

Engaging Underrepresented Groups

2025

Start >>>

**Guides on Citizen
Engagement for Parliaments**

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International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE-103 34 Stockholm
SWEDEN

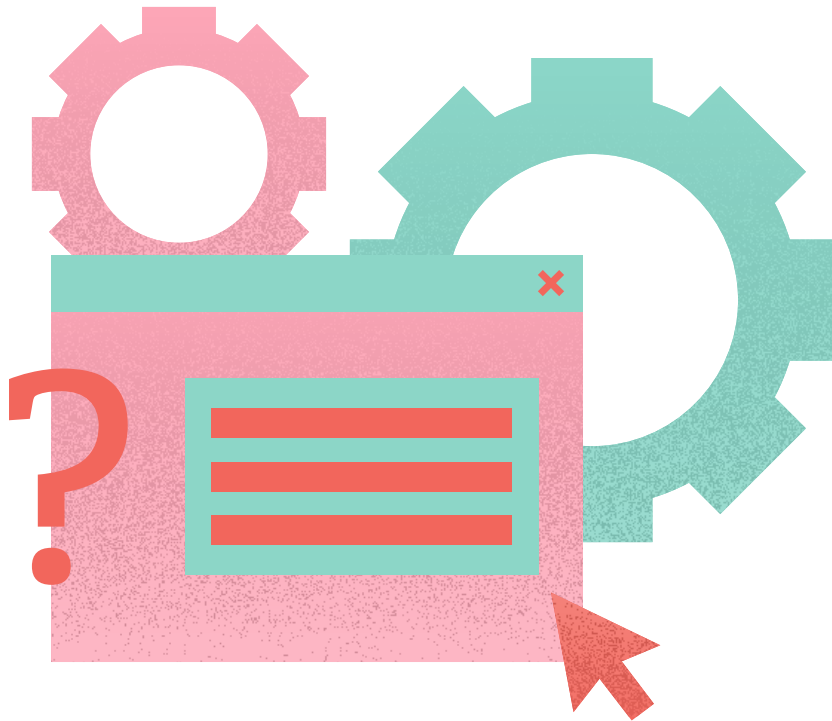
Tel: +46 8 698 37 00
Email: info@idea.int
Website: <https://www.idea.int>

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Executive summary

Citizen engagement processes in democracies are regularly criticised for only involving **‘the usual suspects’**: people from broadly similar, usually socio-economically advantaged, backgrounds. This means parliaments are less likely to make decisions, policies and legislation that respond to the needs and interests of the wider population, and more likely to be seen as elite institutions. **Engaging underrepresented groups is therefore key for overcoming these challenges and improving democratic outcomes.**

Engaging underrepresented groups is something that parliaments sometimes shy away from, for fear it will be too complex, risky or ‘political’. While these can be useful considerations to bear in mind, engaging underrepresented groups presents important benefits for parliaments, including:

- » improving the flow of information into parliament, making laws and policies more robust

- » staving off the threats of misinformation and polarisation
- » countering public perception that parliaments are only for the usual suspects

This Guide outlines an approach to engaging underrepresented groups that is rooted in three key ideas.

First, engagement will not solve all problems of societal inequality, but it can help to **address inequality of access to decision-making power.**

Second, **experimentation is often the route to success**, and parliaments should not be afraid to try different approaches.

Third, **people are not defined by single characteristics**: one might, for example, be female **and** low-income **and** from an ethnic minority background. Engaging underrepresented groups should not focus on single characteristics in isolation. The basis of this approach should be a recognition of citizens’ equality in democracies and a commitment to making that a practical reality.

We provide guidance for engaging underrepresented groups in practice. This guidance is supported by a range of examples from parliaments across the world, and focuses on the following considerations:

- » **Purpose and planning**
What do you want to achieve and what will you need in order to do it?
- » **Understanding underrepresented groups**
Who is underrepresented in your context and how can you reach them?
- » **Information and identification**
What information is needed to support engagement, and how will you foster a sense of ownership and belonging?
- » **Making adjustments**
What are the practical steps you can take to make activities more accessible to underrepresented groups?
- » **Dedicated activities for specific groups**
Where should new programmes be introduced to support the engagement of underrepresented groups?
- » **Co-production**
How can you share decision-making power with underrepresented groups over the design, delivery and evaluation of activities?



This Guide supplements our other **Guides on Citizen Engagement for Parliaments** in focusing on an issue that is addressed across the suite of eight guides.

In **Section 4**, we include links to further resources that parliaments may find helpful in developing their approach to engaging underrepresented groups.

Introduction

Inequalities in society are a factor that all parliaments must contend with when conducting their work. Inequalities don't just affect communities' experiences of policies; they also affect people's access to political spaces and decision-making processes, resulting in laws and policies that are less likely to meet their needs.

This makes it all the more important that engagement **activities are actively and sensitively designed** to reach underrepresented groups. With such careful steps, engagement activities can be very effective in opening up parliamentary processes to a wider range of groups beyond the usual suspects (who already engage with parliament), but this does not happen automatically just because a new engagement mechanism has been established. Parliaments need to **pro-actively consider what steps need to be taken specifically to reach underrepresented groups**.

