



Democratic innovations in parliamentary public engagement

Note to the Commission on Parliamentary Reform, Scottish Parliament, 25th November 2016

Dr. Oliver Escobar, University of Edinburgh

1) Context for parliamentary innovation: A global democratic recession?

- Important to distinguish 2 related but distinct dimensions in parliamentary ‘public engagement’: 1) Public Relations 2) Public Participation. This note focusses on the latter.
- Democratic deficits can undermine institutions: growing gap between citizens’ aspirations and satisfaction with democracy. The academic literature offers two narratives about the evolving role of citizens in Western liberal democracies:
 - **Stories of decline:**
 - Voter turnout in elections
 - Trust in & legitimacy of traditional institutions of public life (e.g. government, media, parties, unions, community associations, etc)
 - Social capital: community ethos & networks
 - **Stories of progress:**
 - Citizens are becoming
 - better educated, more knowledgeable and critical;
 - less deferential to traditional authority and elite-driven / hierarchical forms of governance;
 - dismissive of conventional channels and engaged in alternative mechanisms of political expression.
 - Myth of public apathy
- So there are **democratic arguments** to make the case for widening and deepening public participation in parliamentary business (e.g. developing institutions that respond to civic aspiration and improve transparency, scrutiny, deliberation, trust and legitimacy)
- There are also **pragmatic arguments** for democratic innovation, in particular around the need to improve policy and decision making on complex issues (e.g. citizens can bring different perspectives, knowledge and skills; participation may generate broader consensus on difficult decisions)

2) What are ‘democratic innovations’?

In political studies, democratic innovations are “institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process” (Smith 2009, p.1).

Five broad types of democratic innovations have become prominent around the world:

- Mini-publics (e.g. citizens’ juries, deliberative polls, consensus conferences, planning cells, citizens’ assemblies, citizen councils)
- Participatory Budgeting
- Citizens’ initiatives, ballots and referenda
- Collaborative governance (e.g. stakeholder partnerships)
- Digital participation (e.g. crowdsourcing, e-petitions)

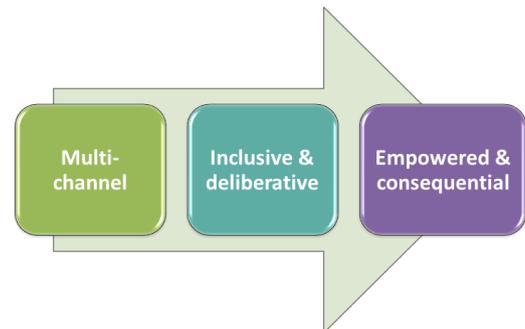
Examples of legislative and executive innovations: Canadian Citizens' Assemblies, Irish Constitutional Convention, Danish Board of Technology, Open Ministry Finland, Oregon's Citizen Initiative Review, Australian's Citizens' Parliament, Icelandic National Forum and Constitutional Council, Estonian People's Assembly, Citizens' Hall Mongolia, National Public Policy Conferences Brazil, etc. See: <http://participedia.net/en>

3) Widening & deepening participation in parliamentary business –Key issues

Figure 1. Challenges in organising public participation



Figure 2. 'What works' in public participation



When undertaking parliamentary reform, **democratic innovators should ask:**

- Are we creating opportunities that accommodate the variety of ways in which people may want to participate?
- Are we harnessing the power of combining online and face-to-face platforms for public participation?
- Are we creating inclusive processes where everyone has an equal chance to participate and influence?
- Are we creating deliberative spaces where participants can learn, hear different views, and engage in dialogue to offer informed opinions and considered judgements?
- Are we fostering empowered processes, where people know that their participation can make a difference?

Other **key considerations** in institutional design:

- Access:
 - Recruiting participants: self-selection vs. targeted selection vs. random selection (sortition)
 - Lowering barriers to participation –tackling inequalities
- Deliberative quality –now just 'widening' but also 'deepening' public participation (e.g. what kind of citizen are citizens invited to be? spectators/complainers vs. co-creators/problem-solvers)
- Capacity – infrastructure / staff / resources
- Systemic thinking – coherent system rather than 'add-ons'; transparent division of labour; maximising the democratic goods realised by different components in the parliamentary system.
- Long-term: Working towards a sortition-based, citizen-led second chamber at the Scottish Parliament?

References

- Elstub, S. and Escobar, O. (forthcoming) *The Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance*, Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar.
- Escobar, O. (2014) 'Towards Participatory Democracy in Scotland', in POST (ed.), *Scotland 44: Ideas for a new nation*. Edinburgh: POST, pp. 24-33. Available: <http://bit.ly/towardsPDinScotland>
- Norris, P. (2011) *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, G. (2009). *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.