

Parliaments and Citizens

Edited by
Cristina Leston-Bandeira

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Parliaments and Citizens

The relationship between parliaments and citizens is one of the least studied subjects in legislative studies, yet this is a crucial dimension to understanding parliaments and the role they play in our political systems. Furthermore, this relationship has gained considerable visibility over the last decade thanks in part to the development of new media, but also as a reaction to the trends of political apathy. In a context of increasing political disengagement, parliamentary discourse shifted attention from the traditionally predominant relationship with government to the relationship with citizens. Issues of legitimacy became more directly associated with the link between parliament and citizens, resulting in investment in new and more complex mechanisms for contact with citizens, even in the more centralised systems.

This book looks at a wide range of case studies across Europe and beyond, assessing overall strategies in the move towards stronger engagement with citizens. It assesses the extent to which the shift in discourse has led to actual changes in parliamentary practice.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Studying the Relationship between Parliament and Citizens

Cristina Leston-Bandeira

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 265-274

Chapter 2

The Finnish Eduskunta: Still the Nordic 'Vatican'?

David Arter

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 275-293

Chapter 3

Far Away, So Close: Parliament and Citizens in France

Olivier Costa, Pierre Lefébure, Olivier Rozenberg, Tinette Schnatterer and
Eric Kerrouche

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 294-313

Chapter 4

*The Bundestag and German Citizens: More Communication, Growing
Distance*

Thomas Saalfeld and Ralf Dobmeier

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 314-333

Chapter 5

The Paradoxes of Parliament–Citizen Connections in Hungary: A Window on the Political System

Gabriella Ilonszki and Zsófia Papp

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 334-350

Chapter 6

Parliament and Citizens in Italy: An Unfilled Gap

Federico Russo and Luca Verzichelli

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 351-367

Chapter 7

A Least Likely Case: Parliament and Citizens in the Netherlands

Rudy B. Andeweg

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 368-383

Chapter 8

Developing Links Despite the Parties – Parliament and Citizens in Portugal

Cristina Leston-Bandeira and Tiago Tibúrcio

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 384-402

Chapter 9

Parliament and Citizens in the United Kingdom

Philip Norton

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4 (September-December 2012) pp. 403-418

Chapter 10

Parliaments and Citizens in Sub-Saharan Africa

Elisabete Azevedo-Harman

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 419-440

Chapter 11

Parliaments and Citizens in Latin America

Jason Ross Arnold

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 441-462

Chapter 12

Parliament and Citizens in Asia: The Bangladesh Case

Nizam Ahmed

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 463-478

Chapter 13

*Do Legislative Petitions Systems Enhance the Relationship between
Parliament and Citizen?*

Richard Hough

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 479-495

Chapter 14

How Are Parliaments Using New Media to Engage with Citizens?

Jeffrey Griffith and Cristina Leston-Bandeira

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 496-513

Chapter 15

*Conclusion: Parliaments' Endless Pursuit of Trust: Re-focusing on Symbolic
Representation*

Cristina Leston-Bandeira

Journal of Legislative Studies, volume 18, issue 3-4
(September-December 2012) pp. 514-526

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Contents

<i>Citation Information</i>	ix
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xiii
1. Introduction: Studying the Relationship between Parliament and Citizens <i>Cristina Leston-Bandeira</i>	1
2. The Finnish <i>Eduskunta</i> : Still the Nordic ‘Vatican’? <i>David Arter</i>	11
3. Far Away, So Close: Parliament and Citizens in France <i>Olivier Costa, Pierre Lefébure, Olivier Rozenberg, Tinette Schnatterer and Eric Kerrouche</i>	30
4. The <i>Bundestag</i> and German Citizens: More Communication, Growing Distance <i>Thomas Saalfeld and Ralf Dobmeier</i>	50
5. The Paradoxes of Parliament–Citizen Connections in Hungary: A Window on the Political System <i>Gabriella Ilonszki and Zsófia Papp</i>	70
6. Parliament and Citizens in Italy: An Unfilled Gap <i>Federico Russo and Luca Verzichelli</i>	87
7. A Least Likely Case: Parliament and Citizens in the Netherlands <i>Rudy B. Andeweg</i>	104
8. Developing Links Despite the Parties – Parliament and Citizens in Portugal <i>Cristina Leston-Bandeira and Tiago Tibúrcio</i>	120
9. Parliament and Citizens in the United Kingdom <i>Philip Norton</i>	139
10. Parliaments and Citizens in Sub-Saharan Africa <i>Elisabete Azevedo-Harman</i>	155

CONTENTS

11. Parliaments and Citizens in Latin America <i>Jason Ross Arnold</i>	177
12. Parliament and Citizens in Asia: The Bangladesh Case <i>Nizam Ahmed</i>	199
13. Do Legislative Petitions Systems Enhance the Relationship between Parliament and Citizen? <i>Richard Hough</i>	215
14. How Are Parliaments Using New Media to Engage with Citizens? <i>Jeffrey Griffith and Cristina Leston-Bandeira</i>	232
15. Conclusion: Parliaments' Endless Pursuit of Trust: Re-focusing on Symbolic Representation <i>Cristina Leston-Bandeira</i>	250
<i>Index</i>	263

INTRODUCTION

Studying the Relationship between Parliament and Citizens

CRISTINA LESTON-BANDEIRA

The relationship between parliament and citizens has been neglected traditionally by the legislative studies scholarship. And yet this is the area that has seen the most phenomenal developments within the last few decades. As a reaction against increasing levels of political disengagement, and utilising modern tools of communication such as new media, parliaments have in fact considerably developed the possibility of linkages with the public. And yet what we know is still very patchy. This introduction establishes the premises of this collection and the questions it aims to address, in order to identify patterns in the relationship between parliaments and citizens across a wide range of case studies.

Introduction

Over the last decade parliaments around the world have followed paradoxical paths: on the one hand the value of parliamentarism has expanded considerably, on the other, parliaments have become the public face of political disengagement. Whilst the value of parliamentarism has been reinforced, the scepticism towards legislatures has in fact increased. Also paradoxically, whilst trust in parliaments has steadily declined, these institutions have never been more active in developing mechanisms to engage with the public.

The relationship between parliament and citizens is one of the least studied areas in legislative studies yet this is a crucial dimension in understanding parliaments and the role they play in our political systems. What is more, this relationship seems to have gained considerably more visibility over the last decade thanks in part to the development of new media, but also as a reaction to the trends of political apathy. However, the publications focusing on this relationship are not only few and far between, but they also tend to focus on a very few case studies. The book edited by Philip Norton in 2002, *Parliaments and Citizens in Western Europe*, is a unique exception and has made an important contribution towards our understanding of this relationship, but is quickly becoming out of date in light of recent developments such as the growth of popularity of petitions and the expansion of new media. The new millennium has brought renewed