This Guide explores different approaches that parliaments can take across all types of engagement activities – information, communication, education, consultation and participation¹ – to ensure that underrepresented groups are reached and that engagement impact is enhanced.

This Guide does not prescribe exactly how to engage specific groups (not least because contexts differ so much across societies), but to **encourage parliaments to recognise and address existing gaps in engagement**.

Similarly to our Guide on Principles of Parliamentary Public Engagement, this Guide cuts across the topics of all the guides included in the suite of eight Guides on Citizen Engagement for Parliaments. Whilst each of those guides addresses the issue of underrepresented groups, we explore it in more depth in this Guide.



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

¹Inter-Parliamentary Union (2022) *Global Parliamentary Report – Public Engagement in the Work of Parliament*.

Section 1: What do we mean by underrepresented groups?

This Guide uses the term **‘underrepresented groups’** to refer to communities that are disadvantaged in society and therefore disadvantaged in terms of democratic engagement.

We use this term precisely because it describes the **effect of societal inequalities** on certain groups’ political agency and representation, and thus contains an implicit call to action for parliaments to improve these groups’ access to democratic processes. See examples of common categories of underrepresented groups on [page 7](#).

Related terms that may be used to a greater or lesser extent in societies across the world are explored in **Terminology**.

Terminology

Various terms are used to describe groups that may need extra support or encouragement to engage with institutions such as parliaments.

In Anglophone contexts, the terms **‘marginalised’** and **‘disadvantaged’** are used to describe these groups’ positions within society.

In other languages, comparable terms are **‘défavorisées/défavorisés’** (French) and **‘marginadas/marginados’, ‘silenciadas/silenciados’** or **‘colectivos desfavorecidos’** (Spanish).

The passive voice is used in all these terms, reflecting that these positions are not of individuals’ making or choosing but rather the result of structural factors.

Communities are sometimes described as **‘hard-to-reach’**, reflecting the distance felt between institutions and these groups (from the point of view of institutions).

‘Seldom-heard’ may be a more accurate term, emphasising the fact that these groups are often excluded from decision-making processes and that institutions have a responsibility to address this.

In recent years, political scholars and commentators have observed a decline in participation in formal politics, which they ascribe in part to reduced trust in political institutions.² This gives rise to the term ‘political disengagement’, and efforts to define which groups in particular are **‘disengaged’**.³

Terminology matters, so consider which terms may be most suitable to use in light of related meanings and connotations.

² Valgarðsson, V., Jennings, W., Stoker, G., Bunting, H., Devine, D., McKay, L. and Klassen, A. (2025) *A crisis of political trust? Global trends in institutional trust from 1958 to 2019*. *British Journal of Political Science*, 55, [e15]

³ Johnston, N. and Uberoi, E. (2022) *Political disengagement in the UK: Who is disengaged?* House of Commons Library briefing.

Section 2: Why engage underrepresented groups?

Some parliamentary staff or Members of Parliament (MPs) may be reluctant to engage underrepresented groups due to potential backlash from dominant groups, or a perception that engaging underrepresented groups is risky, complicated or too ‘political’.

However, it is in parliaments’ interests to engage underrepresented groups.

Bringing a wide range of perspectives into legislation, budgeting and oversight should lead to more robust decision-making and better outcomes.

As democracies increasingly face threats from misinformation and social division, engaging underrepresented groups is also a tool for social cohesion and the preservation of institutional legitimacy.

From the point of view of democratic principles, engaging underrepresented groups helps parliaments practise values of pluralism, inclusion and equality.

Underrepresented groups are likely to face certain barriers to political engagement. Practical barriers such as illiteracy, low levels of IT skills, language barriers, disability, poverty or isolation may combine with low self-confidence, low levels of

trust in institutions, limited knowledge of political systems or low levels of campaigning skills.

Parliaments must therefore **develop different strategies to deal with these practical, attitudinal and knowledge barriers**. Some of these are more straightforward to address than others, and parliaments must also recognise what may be within their control and what lies outside of it.

For example, parliamentary staff cannot solve the problem of poverty, but they can make choices about how they communicate with citizens, how they provide information, and how they make people feel welcomed and valued in parliamentary spaces (see our Guide on Parliament as a Space and Place). Some issues, such as legacies of colonialism or oppression, necessitate greater efforts that go beyond a single activity or programme.⁴



**See our Guide on
'Parliament as a
Space and Place'
for more information**

Common categories of underrepresented groups

Societies' demographics differ widely due to historical factors such as experiences of colonialism, slavery, war, migration or isolation, as well as cultural, religious and linguistic heritage. However, **across societies, common categories of underrepresented groups include:**



Many of these **identities will overlap with one another**,⁶ which means that parliaments must develop practices for sensitively engaging with diverse groups rather than focusing exclusively on individual identity characteristics.

⁴Including the option of non-engagement. See: United Nations (2007) [Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#); Young, I. M. (2004).

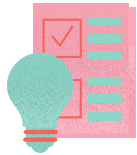
[Two concepts of self-determination](#) in: May, S., Modood, T. and Squires, J. (eds), *Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Minority Rights*. Cambridge University Press; pp.176-196.

⁵ For example, deindustrialised regions of advanced economies.

