

# Petitions and Citizens' Initiatives

2025

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**Guides on Citizen  
Engagement for Parliaments**



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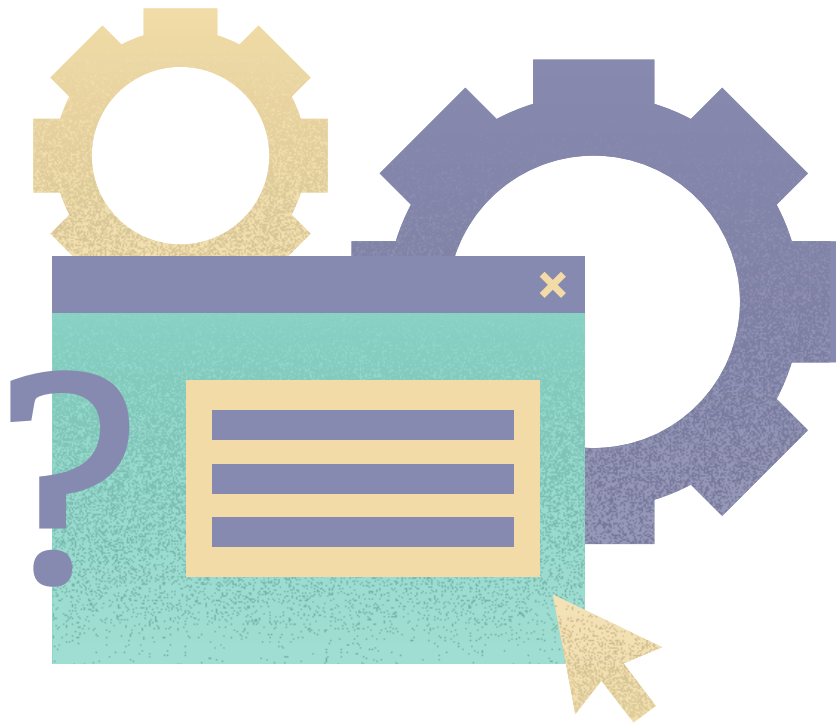
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# How to use this interactive Guide



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# Executive summary

**Petitions and citizens' initiatives (CIs)** are the **most prevalent participation tools** offered by parliaments. They provide a formal mechanism for citizens to raise issues directly to decision-makers in parliament and government and they can enhance participation in democracy. The right to petition, specifically, is one of the oldest political rights of citizens, often predating the right to vote. However, **systems vary greatly** in their format, visibility and effectiveness. This Guide provides an overview of the wide range of systems that exist across parliaments and identifies **key questions to help** parliaments consider which type of system best suits their context.

We review the **purpose** of petitions and CI systems, their **benefits** and **challenges**, the type of **impact** they can have on citizens and parliamentary decisions, how these systems can be made more **equitable** and the type of **resources** needed to support an effective petitions and/or citizens' initiative system.

This Guide is therefore for parliamentary officials and Members of Parliament (MPs) who want to understand how to improve or implement a petitions or CI system in their own context.









We **showcase a wide range of case studies** of how different parliaments across the world have implemented petitions and CI systems. We identify the different rules and approaches that parliaments have adopted, so that other parliaments can learn from these.

Implementing an effective petitions or CI system requires attention to the following questions, which the Guide considers in detail drawing from different types of parliaments:

- » **Purpose and strategy**  
What do you want to achieve and why?
- » **Institutional process and procedure**  
How does the system work? What actions can parliament take on a citizen proposal?
- » **Promotion and communication**  
How are citizens made aware of the system and how are proposers kept informed?
- » **Resources needed**  
What resources (e.g., staff, time, funds, technology) do you need to ensure the system runs effectively?
- » **Evaluation**  
How effective is the system for citizens and for informing parliamentary business?

The Guide also presents six examples of actual petitions and/or CIs that have had an impact in their contexts. These examples illustrate the many different types of impact that petitions and CIs can have, from legislative change to stimulating public discourse to effects on citizen proposers themselves.

Finally, we provide a checklist for assessing whether your approach reflects our **eight principles of parliamentary public engagement**:

-  Purpose
-  Inclusion
-  Openness and transparency
-  Collaboration and empowerment
-  Ethical standards
-  Planning and resourcing
-  Integration and coordination
-  Impact and evaluation



***See our Guide on 'Principles of Parliamentary Public Engagement' for more detail on the principles***



# Introduction

Petitions and citizens' initiatives (CIs) can open an important pathway for citizens to bring the issues they care about to parliament. However, this depends considerably on how they are set up. The parliamentary systems enabling these mechanisms vary greatly across the world. This Guide reviews different types of petitions and CI systems and provides practical guidance on how to implement them in a wide range of contexts, whilst considering some of its key benefits and challenges.

The Guide is based on extensive research and incorporates feedback from an international Advisory Group established to develop these Guides on Citizen Engagement (Section 7).

- » **Section 1** outlines the potential benefits of petitions and CI systems to both parliaments and citizens
- » **Section 2** deals with the potential challenges
- » **Section 3** provides guidance on how to put these systems into practice
- » **Section 4** contains tips for evaluating petitions and CI systems
- » **Section 5** outlines six examples of interesting and effective practice

## Definition of petitions and citizens' initiatives

Petitions and citizens' initiatives (CIs) are mechanisms that enable citizens to formally take their concerns to parliament.

- » **Petitions** can address grievances as well as proposals for change in policy and legislation.
- » **Citizens' initiatives** can be understood as a form of petition that focuses on legislation.

Different traditions exist across the world often linked to their own history – this may explain why petitions are more prevalent in some parts of the world (e.g., Europe) while other parts of the world (e.g., Latin America) favour CIs.<sup>1</sup>

Several parliaments, including the **Austrian**, the **European** and the **Portuguese**, have separate systems for petitions and CIs, dealing with different kinds of proposals and following different processes.

<sup>1</sup> Leston-Bandeira, C. (2019) 'Parliamentary Petitions and Public Engagement: An Empirical Analysis of the Role of e-Petitions', *Policy & Politics*, 47, 415–436.

- » **Section 6** draws on our Guide on the Principles of Parliamentary Public Engagement, presenting a checklist to help assess how well a petitions and CI system is meeting these key principles
- » **Section 7** points to other sources of information on petitions and CI systems

*Continued on next page »*

## Overview of petitions and citizens' initiative systems

Petitions and CI systems differ across parliaments:

- » some have dedicated committees which are tasked with reviewing submissions and taking appropriate action, while others refer submissions to the relevant standing committee;
- » some systems allow citizens to submit their proposals to parliament directly while others require MP sponsors;
- » most petitions systems allow paper submissions, but parliaments are increasingly introducing online tools to expand engagement.

Table 1 outlines five key questions to consider when designing a petitions or CI system. Parliaments will answer differently, based on traditions and resources.

### What do we mean by 'petitions and CI system'?

Throughout this Guide we refer to 'petitions and CI systems', i.e. the structures and processes within parliaments that deal with the submission, moderation, processing and resolution of proposals.

