

Positive Parliament

By Dr Kristen Heim

This work is designed to familiarise citizens of South Africa with what are likely to be little known aspects of their Parliament. Not only does it promise to differentiate and contextualise the role of the party within parliament in simple terms, it also aims to provide a brief snapshot of some of the more positive elements of parliament (as perceived by its workforce) so that those on the outside may have a glimpse into its institutional life (and with it, the foundations of a nascent trust in its work.)

About the author: Kristen Heim, PhD, is a legislative scholar and parliamentary capacity development expert with nearly 15 years experience supporting parliamentarians across Europe and Africa. Her current research focuses on parliaments' engagement in tax policy and how parliaments learn how to be parliaments.

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Parliament is no island. The institution lives, breathes, and develops to the tune of its citizenry. This is by design. It's time that citizens recognise their roles as co-creators of their representative body. The future of South Africa's democracy depends on the ability of the electorate to share their values, their views, and their commitment to democratic rule. Just how do South Africans want to live?

Parliament. What role for citizens?

Democracy may be a long game, but that does not give citizens licence to take a seat at the sidelines. Participation is required. As support for parliaments and democracy wanes, more restricted forms of government will vie to fill the void. Democracy is work. It must be cherished and protected. And who, if not citizens themselves, are best placed to do so? A fight for democracy is, at its essence, a fight for the privilege to be part of a system where every voice is counted as equal and where alternations in power are the norm. (Think of how much we enjoy a good, clean, sports competition.) Democracies are systems in which the common good is privileged over the good of the few. No one wants the alternative, but few appear prepared to roll up their sleeves and maintain its existence.

There is good reason for this. Parliaments broker the relationship between government and citizens. Trust that the institution is making good on the promise to safeguard citizens' interest is on the decline. We know that parliaments need to prove their worth. Parliamentarians, specifically, need to do a much better job at re-presenting the values of their citizenry and listening to all it has to say. They also need to follow through with the promises made in order for trust to take hold and (ideally) spring back to life.

The problem, sadly, extends beyond practical considerations. Parliament is an understudied subject and, often, a wildly misunderstood institution. Where democracy is relatively new, parliament may not even understand itself. Such inexperience might find expression in closed doors and communication silos that keep citizens at arms length. Thankfully, the South African constitution weighs in on this point, mandating Parliament to facilitate public involvement in its processes. It must also 'conduct its business in an open manner,' rendering its sittings and those of its committees accessible to the public.

Recent studies, however, have found Parliament to have neglected its mandate in this regard. In response, its Office of Public Engagement is becoming active in informing, consulting, and involving citizens in its work. Public education and 'parliamentary democracy' offices were established in all but three provinces across the country. There are plans to improve its public education drives, coordinate parliamentary programmes with those of constituency offices, and broaden cooperation with partners and stakeholders over the next five-years. Citizens will also soon have access to a toll-free number that they can use to engage with committees and also live broadcasts of public meetings.

These changes amount to a massive trust building exercise. In parallel, there are several ways in which citizens can initiate their own involvement. These include both direct and indirect modes of influence. Voting in elections is an essential starting point, but only one of many. Citizens are welcome to attend meetings of Parliament. (The equivalent effort of, say, planning a dinner at an unfamiliar restaurant.) Beyond that, citizens are encouraged to make submissions, respond to calls for comments on proposals, and join petitions that can be viewed by members when Parliament is in session. For a more personal

interaction, parliamentarians and or committees can be contacted via email. MPs can now also be visited at their constituency office (which, as mentioned, are in the process of being revamped).

Other, more indirect, modes of engagement are also available. Most obviously, one can stay informed via social media or by following parliamentary proceedings across various outlets. Citizens can also join a political party and take part in their activities. And when all else fails, lobbying outside of parliament remains an option. (All of this assumes that citizens have something to communicate to their representatives. A point which I will return to shortly.)

In addition, drawing on experiences in Europe and beyond, an emerging innovation is that of the 'citizens assembly.' Though the form and functions differ from case to case, these forums offer citizens the opportunity to debate policy and submit recommendations to the national parliament for consideration. A pilot assembly- lead by the Centre for Democratic Research (CREDO) at Stellenbosch University- is due to launch in the Western Cape in 2026. Coming to grips with a real life understanding of how parliament functions is not an easy task, but participating in some of the ways outlined above offers some good starting points.

Parliament could also draw some additional lessons from abroad. The Scottish Parliament has done some amazing work with data visualisations on budgetary matters- making rather complex material both accessible and fun to the eye. While MPs in Germany offer personalised web-based interfaces. These serve as a portfolio of their work, thoughts, and visions for their constituents, but they also create direct modes of communication.

Parliament as an ever evolving space of learning. Its functions change over time. There are no credentials to become an MP. And, once there, the job offers no description. This is by design. Parliaments are meant to remain flexible so that they can be responsive to changing social tides. Citizens are meant to plug in. But just what do citizens have to say?

This is where the real work begins. Citizens should be in a position to identify their own values and what they believe their country stands for (or against). And a political imagination wouldn't hurt: how can we collectively live, work, and make decisions together? What types of set-ups could work? Are realistic? And could produce meaningful engagement with the political process?

'Parliament' should be an approachable item, not something that repels. It is our collective decision making institution. It is how we figure out how to do things together as a society. A community. A nation. And a state. It's how we live. Is that not worth a phone-call, a click, and a study? Now may be as good a time as any to ponder just what is at stake.