⁶ This is known as 'intersectionality'. See: [3. What is meant by the concept of 'intersectionality'? - Using intersectionality to understand structural inequality in Scotland: evidence synthesis - gov.scot](#)

Section 3: How to put it into practice

This section provides practical guidance for parliamentary staff and MPs on how to engage underrepresented groups effectively and meaningfully, and how to incorporate this approach into usual parliamentary engagement practice.



Purpose and planning

Parliaments conduct all sorts of activities that would benefit from the engagement of underrepresented groups, and from which underrepresented groups would themselves benefit. For example:

- » ensuring that **information** provision reaches underrepresented groups
- » establishing **communication** channels that underrepresented groups can use
- » delivering **education** programmes for the enjoyment and empowerment of a range of audiences
- » **consulting** the public in its diversity
- » enabling the active **participation** of underrepresented groups in parliamentary processes

When engaging underrepresented groups, it may be that the activity or programme is designed for one specific group or is part of an exercise that staff and/or MPs are seeking to make more inclusive. This purpose should first be articulated.

In either case, parliamentary teams should consider what **challenges** they might face in engaging underrepresented groups and what resources they may need to draw on to engage effectively. These resources may include advice, specialist staff, digital tools, or assistive technologies.

Time is likely to be a challenge, especially when parliaments are not experienced in engaging underrepresented groups. In those cases, it will take them longer to deliver an activity due to the

range of considerations that arise. This length of time should reduce as parliaments become more experienced and institutionalise inclusion into how they work.

The capacity of **external organisations** – such as civil society organisations and NGOs – can also be drawn on in contexts where parliamentary resources are tight.

In all cases, a guiding principle should be that programmes and services are designed with some level of consultation with the community or their representatives.

Planning should also factor in what **outputs** will be created and how **outcomes** will be shared with participants.

CASE STUDY

Planning for impact: the Citizen Engagement Team at the Welsh Senedd



The Citizen Engagement Team at the **Welsh Senedd** engages a range of groups to support committee scrutiny. The team takes a structured approach to engagement, ensuring that the method is appropriate to the target audience, that ethical considerations are addressed, and that outputs are designed into the project from the outset.

In 2024, the team conducted an engagement project to inform an inquiry by the Children, Young People and Education Committee into ‘children and young people on the margins’. The Committee particularly wanted to hear from young people who had been criminally exploited.

Given the vulnerable nature of the target audience, the team decided to use **interviews** as a method to allow participants to share their views and experiences privately. Participants were given the option of telephone or face-to-face

interviews, and each young person was accompanied by a trusted adult who was able to provide support before, during and after the interview.

Other ethical considerations addressed included anonymising all interview notes and ensuring that all contributions were reviewed by the young person and their trusted adult before being shared with the committee.

To convey the personal nature of the stories, a **short film** was produced using actors to voice the testimonies of the young people. This short film was shown to the Committee on a specific date to ensure that it was given due time and consideration. The team also produced a report on the findings from engagement, something it does for every engagement project it conducts.⁷

Top tips

- ✓ Be honest about the challenges you might face
- ✓ Discuss those challenges – they may appear larger at first than they actually are
- ✓ Ensure that you identify a clear purpose for your activity, so that engagement can be meaningful

⁷See the report here: [Engagement Findings - October 2024.pdf](#)

CASE STUDY

Countering geographical remoteness



In contexts where there are large distances between communities, poor transport links and a lack of internet connectivity (such as island nations and low- or middle-income nations), parliaments have developed ways of ‘**taking parliament to the people**’. This approach has been identified as crucial for engaging with a diversity of people.⁸

Specific tools include establishing satellite parliamentary offices in different regions, conducting outreach tours or extended visits, and forming networks with local leaders and teachers who can promote engagement and build democratic skills in communities.

In **Ecuador** and **Panama**, satellite offices are established on a regional level and jointly used by different parties due to a lack of available resources for each party to establish their own office.

In **Indonesia**, satellite offices are very much connected to individual MPs, who set up ‘Aspiration Houses’ where local citizens are invited to learn about parliament and discuss issues with their MP.

South Africa operates a mixed system, whereby constituency offices exist for individual MPs in their constituencies alongside Parliamentary Democracy Offices which are managed by the institution.

The education team of the National Parliament of the **Solomon Islands** conducts annual constituency tours to ensure that those who cannot travel to Honiara to visit parliament are nonetheless able to engage. One constituency is chosen per year, and the six team members travel by boat to deliver sessions in schools and communities. School sessions take place during the day, while community sessions happen in the evening when adults have returned from work.

There is often a trade-off in terms of budget, since visiting the islands comes at a high cost to the parliament. Sometimes the education team prioritises teacher training over the constituency tour, upskilling local teachers who can then facilitate learning on parliament themselves.

⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union (2022) *Global Parliamentary Report – Public Engagement in the Work of Parliament*.

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Understanding underrepresented groups

Different groups are underrepresented in different contexts. Parliaments should consider **who is underrepresented in their own context**, and the mechanisms by which they are excluded. For example, are barriers mainly to do with practical factors such as geographical distance from parliament, or are there more profound barriers based on mistrust?