**Table 1:** Key questions to consider when designing a petitions and CI system

Key questions	Options (not an exhaustive list)
Who can make a submission?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» MPs only (<i>petitions</i>)</li> <li>» Citizens and residents over a certain age</li> <li>» Anyone</li> </ul>
What are the different types of submission that can be made?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Private petition (<i>grievance</i>)</li> <li>» Public petition (<i>request for parliament/government to make a change</i>)</li> <li>» Legislative proposal (<i>some systems require full draft bills, while format requirements in other contexts are less formal</i>)</li> </ul>
How can submissions be made?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Online portal</li> <li>» By email</li> <li>» On paper (<i>to MP, constituency office, parliament building</i>)</li> </ul>
Who deals with submissions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Dedicated petitions committee</li> <li>» Relevant standing committee</li> <li>» Speaker/Presiding Officer</li> <li>» External organisation (see the example from Estonia in Table 2(c) <a href="#">page 12</a>)</li> </ul>
What actions can be taken after submission? <i>In many systems, particular actions must be taken if a proposal meets a certain threshold, i.e. gathers a certain number of signatures</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Collection of signatures</li> <li>» Question to minister/government department</li> <li>» Question to relevant body or organisation (<i>non-governmental</i>)</li> <li>» Government response</li> <li>» Committee inquiry</li> <li>» Debate</li> <li>» Engagement with petitioners/proposers</li> <li>» Deliberative process</li> <li>» Referendum</li> </ul>

*Continued on next page »*

Throughout the Guide, we provide examples to show how different parliaments have designed their own systems. Tables 2 (a–g) showcase petitions and citizens’ initiative systems at the following parliaments:



**Table 2 (a):**  
Costa Rican  
Legislative Assembly



**Table 2 (b):** Danish  
Folketing ([page 9](#))



**Table 2 (c):** Estonian  
Riigikogu (in collaboration  
with the Estonian  
Cooperation Assembly)  
([page 12](#))



**Table 2 (d):** German  
Bundestag ([page 17](#))



**Table 2 (e):** New Zealand  
Parliament ([page 21](#))



**Table 2 (f):** Nigerian  
Senate ([page 23](#))



**Table 2 (g):** Thai House  
of Representatives  
([page 24](#))



**Table 2 (a):** Citizens’ initiatives at the Costa Rican Legislative Assembly

Who can submit?	Type of submission	How are submissions processed?	What actions can be taken after submission?
Any citizen or group of citizens can make a submission directly to the Legislative Assembly.	Proposal for new law or partial reform to the Constitution.  Proposals that concern budgetary or tax matters are not accepted through this mechanism.	Submissions are made on paper to the Legislative Assembly. Proposers must provide their name and ID number. The Office of Popular Initiative at the Legislative Assembly offers support to citizens on the drafting of bills. Support can also be accessed at Ombudsman offices across the country.  The Legislative Assembly receives the submission and refers it to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal for verification of signatures, which must be completed within 30 days. If the threshold of 5% of the electorate is met, the bill is referred back to the Legislative Assembly.  If the threshold is not met, petitioners are granted a further ninety days to collect signatures.	The Legislative Assembly publishes the bill in La Gaceta, the official newspaper of the Government of Costa Rica (available online and in print).  Once signatures have been verified, the bill follows the normal procedure for bills in the Legislative Assembly (amendments to the constitution follow a different procedure). Bills must be voted on within two years.

# Section 1: Benefits

Petitions and CI systems have the potential to be effective tools for public engagement, as well as productive and constructive parts of parliamentary institutions. Table 3 shows the main potential benefits of effective petitions and CI systems.

**Table 3:** Potential benefits of petitions and CI systems

<b>Shared benefits</b>	» Activating links between parliament and public
<b>Benefits for parliaments</b>	» Improving scrutiny, policy and legislation
<b>Benefits for citizens</b>	» Raising the profile of an issue » Initiating policy change and/or action



## Shared benefits

### Activating links between parliament and public

Petitions and CI systems can activate a relationship between parliament and the public, enabling people to raise issues they care about and giving parliament the opportunity to take action where the issue falls within their remit. The most effective systems will enable some level of learning at each stage of the process, from understanding how to make a submission to following a parliamentary debate. This learning should theoretically have an empowering effect as citizens are better able to understand their role and rights in the political system. This educative function of petitions and CI systems stands to benefit parliaments as well as citizens. A good experience can lead to enhanced trust in democratic institutions.



## Benefits for parliaments

### Improving scrutiny, policy and legislation

Petitions and CI systems bring people's views and experiences into parliament. This includes issues with how existing laws operate in practice. By bringing issues to parliament's attention (or setting off a 'fire alarm'), petitions and CIs are potential mechanisms for scrutinising and improving policy and legislation.

Petitions and CI systems can bring about these benefits in a range of ways. They might alert parliament to an issue they were not aware of, or where they did not know of the strength of public feeling. Submissions that are debated by parliament or its committees can also contribute to the collection of information on the parliamentary record about a particular issue, including responses from the government.

<sup>2</sup> Saalfeld, T. and Dobmeier, R. (2012) *The Bundestag and German Citizens: More Communication, Growing Distance*. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 18(3-4), 314-333





## Benefits for citizens

### Raising the profile of an issue

Petitions and CI systems can contribute to individuals' and groups' campaigns on particular issues, providing a platform on which to mobilise support for an idea or proposal. Such systems, especially those which include a public website where proposals may be signed and tracked by others, can also enable citizens to connect over shared concerns. Some parliaments also use social media to communicate about citizen proposals. For example, the **European Parliament** Petitions Committee is active on X (formerly Twitter), using the platform to publicise petitions it considers and general news affecting citizens' right to participate.

### Initiating policy change/action

A citizen submission might encourage parliamentarians to consider an issue more deeply and conduct further work in the area which might lead to legislation or policy change. Petitions and CIs thus provide a route for citizens to place an issue on the parliamentary agenda and record.

It remains rare for petitions and CIs to lead to policy change in a linear way.<sup>3</sup> While this can be challenging for citizens to accept, satisfaction with outcomes such as a parliamentary debate or inquiry can be achieved by managing expectations effectively and ensuring that the process is well-communicated. Direct outcomes are more likely in systems that allow parliamentarians to adopt citizen proposals, like the e-Cidadania system of the **Brazilian Senate**; or systems that link citizen proposals to deliberative exercises such as citizens' assemblies, which make recommendations directly to the legislature, such as the citizen suggestion system operated by the **Brussels** regional parliament.

<sup>3</sup>In some cases, parliamentarians might even take on the subject matter of a petition and enact a law that goes in a different direction from what was originally proposed.



**Table 2 (b):** Citizens' initiatives at the Danish Folketing

#### Who can submit?

Proposers must be eligible to vote in Danish parliamentary elections and be resident in Denmark.

#### Type of submission

Policy motion (proposal for a new law).

#### How are submissions processed?

Submissions are made online via a dedicated website run by Parliament. Proposers must log in with their national ID. Paper submissions are also allowed. Submissions must be made by at least three and no more than 100 co-authors.

Parliamentary staff in the Legal Services Office review all submissions before they are published on the website for signature collection to ensure that they do not meet any of the 26 grounds for dismissal.

#### What actions can be taken after submission?

If the proposal reaches 50,000 signatures within 180 days, it will be referred to the Legal Services Office. The Legal Services Office then works to find an MP to introduce the proposal in the plenary as a policy motion.

