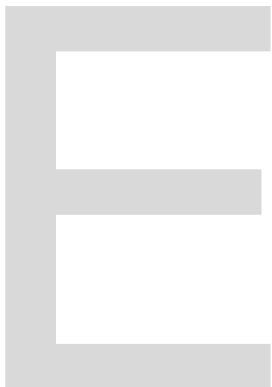
¹ International IDEA. *The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise* (Stockholm, 2019):

<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 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.

⁴ Dalia Research, *Democracy Perception Index 2019: Global State of Democracy* (2019): <https://daliaresearch.com/blog/global-democracy-overview-2019/>



One of the consequences is decreasing voter turnout,⁵ with significantly lower voter turnout of people aged 25 or under.⁶ When voter turnout in parliamentary elections is low, legitimacy of parliament and its capacity to represent the people and decide on their behalf can be questioned.

In a variety of areas, parliaments are being challenged to find appropriate responses and regain public trust. More emphasis should be placed on efforts aimed at bringing parliament closer to the people, especially to young people and women.

Trust in democracy is especially important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged with startling speed in early 2020. The crisis has resulted in parliaments giving extensive rights to governments in order to slow down the spread of the new coronavirus. Citizens in almost all countries have had to deal with severe restrictions to their freedom. Many countries have imposed severe exit and travel restrictions, and different forms of lockdown. People around the world are unsettled owing to the sudden changes in their lives. More than ever, they need to know that they can trust in their politicians to use these emergency measures in a proportionate and time-limited way.

In this context, it becomes extremely relevant for parliaments to find ways to bring people closer to parliaments, to defend people's freedoms and human rights, and to ensure that responses to the pandemic are legal, proportionate, non-discriminatory and temporary.

Furthermore, every country in the world is experiencing an economic shock owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, and parliaments need to respond to an unfolding economic crisis. Across the world, millions of workers are being sent home as businesses close. A United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) analysis estimates that as many as half a billion people could be forced into poverty, or 8 per cent of the world's population.⁷ It shows that COVID-19 poses a real challenge to the UN Sustainable Development Goal of ending poverty by 2030 because global poverty could increase for the first time since 1990.⁸ According to the International Monetary Fund, the world is heading for a recession bigger than that caused by the global financial crisis in 2008.⁹

The pandemic also threatens to increase gender inequalities. Women workers will be among the hardest hit by measures imposed to stop the spread of virus, as they are more likely to be engaged in informal and precarious work.¹⁰

In these exceptional circumstances, parliamentarians need to ask themselves what they could do differently to make people trust them personally and trust parliament as institution, and how to regain public confidence in a context of health, economic and climate crisis.

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

⁵ 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 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2017>).

⁶ 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>.

⁷ A. Sumner, C. Hoy and E. Ortiz-Juarez, *Estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty*. UNU-WIDER (Helsinki, 2020): <https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2020/800-9>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/imf-s-georgieva-says-world-in-recession-urges-funds-for-emerging-market-nations/30514599.html>.

¹⁰ "Dignity Not Destitution", media briefing, Oxfam: <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com>.

There is evidence that parliaments all over the world are seeking to address these challenges by taking steps to become more transparent, accessible and accountable institutions. Parliaments are examining how to increase their effectiveness in law-making and holding government to account. Many of them are providing the public with various tools and mechanisms to participate in this work, often supported by new technologies, and as an attempt to address public pressure.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has plunged many legislatures into a state of emergency. While some parliaments have been able to adapt rapidly, many are still grappling with the implementation of the emergency health measures and social distancing recommended by the World Health Organization. At the same time, they are having to explore new ways to conduct debates, scrutinize and pass legislation, hold parliamentary committee meetings, and oversee and question the actions of the executive. Such challenges may potentially obstruct parliament's critical mission to ensure that medical workers have the necessary protective equipment and to safeguard gender equality and human rights in the response to the pandemic.

A strategic approach may be required for creating real and meaningful links between people and parliaments, with clearly defined goals. Based on that, different forms of public engagement and participation can be defined, taking into account the range of national contexts as well as different channels and tools for participatory decision-making. Educating people about their fundamental rights and freedoms is an essential condition for an active citizenry. Democracy education is particularly important for children and young people, kindling their interest in democratic processes, participatory rights and freedom of expression.

Stronger links between parliaments and the people would ultimately lead to laws and policies that are better suited to people and to reinforced public trust in parliaments. In addition to enhancing their oversight role, parliaments should ensure sound regulatory frameworks for facilitating public engagement, through constitutional or other legal provisions.

Key questions

What are the trends in the relationship between parliaments and the public, particularly in a time of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the opportunities for parliaments to build public trust in this situation? To what extent is parliament able to influence these trends?

What are the global issues that parliaments should be aware of and address in a bid to demonstrate that they are attuned to the real concerns of the people?

How have parliaments adapted to changes in society, including technological changes? Are parliamentary working methods in line with public expectations?

What role is there for the public in the work of parliament? What good practices have parliaments put in place to engage people in parliamentary work, including women and young people? What has been the impact of these initiatives?

How can representative democracy be complemented by new forms of participatory and collaborative decision-making? How might this change the relations between parliaments and the people?

Gathering examples of good practice

Parliaments are invited to contribute examples of good practices of public engagement in the work of parliament through an [online pre-session survey](#). These examples will complement the survey undertaken by the Parliament of Austria on democracy education, and will help to inform the preparation of this session, so that it can be firmly grounded in parliamentary experience. The deadline for providing examples is 20 July 2020.

Global Parliamentary Report

In order to support parliaments in addressing these challenges, *Public engagement in the work of parliament* will be the theme of the next Global Parliamentary Report. It will be built on parliamentary experience and good practice examples, with the aim of formulating recommendations for more effective public engagement in parliamentary decision-making processes around the world. Research for the report is being carried out by the IPU and UNDP in 2020, with a view to publication in 2021.