Methods for identifying underrepresented groups could include reviewing participation data collected on parliament’s different engagement activities, consulting relevant research on the topic, and engaging with civil society organisations that have relationships with communities.

After identifying underrepresented groups, it is useful to conduct **audience research**. This research should aim to understand how target groups access information, how they organise themselves, who their representatives are, what specific barriers to engagement they may face, and which civil society organisations could help to reach them.

Based on this research and understanding, consider what **skills and knowledge** staff and MPs need to engage with underrepresented groups in ways that are effective, sensitive and not tokenistic. This may involve producing guidelines for engaging with certain groups, or the provision of specific training. For example, the **Parliament of South Australia** arranged training with Autism SA, Deaf Connect and the Royal Society for the Blind to help staff and MPs better engage with visitors and committee witnesses with additional needs. This sort of training opens up options for parliaments to network with such organisations and connect with their communities.

Staff and MPs may need to build familiarity in terms of discussing inclusion and diversity topics. This may involve providing ‘myth-busting’ or ‘101’ sessions: that is, sessions that provide a grounding in the topic and surface any assumptions or misconceptions.

In some cases, **stronger interventions may be required to repair relationships** between parliament and underrepresented groups. In many societies, there are groups which do not wish to be represented by parliament, and which (some) parliamentarians do not wish to represent.

This can especially be the case with Indigenous groups and cultural and religious minority communities. There is no single right way to resolve such situations, but the first step is usually to build shared understanding on an equal basis.

For example, in 2024 the **Czech Chamber of Deputies** held an event with Roma community leaders to address racist comments that had been made by parliamentarians. The event consisted of a panel discussion followed by the opening of an exhibition that aimed to confront stereotypes about Roma people.

CASE STUDY

Institutionalising inclusion: the New Zealand Parliament

The **New Zealand Parliament** has taken a range of steps to embed inclusion in its work. The main bodies of the parliamentary administration – the Parliamentary Service and the Office of the Clerk – have collaborated to introduce initiatives to enable engagement with disabled people, indigenous Māori communities, ethnic minority groups and young people.

The New Zealand approach is characterised by **institutionalisation**. Permanent staff roles have been established to ensure that engagement of underrepresented groups remains a priority and that strategic commitments are delivered on.

For example, a Senior Accessibility Advisor was appointed in 2022 to lead on the implementation of initiatives to support **disabled people** to engage with parliament – as citizens, visitors, staff and MPs. Initiatives include:

- » Providing explainers about parliament (including how to make a submission to a select committee, petitioning parliament, and the legislative process) in New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL). Along with this, the parliament is committed to providing Easy Read,⁹ audio, Braille, large-print, NZSL, and screen-reader friendly formats where possible.

- » A range of measures to support disabled visitors to parliament: tactile maps, Braille resources, ‘deaf cards’ to help hearing-impaired visitors get the support they need during their visit, and a bespoke NZSL tour.
- » Developing a new building on the parliamentary precinct in line with universal design principles.
- » Logging ‘accessibility events’ (instances where visitors to parliament do not have their accessibility needs met) so that improvements can be made.

The Senior Disability Advisor is supported by internal groups such as the Disabled Staff Network and the Accessibility Champions Group, which work to embed initiatives across parliament.

The parliamentary administration continues to develop relations with **Māori communities**. This work is based in the recognition of New Zealand’s colonial history as well as the fact that the parliamentary precinct itself sits on the land of the Te Āti Awa *iwi* (a Māori tribe with traditional bases in the Taranaki and Wellington regions of New Zealand). There is a permanent Tumu Whakarae (Māori Cultural Advisor) on staff.

The parliamentary administration works in a collaborative way with Te Āti Awa. This collaboration was formalised in 2024 through a Memorandum of Understanding, which outlines the two sides’ commitment to the partnership and their ambitions for realising Māori representation and empowerment within parliament. Māori customs such as *karakia* (prayer) and welcome (*pōwhiri* and *Mihi whakatau*) are increasingly embedded within parliamentary proceedings including meetings, plenary activities and delegations.

The collaborative nature of the partnership was demonstrated in the project to restore the parliament grounds after their occupation in 2022 by those protesting against COVID-19 public health measures.

Alongside the practical work to address damage to the grounds and sanitation risks caused by the occupation, Te Āti Awa led three ceremonies to restore the *mōuri* (lifeforce) of the space. The restoration process led to greater representation of Māori culture in the parliamentary building and grounds, with the installation of carved pillars and an archway at the main entrance to the parliament building, as well as Māori markers on the forecourt indicating where key parts of the *pōwhiri* (welcome ceremony) should take place.

⁹ Easy Read refers to the presentation of information in an accessible and easy to understand format, often combining images with small chunks of jargon-free text.

CASE STUDY

Disability inclusion at the Irish Houses of the Oireachtas

The **Irish Houses of the Oireachtas** have developed strong mechanisms for **disability inclusion**.

The parliament's broadcasting unit includes an Irish Sign Language (ISL) team of two interpreters providing live ISL interpretation for selected proceedings each week. The interpreters also support witnesses to give evidence to committees where needed, support deaf guests at parliamentary events, and provide ISL tours to deaf visitors.