Once introduced, there is first a general debate in plenary, before a committee stage and a subsequent plenary debate. At the committee stage, original co-authors may be invited to a meeting with the committee.

## Section 2: Challenges

Petitions and CI systems also pose potential challenges for parliaments and citizens (Table 4). These must be navigated carefully to ensure the continued buy-in and trust of all stakeholders.

**Table 4:** Potential challenges of petitions and CI systems

<b>Shared challenges</b>	» Limited public awareness, interest and trust
<b>Challenges for parliaments</b>	» Limited resources » Managing expectations » Achieving diversity of users » MP interest and buy-in
<b>Challenges for citizens</b>	» Navigating process and procedure » Signature thresholds » Accessibility barriers



### Shared challenges

#### Limited public awareness, interest and trust

Public awareness of petitions and CIs is often limited. People who know about them may not know how to use them, be confident that their submissions will be considered in any meaningful way, or (where relevant) want to use this route to address grievances

with state institutions. This is complicated further by the existence of independent petitions websites (such as change.org) that might have more visibility among civil society groups or communities, but do not provide a direct route into parliamentary business.



### Challenges for citizens

#### Navigating process and procedure

Petitions and CI systems are highly procedural and can be complex and confusing for citizens who are not used to engaging with parliament. This increases the risk that they will not interact with the system or that they will be disappointed or even angry when they do so (e.g., if their proposal is judged inadmissible or takes a long time to be considered, or if the change they want is not enacted).

Many proposal systems (especially in the case of petitions) rely on sponsorship by parliamentarians, whereby proposals must be submitted to an MP who can then choose to raise it in parliament. This type of system can contribute to connections between MPs, their constituents and civil society organisations. It can also present a barrier to citizens getting heard if they don't secure an MP to support their proposal.

#### Signature thresholds

In many systems, petitions or CIs need to attract a certain number of signatures (the threshold) before any action is taken by parliament or government. Varying across parliamentary contexts, different thresholds may be required for more intensive action. Thresholds may privilege those with time to promote their initiative and may disadvantage those who represent a very small minority facing an issue specific to them.

#### Accessibility barriers

Related to potential barriers posed by procedures, certain groups are likely to face more general barriers when engaging with petitions and CI systems: language or literacy barriers, digital exclusion, or a lack of information in the right format, especially if they have a disability such as a visual impairment or learning disability.



## Challenges for parliaments

### Limited resources

An effective petitions or CI system requires resources, which tend to be limited in parliaments. For example, not all parliaments with petitions or CIs have dedicated staff for dealing with submissions and managing communication with petitioners. Petitions and CI systems are increasingly moving online, creating the need for the development of proprietary platforms or commissioning external companies to develop one.

### Managing expectations

Related to the challenge of adequately resourcing a petitions or CI system is providing accurate, accessible and timely information about the system to ensure that participants understand what they can expect. Parliaments must strike a balance between encouraging citizens to see these opportunities as a legitimate way to participate in democracy, while not setting an expectation that all proposals will be acted on in exactly the way citizens want.

### MP interest and buy-in

The involvement of MPs is crucial for the success of citizen proposal systems, as they are the ultimate decision-makers on citizens' submissions. However, parliamentarians are busy. Not all are supportive of petitions or CI systems, with many seeing such systems as unnecessary or even as a challenge to their roles as representatives. Officials may struggle to find MPs to engage with a citizen proposal (to sponsor a debate on the proposal, for example). It is therefore vital to highlight to parliamentarians how citizen proposal systems can help them in their work and provide strong evidence to support these arguments.

### Achieving diversity of users

Evidence shows that citizens using petitions and CI systems tend to be from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds:<sup>4</sup> a group more likely to already engage and share views with parliament. To make the most of petitions and CI systems' potential to bring new issues, views and experiences into parliament, parliaments need to raise awareness of the system among groups less likely to engage.

A further dimension to this is the extent to which proposal systems become a tool for lobbying groups rather than 'the average citizen'. The use of such systems by civil society groups should be encouraged as a way of organising people with shared experiences and amplifying issues of public concern. However, petitions and CI systems should be accessible to individual citizens who may not have significant levels of resources or expertise.

<sup>4</sup>Carman, C. (2006) *Review of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions System*; Escher, T. and Riehm, U. (2017) *Petitioning the German Bundestag: Political Equality and the Role of the Internet*. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 70(1), 132–154





**Table 2 (c):** Citizens' initiatives in Estonia

Who can submit?	Type of submission	How are submissions processed?	What actions can be taken after submission?
Estonian citizens and permanent residents above the age of 16.	<p>Proposals can be made to the Riigikogu<sup>5</sup> to change legislation or “improve community life”<sup>6</sup></p> <p>Proposals must be constitutional and not contain offensive language. The terms of use also encourage initiators to provide strong information to back up their proposals, and to put forward potential solutions rather than focus on the issues.</p>	<p>The initiator creates a proposal on the <a href="https://rahvaalgatus.ee">Rahvaalgatus.ee</a> platform.<sup>7</sup> Where initiatives deviate from good practice guidelines, authors are asked to make adjustments. There is then a ‘co-creation’ period of three days minimum, during which other citizens can comment on or amend the text. Following this period, the initiative is opened for signatures both online and on paper.</p> <p>Initiatives are displayed on the <a href="https://rahvaalgatus.ee">Rahvaalgatus.ee</a> platform. Once initiatives reach 1,000 signatures (0.1% of the population), proposers can then submit the initiative through the platform to the parliament.</p>	<p>The Chancellery of the Parliament verifies the signatures. The Board of Parliament is responsible for referring the initiative to the relevant parliamentary committee. The committee secretariat’s position is that even initiatives with limited practical proposals merit consideration. These more limited initiatives often come in response to controversial decisions or societal shocks, and are internally thought of as ‘digital demonstrations’.</p> <p>Parliamentary procedure outlines six actions that can be taken by the relevant committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. initiate a bill, a draft resolution or a plenary deliberation of the issue as a matter of significant national importance;</li> <li>2. hold a public sitting;</li> <li>3. transmit the proposal to a competent institution to resolve the proposal;</li> <li>4. transmit the proposal to the national government to develop a position and reply to the proposal;</li> <li>5. reject the proposal;</li> <li>6. resolve the problem raised in the proposal by other means.</li> </ol> <p>Initiators have the right to be involved in a hearing as part of this process. A decision must be made within six months. The initiator is then sent a letter informing them of the decision.</p>

<sup>5</sup> Proposals can also be made to local government via the same platform.

<sup>6</sup> Sitra (2024) *Citizens' initiatives in Finland and Estonia*.

<sup>7</sup> The platform is maintained by the Estonian Cooperation Assembly (ECA), a government-funded think tank with a focus on participatory democracy and the development of civil society. The ECA coordinates with the parliament as well as national and local government to respond to initiatives.

## Section 3: How to put it into practice

This section outlines key considerations for parliaments when designing or improving a petitions or CI system:

- » the **purpose and strategy** underlying the system
- » the **institutional process and procedure** followed
- » the **promotion and communication** approaches
- » the **resources needed** to support effective practice



### Purpose and strategy

Parliaments should set a clear purpose for their petitions or CI system to realise its benefits and mitigate its challenges. This purpose needs to be sensitive to their context and agreed with internal stakeholders, with input from external stakeholders such as users and civil society organisations. This purpose should feed into institutional processes and inform communication and evaluation activities.

#### Parliaments can consider:

- » What is it about parliamentary democracy that you want to improve through a petitions or CI system?
- » What impact (short or long-term) do you want to have on participants? What impact do you want to have on the wider society?
- » How will the system be integrated with parliamentary processes?
- » What role will MPs play?
- » How will you enable equitable access to the system?
- » What resources are needed to deliver an effective system?



## Institutional process and procedure

There are various models for petitions and CI systems. A key feature of these systems that sets them apart from other engagement mechanisms is their highly procedural nature.

When organising a petitions and CI system, the following considerations arise:

### Who can participate in the system?

Most parliaments restrict the **right to petition** (or submit an initiative) to citizens or residents. The petitions process at the **German Bundestag**, by contrast, is open to any individual, whether resident in Germany or not (see Table 2(d) [page 17](#)). Some systems use national ID systems to verify participants' identity (for example **France, Estonia and Denmark**), while others rely on signatures. Most systems require the user to create an account, which can act as a barrier. The **UK** Parliament's e-petitions system does not require a user account, which explains partly its very high

volume of submissions (over 10,000 a year). The process for **verifying participants' identity** varies according to countries' technological capabilities and existing systems such as integrated electronic IDs.

Many parliaments allow children to submit proposals (for example **Ireland, Italy, Portugal and UK**). People who are incarcerated or on parole often face restrictions on the right to petition or submit legislative proposals.

### CASE STUDY

## Citizen participation in the legislative process: Latin America



There is a strong tradition across Latin America of citizen participation in the legislative process at multiple levels. Citizens' initiatives are a key part of this tradition. Many countries in the region also enable citizens to comment on draft bills and initiate a referendum.

Several countries in Latin America, including **Colombia** and **Panama**, enshrine the right to submit citizens' initiatives in their constitutions. In some countries (such as **Peru**) this includes the right to amend the constitution.

Beyond petitions and CIs, some parliaments in Latin America also allow citizens to comment on draft bills. The parliaments of **Brazil, Chile, Colombia** and **Peru** operate digital platforms allowing citizens to express their opinions and make suggestions on specific legislation before parliament. Several of these systems also allow citizens to vote on the draft legislation, allowing parliament to get an indication of public feeling on the issue.

In countries such as **Colombia, Panama** and **Uruguay**, citizens can initiate a referendum on a law or an element of the constitution. There are different requirements across systems for exercising this right. In Colombia, signatures must be gathered from 5% of the population for a referendum to be held. In Panama, the requirement is 20% and in Uruguay signatures are needed from 25% of eligible voters.

The thresholds mean that referenda occur only rarely. However, citizens in Uruguay used this mechanism in 2020 to call for 135 articles of an urgent law (initiated by the executive and subject to an expedited process through parliament) to be repealed. Citizens and civil society organisations opposed specific articles on the wide-ranging law, including limitations to civic freedoms. The referendum was very close but ultimately failed to repeal the articles, with 50% voting in support of the law and 48.7% against.



## How should citizens submit their proposals and in what form?

Good systems offer **multiple channels for submitting proposals**, because people have different preferences.

Providing options for people to submit **online, in person** (e.g., at parliamentary buildings or regional offices), or **by post**, will allow people with different levels of internet connectivity and digital skills to participate.

Allowing people to submit in different formats, such as **audio** or **video**, with staff assisting to ‘translate’ into a formal proposal, can also help systems be more inclusive. In Brazil citizens can use **a toll-free phone** service to explain their legislative proposal idea, which is then written up by a staff member and submitted to the Senate’s e-Cidadania online platform. There is also the option to submit **in sign language** for transcription by an interpreter.

Petitions and CI systems should have a set of clear, visible and accessible rules around **what makes a valid submission** and on what criteria

proposals will not be accepted for consideration. For example, most parliaments stipulate that petitions should be about something within parliament or government’s control, that they shouldn’t duplicate other petitions/CIs, and that they shouldn’t include harmful content (e.g., libelous claims or offensive language).

Many parliaments have developed their own **in-house online platform** to submit petitions and/or CIs, such as in **Canada** and **Denmark**. But some parliaments work in collaboration with other public institutions such as government or even civil society organisations to utilise an **external online platform**, such as in **Estonia** and **Morocco**.

## What should happen following submission and what range of actions should parliament offer?

In general, these processes benefit from having a **dedicated team of staff and MPs** to manage the workload, for example through a Petitions Committee: the former focusing on administrative tasks such as checking submissions’ validity and communicating with citizens, and the latter making decisions about what actions to take (e.g., requests for more information, inquiries or debates).

Where citizen proposals are added to the existing workload of a subject committee or other staff team, there is a risk that they will be low on the list of priorities. Many parliaments have a dedicated Petitions Committee, such as the **German Bundestag**, and the **Namibian National Assembly**. But some don’t, such as the **French National Assembly**.

### CASE STUDY

## Using AI to analyse large numbers of submissions



The **Brazilian Senate**’s e-Cidadania initiative has received over 100,000 submissions since its launch in 2012. The team is beginning to use artificial intelligence (AI) to help analyse the subject matter of citizens’ legislative proposals and deal more effectively with the large numbers of submissions.

Natural language processing techniques are used to discern similarities across proposals. AI is also used to help find Senators who might be interested in taking a citizen proposal forward, by matching up topics with those parliamentarians who have sponsored bills on similar issues.

Many parliaments have instituted thresholds at which proposals become eligible for certain actions (see case study). In some ways, thresholds provide helpful structure and allow parliaments to manage expectations as people know what actions will be taken at a particular threshold. However, factors such as the population size and the restrictions being placed on the validity of signatures (e.g., requiring ID numbers as well as names) need to be considered when deciding what these thresholds should be.


**Involving citizens in the process** following their submission can help them feel heard and valued, even if their desired change is not immediately or exactly made. Possible ways of involving citizens include: parliamentarians meeting with petitioners when they deliver a petition or through a committee hearing, or inviting them to observe parliamentary proceedings such as committee hearings or debates. For example, the **UK Parliament's** Petitions Committee often consults petitioners and supporters on the reasons behind

CASE STUDY

## Thresholds across different systems

The **parliament of Slovakia** places no threshold for a petition hearing but requires 100,000 signatures (just under 2% of the population) before a debate is held. The **Portuguese Assembly of the Republic** sets thresholds for different actions: petitions that gather 1,000 signatures (approximately 0.01% of the population) receive a hearing, those with between 2,500 and 7,500 signatures are discussed by a committee, and those reaching over 7,500 signatures are debated in the plenary. The **German Bundestag**, meanwhile, has the same threshold of 50,000 signatures (0.06% of the population) for hearings and debates.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Serra-Silva, S. and Gaio e Silva, J. (2024) *Empowering the people: The evolution and impact of Portugal's citizens' legislative initiatives in a comparative perspective*, *Parliamentary Affairs*, published online 06 December 2024.



In **Denmark**, a CI must gather 50,000 signatures before the Legal Services Office considers it for presentation to a parliamentarian. In South American contexts the threshold is usually set at a certain percentage of the electoral roll. For example, in **Argentina** signatures must be gathered from at least 1.5% of voters and from at least 6 out of 24 districts.