In 2023, the ISL team launched a **glossary of parliamentary terms in ISL**. The glossary was the result of a close collaboration with interpreting students at the Centre for Deaf Studies at Trinity College Dublin. The aim was to create signs for parliamentary terms that didn't exist in standard ISL vocabulary. For the Oireachtas ISL team, coping strategies such as fingerspelling were inadequate and inconvenient. The project has developed over 80 signs for terms including 'cabinet', 'referendum' and 'select committee',

with each one subject to a consultation process with ISL users.¹⁰

The parliamentary website includes a dedicated page with support for **autistic visitors**. The page details the kinds of noises that might be heard during a visit and provides downloadable maps identifying potential sensory issues (e.g., lighting or loud spaces). Information is provided about aids that can be accessed during a visit, such as sensory support kits and stickers that signal to others how the visitor prefers to communicate during their visit.

Disability inclusion has been institutionalised within the committee system in the form of the Committee on Disability Matters.¹¹ The Committee is responsible for ensuring that government policy is 'disability-proof' and in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Committee regularly consults disabled self-advocates, carers and Disabled People's Organisations.¹²

Top tips

Collaborate with internal research services as well as external specialist organisations to understand the barriers different groups face



Appoint staff to implement inclusion strategies



Ensure that there are procedural responsibilities for inclusion

¹⁰ The ISL glossary of parliamentary terms can be accessed [here](#).

¹¹ Listen more about the Committee [here](#).

¹² The Houses of the Oireachtas have explored other inclusion issues through dedicated committees, such as the Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, and the Committee on the Irish Language, Gaeltacht and the Irish-speaking Community.



Information and identification¹³

To support underrepresented groups to engage, parliaments need to provide **information about their work and ways to get involved, and cultivate a sense of identification with the institution.**

Information should be clear, accessible, engaging, and provided through channels identified in the audience research stage. It is advisable to use a range of channels, based on an understanding that underrepresented groups are unlikely to access parliamentary websites or social media organically.

Community networks and civil society organisations can help parliaments to provide information through trusted intermediaries and create a parliamentary presence in communities: for example, disseminating printed materials and guides, and encouraging community groups to engage with local constituency offices where information can be accessed.

CASE STUDY

Parliament at home: radio



Radio is a format that can help parliaments reach **communities beyond those already engaged.** UNESCO estimates that over 75% of households in developing countries have access to a radio.¹⁴

In 2009, the **National Assembly of Zambia** launched two radio shows to strengthen communication between citizens, parliament and MPs. The broadcasts are made from the parliament's radio studio. There are two main formats: Parliamentary Business Update and Know Your MP. Both formats are interactive: listeners can text in questions for guests, with an average of 45-50 texts per programme. Parliamentary Business Update provides information on issues before parliament, with expert guests answering listeners' questions. Know Your MP brings individual MPs in to answer questions from constituents.

The Parliament News Bureau at the **Indonesian House of Representatives** runs a television and radio production unit called Parliamentary

Television and Radio (TVR). The television service was established in 2007, and the radio service started broadcasting in 2017. TVR radio broadcasts are available on platforms such as Spotify alongside traditional radio. The radio broadcasts have four main functions:

- » **Education:** programmes that focus on explaining the legislative process and the role of parliament in governance
- » **News and updates:** coverage of the daily and weekly activities of the House
- » **Collaboration:** TVR has developed partnerships with national and local radio stations. On the local level, this allows for regional specialisation of programming
- » **Public engagement:** Listener-submitted questions, and opportunities to comment on broadcasts via Spotify.

¹³ Leston-Bandeira, C. (2021) *The Public Engagement Journey*

¹⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), (2018), "Developing communities through radio", cited in Inter-Parliamentary Union (2022) *Global Parliamentary Report – Public Engagement in the Work of Parliament*, p.22.

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Information is most effective when it develops citizens’ identification with the institution of parliament. Parliaments can do this in a range of ways. Often, citizens are motivated to get involved with parliament due to an issue that they feel strongly about – and this is true of underrepresented groups. Demonstrating in parliamentary communications **how parliament is working on a particular issue of interest, and how citizens can get involved**, can help foster identification with parliament as a place that is relevant to them. In information, communication and education initiatives, taking an issues-first approach (rather than focusing on parliamentary processes) can support this identification for underrepresented groups.

Similarly, it is important to demonstrate that citizen engagement can have impact. Promoting stories of **how people from different backgrounds have contributed to parliamentary decision-making and legislative change** can help cultivate trust and confidence in parliament to be responsive to a wide range of citizens’ concerns.

While descriptive representation is no guarantee of substantive representation,¹⁵ **showcasing diversity among MPs** can encourage identification with parliament.

For example, communicating about how MPs from underrepresented groups use their roles in parliament and contribute to democratic processes can lead citizens to see parliament as relevant to them.

Identification goes beyond providing information. Parliaments can lay groundwork for further engagement by **creating space for underrepresented groups in parliamentary precincts, infrastructures, and routines**. This could mean holding events or exhibitions to highlight the challenges and/or successes of different communities. It could also involve establishing bodies within parliament that are dedicated to the interests of a particular group, for example in the form of a parliamentary committee or a reference group.