Some systems operate with no thresholds, such as the petitions systems of the **Irish Oireachtas**, **Kenyan National Assembly**, and the **South African Parliament**. Others, such as the **UK Parliament**, exercise discretion when dealing with proposals from minority groups who would otherwise struggle to reach the threshold.

their petition, through online surveys or in-person consultations. It also connects petitioners to other relevant parliamentary business taking place on the issue petitioned, with some petitioners giving evidence to specialised committees as a result.

The actions taken by parliament can benefit parliament and citizens in various ways, even if they don't correspond to the change requested by the proposer. For example, **inquiries** and **requests for further information** can put valuable information on the parliamentary record and give participants more information

to use in further campaigning activities.<sup>9</sup> The structure of the process around petitions and CIs is therefore key, as it shapes the types of actions that can result from a submission.

<sup>9</sup> Bochel, C. (2020) *Petitions Systems: Outcomes, 'Success' and 'Failure'*, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 73(2), 233–252

## How should information on proposals and proposers be collected, analysed, shared and retained?

Gathering data on the proposals submitted to parliament and on those who are submitting them can help parliaments to build up a picture of **who is engaging and what they care about**. This data can be useful in assessing how effectively the system is including different parts of society.

Sharing data with other teams in parliament, especially those who are

working on other types of engagement, can help to ensure that engagement opportunities reach those to whom they are relevant.

Of course, data protection principles and regulations must be observed when collecting, analysing, sharing and retaining information about participants and their proposals.

### Top tips

- ✓ Include citizen voice in the process
- ✓ Communicate how petitions/CIs can support the work of MPs
- ✓ Provide and accept multiple formats
- ✓ Evaluate for continuous learning and improvement



**Table 2 (d):** Petitions at the German Bundestag

Who can submit?	Type of submission	How are submissions processed?	What actions can be taken after submission?
Any individual, including children and those living outside Germany.	<p>Complaints and requests, including suggestions for new laws.</p> <p>Submissions must be legible, include a signature and not contain insulting language.</p>	<p>Submissions can be made in writing by post or fax, or by using an online form on the Petitions Committee website.</p> <p>The Petitions Committee deals with all petitions that pertain to legislative functions at the federal level. Petitions that concern state parliaments or other bodies are referred on for the relevant bodies to handle directly.</p>	<p>The petitioner is sent confirmation by email that their petition has been received. A statement is then requested from the relevant federal body. The petition may be resolved at this stage.</p> <p>If it is not resolved, the petition follows a ‘rapporteur procedure’ whereby it is examined by two MPs (one from a governing party and one from the opposition). The committee can request further evidence from ministers, experts or other stakeholders, and can consult documents or conduct visits. The committee then comes to a recommendation on the petition, which is voted on by the Bundestag as a whole.</p>





## Promotion and communication

Parliaments across the world have experienced varying levels of uptake of their petitions and CI systems. Effective promotion and communication activities are required in order to ensure wide and meaningful participation.

Clear and easily accessible information about the system and how it works should be available to members of the public in a range of formats (to meet accessibility needs and cater to context-specific considerations such as linguistic minorities) and in a range of places (e.g., on the parliamentary website and in print), with further support and guidance available if needed (e.g., via email or over the phone).

### CASE STUDY

#### Guides for citizens

One way to help citizens engage effectively with a proposal process is to produce a guide on how to make a submission and what to expect. This can help to manage citizens' expectations of the system (a challenge discussed in [Section 2](#)).

The **Portuguese Assembly of the Republic**, for example, has developed a "[practical guide](#)" for petitioners. The guide outlines the petitions process, distinguishing between actions that are "guaranteed" according to thresholds (see case study [page 16](#)) and "possible" actions that parliament or parliamentarians may choose to take (e.g., a committee writing to the relevant government department, or an MP bringing a bill on the matter). Interestingly, the guide also presents data on the current 'petitioner profile': according

to the most recent data, the average petitioner in **Portugal** is male and highly educated.

The **New Zealand Parliament** provides a [step-by-step guide](#) of the petitions process on its website. The guidance also makes clear that petitions can result in a variety of outcomes, including "raising awareness about an issue", "initiating or building momentum towards a change in policy" and "proposing a new law or influencing one that's being considered".

Similarly Tynwald, the parliament of the **Isle of Man**, notes in its [guidance document](#) on petitions that procedures "are not quick" and "are largely out of your hands". This plain-speaking approach can be helpful in developing trust in the system and



those who run it, and is something that smaller parliaments with few resources can easily implement.

#### Alternatives to written guides:

In **France**, the National Assembly displays key information about the petitions process on the landing page of the website in the form of an [infographic](#). There is also written guidance in the 'Help' section of the petitions website. Presenting information in a variety of formats, using both text and imagery, can help citizens understand key points.

The [Office of Citizen Participation](#) at the **Peruvian Congress** provides several videos on its platform outlining different ways that citizens can get involved, including how to comment on draft bills and submit their own initiatives.

Some parliaments deliver **workshops** to target audiences such as young people and marginalized groups, in order to build their interest in the citizen proposal systems and the confidence to use them. This sort of activity can be tied into existing education activities. Taking a **‘train the trainer’** approach to help civil society organisations to understand citizen proposal systems and how to use them can have a multiplier effect as they pass this knowledge on to the communities with whom they work. Another method used by parliaments to promote the use of proposal systems is to publicly recognise effective proposals, for example with **annual awards**.

#### CASE STUDY

### Incorporating petitions and CIs into visits to parliament



In 2023 the **Austrian Parliament** opened the Demokratikum, its new visitor centre. The Demokratikum allows visitors of all ages to explore the history of the parliament, its roles and functions, and engage with current parliamentary business. The centre uses a range of media to present information, including display walls, video installations and interactive stations.

One activity available at the interactive stations is **browsing** petitions and legislative initiatives that are currently accepting signatures. Adult citizens are able to **sign** petitions and initiatives there and then.

There is also an **area for children** to learn about the principle of petitions and legislative initiatives, and **write their own ideas** for laws in specially developed leaflets. These leaflets are then **displayed** on a board in the children’s area.

Citizens can also **watch filmed interviews with people** who have proposed petitions and CIs, and hear about the impacts both on them and on parliamentary decisions.

Taking a user-centred approach to communications can be useful, i.e. mapping out how participants will be able to access information, and contact the relevant teams or individuals, at various points in the process. Parliaments can consider offering the following services:

- » Providing clear and accessible guidance on the process and what to expect, via a range of channels, e.g., on the parliamentary website, social media, in print and at local offices
- » Answering queries about the process and how it works
- » Confirming receipt of proposals and outlining next steps
- » Providing ways for proposers and supporters to track the progress of a particular proposal
- » Sending significant updates directly to proposers and supporters (e.g., if an inquiry is opened or a debate scheduled)
- » Inviting participants to be involved in inquiries or observe debates and supporting them throughout this process
- » Informing proposers and supporters of the outcome of their proposal
- » Signposting participants to relevant parliamentary business and ways to get involved that might be of interest to them

#### Top tips

- ✓ Communicate with participants throughout the process
- ✓ Use diverse means of communication to widen reach
- ✓ Deliver workshops with underrepresented groups, including ‘train the trainer’ approaches
- ✓ Celebrate citizen proposals



## Resources needed

Petitions and CI systems require infrastructure, skills and buy-in from Members and staff to succeed in giving people a voice in parliament. For example:

- » Effective liaison with relevant civil society groups can help scale up the adoption of petitions and CI systems.
- » Other staff and MPs will need to understand the process and see the value of it. For example, MPs may need to be convinced that these systems can support them in their roles as representatives and legislators by providing information on what citizens care about, complementing what they learn from constituency visits, correspondence and engagement with academics and other experts.
- » A dedicated team of staff and Members, including those who can handle procedural elements as well as those who have the skills to engage with citizens, deliver effective communications, and run outreach activities such as workshops.
- » If offering an online system, parliaments will need to develop or procure IT solutions that work on a range of devices and provide a good user experience for participants (e.g., good search functions, ability to track progress of proposals).

### Top tips

- ✓ Invest in staff resources
- ✓ Develop technical infrastructure
- ✓ Create and nurture MP champions
- ✓ Liaise with civil society groups



**Table 2 (e):** Petitions at the New Zealand House of Representatives

Who can submit?	Type of submission	How are submissions processed?	What actions can be taken after submission?
Any individual or organisation can create a petition, but it must be presented to the House of Representatives by an MP.	<p>Petitions are accepted within a broad scope, including those that: raise awareness about an issue, propose a new law, request a public inquiry, request redress for a grievance, or ask public bodies to supply certain information.</p> <p>Petitions must: be in English or Te Reo Māori; ask parliament to take an action; use respectful and moderate language; be serious in intent; be succinct; and not include statements that cannot be authenticated, defamatory information or unfounded allegations.<sup>10</sup></p>	<p>Paper, electronic or hybrid submission options are available. A paper submission allows petitioners to collect names and signatures in person, whereas an electronic petition will be hosted on the parliament website for anyone to sign if they want to support it (they need to provide their name and email address). Petitioners are able to choose the closing date for signatures.</p> <p>The Petitions Committee checks that submissions are in order before they are presented to the House by an MP. Once presented, the petition is referred back to the Petitions Committee to consider and take appropriate actions.</p>	<p>The Petitions Committee might take any of the following actions: gather further evidence, including requesting further information from the petitioner(s) in person, over the phone or in writing; refer the petition to a subject committee; refer the petition to a government minister for a response.</p> <p>The Committee then reports on its investigations and may make recommendations, e.g., for the Government. The Government is required to respond within 60 days.</p>

<sup>10</sup> New Zealand Parliament, [Guide for petitions](#).



## Section 4: Evaluation

This section provides key considerations for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness and impact of a petitions or CI system. There are various potential dimensions for assessing how well such a system is performing, and it is worth bearing in mind that different stakeholders are likely to value particular outcomes and impacts differently.

For example, participants might place most value on results, i.e. proposals being adopted or acted upon, as well as their experience of the process and their treatment by parliament. Parliamentary staff, meanwhile, might want to ensure that the system is being widely used and that procedure is being followed correctly. Parliamentarians may place emphasis on the actual proposals coming through the system and how useful they are to them in their roles of representation, legislation and oversight.

This is not to say that stakeholders do not share an interest in all of these elements, just that the balance is likely to be different across groups, and that results are not the only place to look: “the right to petition is intended to give a voice to citizens...but there is no right to a favourable decision”.<sup>11</sup> Table 5 outlines four different dimensions for evaluation.

**Table 5:** Key evaluation dimensions of parliamentary petitions and CI systems

Evaluation dimension	What to look at/measure
Usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» How many people use the system per quarter/year?</li> <li>» How many submissions are made per quarter/year?</li> <li>» What types of topics do submissions concern?</li> </ul>
Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Who is participating in the system?</li> <li>» Do participants come from a range of different backgrounds?</li> <li>» What is the balance between individuals, groups and organisations using the system?</li> </ul>
Process and experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» How long does it take for participants to receive a response?</li> <li>» Do responsible bodies (e.g., parliament, government) fulfil their responsibility to respond to participants in a specified timeframe (if applicable)?</li> <li>» What are users’ opinions of the process?</li> </ul>
Outcomes and impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» What is the proportion of proposals that progress to each stage of the parliamentary process e.g., successful submission, debate, hearing, bill, law?</li> <li>» What wider influence or impact does a proposal have on policy/legislation, including e.g., influence on committee agendas, public discourse?</li> <li>» What impact does participation have on users (individuals, civil society organisations)?</li> </ul>

<sup>11</sup> European Parliament Directorate General for Internal Policies (2015) *The right to petition*. Prepared for the Petitions Committee.



## Potential evaluation techniques

- » Regular collection of monitoring data
- » Periodically convening user groups for deeper evaluation of their experiences with the system
- » Consulting internal and external stakeholders on the effectiveness of the system
- » Bringing in expert and critical voices e.g., from civil society and academia to ensure that systems keep pace with developments in knowledge, methods and societal trends

### CASE STUDY

#### Evaluating petitioners’ experience at the Portuguese Parliament



In 2024, the **Portuguese Assembly of the Republic** started collecting data on who submits petitions and their experiences of the system. This is done via a survey sent to all petitioners when their petition has closed. It collects key demographic data on petitioners (e.g., gender, age), as well as how satisfied they felt with the petitioning process. This is then published online as a report. This evaluation helps staff understand better the petitioning experience from the petitioner’s perspective. It also informs developments of the petitioning system.



**Table 2 (f):** Petitions at the Nigerian Senate

Who can submit?	Type of submission	How are submissions processed?	What actions can be taken after submission?
Any individual or corporation can submit a petition to a Member of Parliament to present to the Senate.	<p>Requests for redress of “violations, administrative breaches or infractions committed by public officers”.<sup>12</sup></p> <p>The submission must be in English or accompanied by an English translation. Respectful language must be used, and the petition should outline how they want their issue to be resolved. The petition must be signed by at least one person.</p>	<p>On paper, by post, courier or by hand. Petitions should be addressed directly to the Senate but delivered either to their Senator or a member of the Senate Committee on Ethics, Privileges and Public Petitions. The Senator named in the petition then presents it in plenary.</p> <p>The petition is then referred to the Committee on Ethics, Privileges and Public Petitions. The Committee notifies the Respondent (the body that the petition is being brought against).</p>	<p>Once the Respondent replies, the Committee arranges a date for a hearing. This date is publicly announced as well as sent directly to the Petitioner and Respondent.</p> <p>At the hearing, both Petitioner and Respondent have an opportunity to present their case. Members of the Committee may ask questions about their statements.</p> <p>The Committee then produces a report of the hearing with recommendations. This report is debated in plenary and the Senate makes a resolution on the issue. The Petitioner and Respondent are notified of the decision.</p>

<sup>12</sup> Nigerian Senate Committee on Ethics, Privileges and Public Petitions. *How to submit a petition*.