In the **New Zealand Parliament**, the Rito group ensures that youth voice is a permanent part of the institution by appointing a group of young people each year to lead a programme of activities (see our Guide on Youth Engagement).

The Joint Committee on Disability Matters in the **Irish Houses of the Oireachtas** is an example of where underrepresented groups are formally represented in parliament’s scrutiny function.

Top tips

- ✓ Provide information in a range of formats and via a range of channels to meet different needs
- ✓ Communicate about issues, not just process
- ✓ Help citizens see themselves in parliament – through case studies, MP spotlights, events and exhibitions



See our Guide on ‘Youth Engagement’ for more information

¹⁵ Descriptive representation refers to the presence of those with particular socio-demographic characteristics, while substantive representation refers to the extent to which concerns and interests of those groups are advocated for and addressed.



Making adjustments

Engagement activities can be adjusted in various ways to better include underrepresented groups. Some countries specify in legislation adjustments that **must** be made.

For information and communication forms of engagement, or where outputs are being created for public audiences, it is important to consider how to make materials clear, engaging and accessible. Using **a range of communication styles** (text, audio, video, infographics and other visuals) and **channels** (website, radio, TV, social media and print materials) can help to reach different audiences and appeal to different preferences.

Ensuring that plain language is used and providing alternative formats such as Easy Read and translated versions can help parliaments reach marginalised groups and meet obligations under accessibility legislation.

CASE STUDY

Brazilian Senate e-Cidadania programme



The e-Cidadania programme at the **Federal Senate of Brazil** consists of three main elements:

1. Legislative idea

Citizens can submit proposals for new laws or changes to existing ones. Proposals that receive 20,000 signatures are considered for debate.

2. Public consultation

Draft bills and proposed constitutional amendments are made available on the e-Cidadania portal for comments from citizens.

3. Interactive event

Committees can opt to hold their hearings as 'interactive events', whereby citizens propose questions for committee members to ask witnesses. Answers are then shared with submitters via email.

Various measures have been taken since the launch of the programme in 2012 to make it more accessible. The Legislative Idea component has expanded in important ways. Submissions are now allowed via a **toll-free telephone** number and **sign language**. In both cases, staff transcribe submissions into written format.

In 2020, the e-Cidadania team began offering another way for citizens to make submissions: the **Legislative Workshop**. Schools and community groups can download a workshop guide from the Senate website and conduct their own session on citizenship and how to make a legislative proposal. This initiative was designed and tested in schools from 2016 before formally launching in 2020. The Legislative Workshop is also offered to organisations that work with disabled people. More than 45 ideas from Legislative Workshops have been transformed into bills.

When planning education, consultation or participation activities, further considerations come into play. The **timing and location of engagement** should be considered with a view to the needs of different groups.

On **timing**, key considerations are:

- » scheduling sessions at different points in the day to give full-time workers and those with caring responsibilities the opportunity to engage
- » making sure that longer sessions include breaks as a measure to include disabled people and those with health conditions
- » being aware of school schedules and avoiding examination seasons if trying to engage students or teachers

In terms of location, parliaments should consider how choice of **location** may include or exclude certain groups. For example, parliaments should aim to hold a substantial amount of engagement outside the capital city and the parliamentary precinct.

For some groups (such as those who work full-time, those with caring responsibilities, and some disabled groups) online sessions can be more accessible, while for others (such as older people and digitally excluded communities) in-person engagement should be prioritised (see our Guide on Parliament as a Space and Place).

CASE STUDY

UK Parliament Select Committee Public Engagement Team



The **UK Parliament** has a dedicated public engagement team supporting select committee work. This team is responsible for ensuring that a range of people can engage with select committee inquiries, with a focus on underrepresented groups.

Committees that scrutinise social policy areas such as education, health and welfare often engage with underrepresented and vulnerable groups. The Work and Pensions Committee scrutinises the policies and spending of the department in charge of support for those with additional needs such as disabled people, parents, unemployed people, and pensioners.

In 2019, the Committee conducted an inquiry into Universal Credit and Survival Sex following findings by the UN Special

Rapporteur on extreme poverty that people (predominantly women) were selling sex to meet survival needs as a result of welfare policy changes.

As part of its inquiry, the Committee held a private evidence session with four women affected by the issue. The women were contacted via specialist organisations from whom they had received support. The government minister responsible for the policy area was invited to sit in on the session, increasing its potential impact. Women who did not want to appear in front of the Committee, even in a private session, were given the option of recording audio testimonials, which were then shared with committee members and the minister.



**See our Guide on
'Parliament as a
Space and Place'
for more information**

For those types of engagement that involve direct interaction with citizens, **reasonable adjustments** should be provided to meet additional needs. This includes providing interpreters for speakers of other languages, ensuring that venues for engagement are accessible, and provision for advocates or trusted adults for vulnerable groups such as those with learning disabilities and children.

Some parliaments have policies for **reimbursing and/or rewarding participants** for engagement. Reimbursed costs can include transport, data, lost wages, accommodation and childcare. This can facilitate the participation of low-income groups, as well as certain disabled groups and those with caring responsibilities. Policies for paying participants are rarer,¹⁶ but where they do exist (usually for consultation and participation activities) they provide a way for parliaments to recognise the time and contributions of participants. Payments might be made in the form of direct cash payments, vouchers, or grants for relevant intermediary organisations to dispense. For example, the **Scottish Parliament's** framework rewards participants based on the time commitment and the level of preparation expected of participants (see our Guide on Public Consultations).¹⁷



**See our Guide on
'Public Consultations'
for more information**

CASE STUDY (CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

Ensuring inclusion across the work of the Scottish Parliament's Participation and Communities Team



The Participation and Communities Team (PACT) is a dedicated team that works with the committees of the **Scottish Parliament**. The team has three main areas of focus:



**See our Guide on
'Deliberative Engagement'
for more information**

- » **Communities:** meaningful engagement between committees and those with lived experience, drawing on networks of community organisations.
- » **Digital:** online engagement opportunities including the 'Call for Views' and dedicated discussion website.
- » **Deliberative:** Citizens' Panels (informed, facilitated discussion by a randomly selected, broadly representative sample of the population). See the Guide on Deliberative Engagement for more details.

PACT works to **ensure inclusion across its work**. In the case of the deliberative strand in particular, the team takes steps to ensure that people from a wide range of backgrounds can participate. This is crucial for the robustness of the model. Measures include paying participants for their time, covering travel costs, and providing food and accommodation during Panel activities.

¹⁶ Rewarding participants is often seen as strengthening inclusion. Some think it may create disproportionate incentives for certain groups to engage or issues with welfare entitlements.

¹⁷ See: [Payment for participation policy | Scottish Parliament Website](#)

CASE STUDY (CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE)

Ensuring inclusion across the work of the Scottish Parliament's Participation and Communities Team

In most cases, PACT uses a process called sortition¹⁸ to select participants so that Panels are broadly representative of the demographic makeup of Scotland.

However, in 2023 the Equality, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee decided to run a deliberative process as part of their pre-budget scrutiny work and focus on people from low-income and ethnic minority backgrounds. Working with PACT and the parliamentary research service, the committee collaborated with the Whole Family Equality Project, an organisation supporting ethnic minority families with experience of poverty.

The deliberative process took place over **three sessions** in which participants:

1. were given a grounding in parliament and the budgeting process;
2. considered potential challenges in meeting human rights through the budget and which areas of the budget posed risks to those rights;
3. deliberated to agree a set of six questions for the Committee to put to the Minister at their upcoming evidence session.

This process demonstrates several **elements of good practice**:

- » defining a clear target group (and what adjustments and information they may need)
- » working with an expert partner organisation
- » ensuring that the engagement fed into a parliamentary process

In 2024 the team collaborated with the Presiding Officer (equivalent to the Speaker or President of Parliament) on an engagement tour to mark 25 years of the Scottish Parliament. Twenty engagement sessions were held across the eight regions of Scotland, involving over 900 participants.¹⁹ Sessions were held in partnership with local organisations, reflecting PACT's 'community development' ethos.

Target groups included those on low incomes, ethnic minority communities, disabled people, older people and new immigrants. Staff volunteers were brought in from across parliament to support the programme, thereby building overall engagement understanding and capacity.

Sessions focused on gathering participants' views about parliament, how they would like to get involved, and what their priority issues were (e.g., health, education). The findings from the programme informed the development of a Communities Approach for PACT to deliver on in a 12-month period.

Top tips

- ✓ Consult with participants or their representatives to understand what adjustments need to be made
- ✓ Record how adjustments are made so that they can be incorporated into usual practice
- ✓ Many adjustments are small, inexpensive and improve the quality of engagement for everyone

¹⁸Sortition involves randomly selecting participants from a wider population. Participants are stratified by characteristics such as age and ethnicity so that a representative sample can be formed. PACT commissions an expert organisation, the Sortition Foundation, to carry out this process.

¹⁹ For more information on the 25th Anniversary Regional Programme, see here: [25th anniversary | Scottish Parliament Website](#)

CASE STUDY

Inclusive Youth Parliaments²⁰

Many parliaments conduct youth engagement in recognition of the fact that young people are generally underrepresented among MPs and within parliamentary processes. However, without due attention to who is participating in these youth engagement activities, parliaments risk only reaching those who are from more advantaged backgrounds and who may already be engaged with politics. Some parliaments take active steps to ensure that a diverse range of young people gets the opportunity to participate.

The **Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago** runs a youth parliament every year. Forty participants are selected to participate in a programme of activities designed to build leadership skills and understanding of parliamentary work. Participants are selected in a range of ways. Educational institutions such as schools, further education colleges

and universities nominate students whom they think will benefit from the programme. In recent years, young people have been put forward by young offenders' institutions as a way of ensuring that the programme reaches beyond 'the usual suspects'.

The **Welsh Youth Parliament** (WYP) is an example of where inclusive recruitment is built into the design of the programme. Youth charities and community organisations are partners in the delivery of the WYP. They are responsible for recruiting a third of the members of the youth parliament (two-thirds being elected by schools regionally), to ensure that the cohort is diverse.