**Table 2 (g):** Citizens' initiatives at the Thai House of Representatives

Who can submit?	Type of submission	How are submissions processed?	What actions can be taken after submission?
Any group of people with the right to vote, as long as it is signed by 10,000 people, can propose a citizens' initiative (50,000 signatures are needed for proposed constitutional amendments).	Draft bills must relate to either Section 3 (Rights and Freedoms of the <b>Thai</b> People) or Section 5 (Duties of the State) of the Constitution. Constitutional amendments cannot change the democratic system with the King as Head of State or form of government. Specific legislative format, and supplementary documentation, are also specified for the format of the proposals.	<p>Submissions can be made on paper or online through the secretariat's IT system. In both cases, signatures need to be supported by identity verification and voter eligibility.</p> <p>The group of people who constitute the proponents are heavily involved in shaping and leading the committee's programme of work. This takes place with the support of parliamentary staff.</p>	The draft citizen proposal follows the normal legislative process, but the proponents are also heavily involved being part of the committee that considers the draft bill. Other draft bills on the same topic can be presented by MPs and discussed in the same committee.

## Section 5: Petitions or citizens' initiatives that have had an impact

Petitions and CIs can have a range of different types of impacts. The impact could be on the proposer themselves and their campaign, and/or on parliamentarians and the decisions they take.

- » Proposals may lead to a new law
- » They may simply raise awareness of a problem that needs addressing
- » They may even result in impacts that proposers did not intend (see Spain example, [page 28](#))
- » They may develop citizens' democratic agency, or conversely amplify mistrust of politics if citizens do not feel listened to

We outline six examples to illustrate possible types of impact:

- » Addressing an everyday injustice (Portugal)
- » Young people having an impact (New Zealand, [page 26](#))
- » Role of civil society groups (Brazil [page 27](#), Spain [page 28](#))
- » Impact across different levels of governance (EU [page 29](#), Estonia [page 30](#))

### Addressing an everyday injustice

#### EXAMPLE

#### **A small but meaningful change: The right to accompaniment at caesarean sections (Portuguese Assembly of the Republic)**



In June 2015, a woman contemplating a third caesarean section without her husband by her side brought a petition to parliament requesting a small change in policy. With the help of a nurse, Monica Barbosa submitted a petition calling for significant others to be allowed to accompany their partners during caesarean sections in public hospitals. The fact that this practice was freely allowed in private facilities but not in public ones was, Monica felt, an “injustice”.

Accompaniment during caesareans was already granted under Law 15/2014. However, the legislation included a clause that allowed significant others to

be denied access “where the facilities are not compatible with the presence of a companion.” Under this clause, public hospitals were denying accompaniment on the grounds of increased risk of infection. Monica and others supportive of a change argued that with proper disinfection measures, this risk could be significantly minimised (as it was in the private hospitals where accompaniment was allowed).

The petition was referred to the parliamentary committee on health, but the issue was not resolved before the end of the parliament. In the subsequent parliament, one of the main parties proposed that the government issue a

decree to clarify the right to accompaniment. Parliament approved the resolution, and the Ministers for Citizenship and Health issued a decree in April 2016 emphasising the right to accompaniment at all births, including caesareans. The decree stipulated that accompaniment could still be denied if a risk was posed to the health of the mother or baby.

This example demonstrates how petitions can help shed light on issues that may have been overlooked by legislators but were deeply felt by people on the ground. Monica’s petition resulted in small tweaks that cost the state little but meant a great deal to those affected.



## Young people having an impact

### EXAMPLE

### The New Zealand Land Wars: Petition 2014/0037 of Waimarama Anderson and Leah Bell



In 2015, two secondary school students from the North Island of New Zealand launched a petition calling for formal recognition of the New Zealand Land Wars of 1845–72. The Land Wars saw extensive confiscation of Māori land by British imperial forces. Over 2,000 Māori people are estimated to have been killed, with the British death toll estimated at 745 people.

Waimarama Anderson and Leah Bell had learned about these events while on a school trip to Orakau and Rangiaowhia (both major sites of conflict in 1864). They had been struck by the oral history shared by local elders and were concerned that this piece of New Zealand history was not adequately treated in the

curriculum and risked being erased from social memory with the loss of older generations. Bell also expressed her feeling that “the tragedy of the New Zealand Land Wars... underlie many of the social justice struggles that we face as *rangatahi* [young people]”.

The young women started a petition calling for greater attention to be paid to the Land Wars in the school curriculum, and for a statutory day of recognition to be introduced commemorating those who lost their lives in the conflict. They raised awareness of their petition by setting up a public Facebook page, spurring debate in the media. This helped their petition gather 12,000 signatures, and their local MP Nanaia Mahuta

presented it to the House of Representatives in December 2015.

The petition was referred to the Māori Affairs Committee for investigation. Evidence received by the committee was mixed, with many opposed to what they perceived as the ‘rewriting of history’ while others were adamant that this was an overlooked piece of history that needed to be placed on the official record. During the committee’s investigation, the Government committed to a day of commemoration, to be held on 28 October every year from 2017 onwards. The Māori Affairs Committee recommended that specific curriculum content be created to cover the New Zealand Land Wars. The Government

initially demurred from this, but ultimately implemented this recommendation. In 2019, then-Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that the topic would be treated within a revised curriculum. A plaque commemorating the Land Wars was unveiled in the Parliament building in the same year. The history curriculum was updated, with specific materials on New Zealand history and the Land Wars coming into use in 2023.

The story of the petition has been written up on the New Zealand Parliament website<sup>13</sup>, with a clear call to action for others to engage with the petitions system on issues that matter to them.

<sup>13</sup> [Ka whai hua te petihana a ngā taurira / Students’ petition turns into a success - New Zealand Parliament](#)

## Role of civil society groups

### EXAMPLE

### Senate of Brazil: Citizen idea for hanging vegetable gardens turned into bill (PL 4.206/2023)



A legislative idea from a workshop organised by the Senate's e-Cidadania programme has been developed into a bill currently under consideration by the Committee on Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. The initiative, proposed by Marcelo Siqueira, a participant supported by the Pestalozzi Association of Brasília (an organisation providing assistance to adults with multiple disabilities), suggested creating suspended community gardens in schools and social assistance units. These gardens aim to promote healthy eating, sustainable development, and inclusive community engagement.

The idea emerged during the first "Legislative Workshop for Good," a workshop focused on empowering individuals with disabilities to make legislative proposals. This event resulted from a partnership between e-Cidadania and Liga do Bem (a voluntary organisation founded by Senate employees). As the legislative proposals needed to be made by members of the Brazilian legislature, Senator Paulo Paim decided to pursue this initiative and presented it to the Senate.

The Legislative Workshop programme was launched in 2020 by the Brazilian Senate, the

Legislative Workshop connects students from elementary, high school, and higher education with the legislative process. The initiative encourages students to reflect on societal challenges and propose solutions in the form of legislative ideas, which are submitted to the e-Cidadania platform for public voting. Ideas gaining 20,000 votes are reviewed by the Senate's Human Rights and Participatory Legislation Committee. Senators can also adopt ideas directly, without them meeting the threshold.

The workshop provides educational materials and a

structured, adaptable format for use in classrooms or virtual environments. Teachers and students receive certificates for their participation. In higher education environments, students focus on laws related to their fields of study, proposing updates to legislation that can be submitted for Senate consideration.

In schools, children aged 12+ learn about the legislative process, debate societal issues, and create innovative ideas to address them. This initiative empowers young citizens to actively participate in shaping public policy while promoting civic education.



## Role of civil society groups

### EXAMPLE

### Mixed success: the Popular Legislative Initiative for Dignified Housing (Congress of Deputies, Spain)<sup>14</sup>



In 2011, a campaign group called the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) launched a popular legislative initiative (PLI) calling for measures to relieve those facing mortgage debt in the wake of the global financial crisis.

The Spanish Congress' procedure for national PLIs sets a threshold of 500,000 signatures before a vote is held in parliament. The PLI for Dignified Housing received over 1.4 million signatures.

Congress voted almost unanimously for the initiative to become a bill and proceed to the next stage of legislative development.

Unfortunately for the PAH, a change in the political make-up of parliament following an election meant that the bill was significantly redrafted, with the substantive content of the PLI removed. A new mortgage law was adopted in 2013 bearing little relation to the proposal of the PAH.

Despite the seeming failure of the PAH to change the law in the way that they had intended, they garnered distinct benefits from the process. First, they strengthened their public support and legitimacy as a campaigning organisation. Second, they developed relationships with sympathetic politicians during the process, and improved their understanding of parliamentary mechanisms. This last point can be seen in their successful legislative initiative at

the regional level in 2015, which saw the Catalan Parliament adopt measures to protect vulnerable people from energy poverty.

<sup>14</sup> Emperador Badimon, M. (2024) [Explaining the impact of citizens' initiatives on social movements: insights from the Spanish housing movement](#). *Social Movement Studies*, 1–23.

## Impact across different levels of governance

### EXAMPLE

### **The Right2Water: the first European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) to collect more than 1 million signatures**



The Right2Water is a European Union-wide campaign calling on member states and the European Union (EU) itself to commit to the human right to water and sanitation. A consortium of NGOs and trade unions from across the EU collaborated to launch an European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) in 2013 with three main goals:

- » Guaranteed water and sanitation for all EU citizens
- » No liberalisation (privatisation) of water services
- » Universal access to water and sanitation

The European Parliament's ECIs are required to gather 1 million signatures from over seven member states before their initiative can be considered by the European Commission. The Right2Water was the first ECI to reach this threshold in the history of the mechanism, gathering over 1.8 million signatures. Organisers used social media (e.g., Facebook) as well as traditional media (e.g., TV and radio) to gain support.

The Commission adopted many of the proposals around water quality, but stopped short of measures to promote public ownership of water. Several member states, as well as cities

and regions, have supported the initiative by declaring the human right to water. Some cities and regions, for example in Germany and Switzerland, have taken the further step of reversing the privatisation of water services.

Reflecting on the initiative, organisers say that while the international coordination of the campaign was successful, they could have done more to generate political as well as public support at the national level in member states.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> European Citizens' Initiative Forum (2021) [Right2Water: the impact of prime-time TV coverage](#).



## Impact across different levels of governance

### EXAMPLE

### Taking an issue from the local level to the national parliament: Rural schools in Estonia<sup>16</sup>



Pressures on local government budgets and a declining population have led to extensive school closures across Estonia in the last decade. Some rural communities felt that decisions to close schools had been made without adequate consultation of local communities. They responded by launching CIs in their respective municipalities, calling on local decision-makers to reconsider.

When the local government declined to take action on these CIs – despite seven separate initiatives being submitted on the topic in a single municipality between 2020 and 2023 – the communities decided to work together to submit a citizens' initiative to the national parliament, the Riigikogu. In April 2023, they submitted a proposal to the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform calling on the Ministry of Education to implement measures to

maintain school provision in rural communities.

The proposal received 2,116 signatures on the platform and was referred to the Cultural Affairs Committee for consideration. The committee recommended that the issue be deliberated on as an issue of national importance. As a result of this, the Ministry of Education allocated funds in the 2024 budget specifically to support primary schools with between 19 and 90 students in rural areas.

This example demonstrates how a CI system can allow disparate groups to coalesce around a shared concern and achieve significant impact.

<sup>16</sup> Sitra (2024) *Citizens' initiatives in Finland and Estonia* (p.37); Citizens' initiative: [We ask you to ensure the preservation of strong rural schools and rural life! - People's initiative](#)

## Section 6: Checklist

Questions to help parliaments assess the extent to which their (planned or existing) petitions and CI system meets the eight principles set out in our Guide on Principles of Parliamentary Public Engagement:



### Purpose

Is there a defined purpose for your petitions or CI system that has been developed in collaboration with stakeholders?

Are there the required resources to deliver on the purpose?

Is the purpose reflected in your evaluation plans?



### Openness and transparency

Have you provided clear and accessible information about the system and how it works?

Do you provide timely and useful updates to citizens about the progress of proposals?

Are there ways for citizens to get in touch and ask questions?



### Planning and resourcing

Have you established a process with a clear workflow and division of responsibilities?

Do you have the resources (e.g., staff and technical infrastructure) to consider proposals and consider them effectively?

Do the staff and Members responsible for the system have the right skills and expertise? Is there training that could be offered?

Are there ways for stakeholders to suggest improvements and for these to be considered and implemented where appropriate?



### Integration and coordination

Do staff and MPs across the organisation understand what the petitions or CI system is, how it works, and how they can interact with it?

Do parliamentarians understand how the system feeds into parliamentary business?

Is the system integrated with the work of other engagement teams?

Is there cross-party support for the system?



### Inclusion

Is the system set up in a way that allows people from across society to engage?

Have you thought about how to remove barriers for marginalised groups? Do you have the expertise to put appropriate measures in place or do you need to consult others?



### Collaboration and empowerment

Is the system set up to build participants' democratic skills, knowledge and agency, as well as trust in parliament?

Do you have relationships and networks that you can build on to enable greater engagement with particular groups and civil society in general?



### Ethical standards

Are all staff and MPs aware of their responsibilities under the relevant policies such as data protection and safeguarding?

Have you considered how to protect the rights of marginalised people and have you consulted with experts where appropriate?



### Impact and evaluation

Do you have an evaluation framework based on your purpose and strategy?

Does your evaluation framework include ways to understand who is participating in the system and where there are gaps?

Does your evaluation plan include ways to understand the experience of participants and what they think of the system?

Does your evaluation plan include points for reviewing and discussing data with relevant stakeholders?

## Section 7: Useful materials on petitions and citizens' initiatives

- » European Parliament Directorate General for Internal Policies, [The right to petition](#)
- » Participatory platform of the Brussels Capital Region and the French-speaking Brussels Parliament: [Citizen Participation in the Brussels region](#)
- » Leston-Bandeira, C., '[Breaking barriers to engagement with parliaments](#)'. Blog post and visual summary
- » ParlAmericas, [Citizen participation in the legislative process](#)

### See our other **Guides on Citizen Engagement for Parliaments**

This Guide was developed by Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira and Juliet Ollard at the International Parliament Engagement Network (IPEN) in collaboration with Inter Pares I Parliaments in Partnership – the EU's Global Project to Strengthen the Capacity of Parliaments.

The Guide draws from extensive research carried out in 2024 and 2025, including: a review of relevant academic research; interviews with academics and parliamentary officials from across the world; analysis of relevant practitioner reports and parliamentary documentation; testimonies from members of IPEN; and relevant seminars and workshops organised by Inter Pares and/or IPEN.

The Guide also incorporates feedback from an international Advisory Group established to develop this suite of Guides on Citizen Engagement for Parliaments, as well as from the IPEN Executive Team. The authors are very grateful to all those who shared their knowledge and expertise as part of this project.



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