The **Children's Assembly of the Republic of Korea** is a programme for children in the last year of primary school (participants are usually 11 or 12 years old). The programme ensures that a range of children gets the

chance to participate through its structured selection process and emphasis on local activities. Children's Assembly Research Groups (CARGs) are established in each of Korea's 253 electoral districts. Each CARG is made up of 10 students representing one primary school, one special school and one out-of-school support group. CARGs work over a three-month period to prepare draft bills. The programme culminates in a final day where a subgroup of participants convenes at the National Assembly to deliberate on the draft bills through committee work and a plenary session.



**See our Guide on
'Youth Engagement'
for more information**

²⁰ See our [Guide on Youth Engagement](#) for more details.



Dedicated activities for specific groups

Purpose and planning processes may indicate that a new programme or initiative should be established to enable greater engagement with underrepresented groups. The purpose of these activities should be defined to avoid tokenism. These activities should also follow the processes of identifying key audiences and conducting audience research as outlined above to ensure that they are meaningful.

The following examples demonstrate how different parliaments have developed bespoke initiatives for underrepresented groups across the spectrum of engagement.

Information: The **Parliament of Ghana's** Outreach unit²¹ conducts information sessions with marginalised groups during parliamentary recesses. Target groups for the programme include fishermen, farmers, illiterate groups, young people, and religious communities. Every quarter, the Outreach team looks at the bills before parliament so that the sessions can include information about current business as well as general information about parliament and how it works. The local MP for the area joins the session along with an MP from another party to ensure political balance.

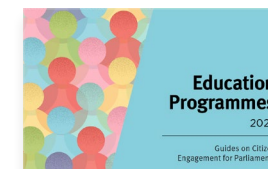
Communication: The **Parliament of South Africa** partners with local radio stations on phone-in programmes with committee members and other MPs to enable citizens to hear updates from parliament and share their views on them.

Education: The Education Centre at the **UK Parliament** runs bespoke programmes for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and home-educated children alongside its offer for mainstream schools. Dedicated 'Quiet Days' are offered for SEND groups throughout the year, and home educators can book in for tours and workshops where home-educated children can engage with each other and receive the same curriculum enrichment as mainstream school groups (see our Guide on Education Programmes for more examples).

Consultation: The Constitution of **Vanuatu** provides for consultation of the Malvatuma Council of Chiefs (MCC) "on any question, particularly any question relating to land, tradition and custom, in connection with any bill before Parliament".²² The MCC successfully lobbied for an amendment to the provision in 2013, changing the phrasing from "may

be consulted" to "must be consulted". This is an example of ongoing negotiation and experimentation between parliaments and Indigenous communities.

Participation: The e-Cidadania programme at the **Brazilian Senate** enables citizens to submit proposals for new laws. While most submissions are made through the online platform, the project team also runs 'Legislative Workshops for Good' to empower disabled people to make proposals. Following a workshop in 2023, a legislative proposal suggesting that the government support the creation of vegetable gardens in schools and social assistance units was taken up by a senator and turned into a bill (see our Guide on Petitions and Citizens' Initiatives).



*See our Guide on
'Education Programmes'
for more information*



*See our Guide on
'Petitions and Citizens'
Initiatives' for more
information*

²¹ The Outreach team is part of the parliament's Department of Public Engagement, which was established in 2023. Along with the Outreach unit, the Department consists of units for Visits & Tours and Education & Internal Communication, and a Citizen Bureau which manages engagement with civil society organisations and think tanks.

²² [Constitution of Vanuatu](#), Section 30 (2)

CASE STUDY

UK Parliament Outreach Team community workshops

The Outreach Team in the **UK Parliament** runs a year-round programme of workshops with schools and community groups, including underrepresented groups. The team has Outreach Officers based in each of the twelve regions of the UK who deliver sessions in their respective region.

In 2019 and 2020, the Outreach Officer for the North East of England delivered two accessible workshops with Sunderland People First, a self-advocacy group made up of **adults with autism and learning disabilities**.

The first was an EMPOWER! workshop, a format designed by and for adults with learning disabilities. The second workshop focused on petitions and led to the group submitting a petition calling for the creation of an independent body to monitor the treatment of adults with learning disabilities in health settings. While the petition did not gather the

10,000 signatures needed for a government response, the group's local MP met with them to discuss the issue.

Sunderland People First was subsequently consulted as part of the UK Parliament's Restoration and Renewal programme, which is managing large-scale renovations to the parliament buildings. The group provided input to help the programme ensure that parliament buildings were accessible, inclusive and fit for purpose. Sunderland People First remains part of a wider network of civil society organisations that parliament can call on for advice and contribution to consultations such as those initiated by committees.

Top tips

Consult with the community and/or their representatives to avoid launching an initiative they don't need or want



Ensure that engagement is linked to a parliamentary process



Co-production

Co-production is a method whereby **decision-making power is shared** between participants and institutions in the production of research, policy or service provision. In parliamentary contexts, this might involve the co-production of an education programme with students and/or educators, the co-production of a committee inquiry with affected communities; or the co-production of a parliamentary information resource, such as a guide on parliament for a particular underrepresented group or a podcast aimed at a particular group.

Co-production entails a resource cost, chiefly in terms of **time**. This is because the method requires that all stages of a project are subject to joint development. However, this approach has the potential for enhanced impact, as participants and parliaments have the time for meaningful information-sharing and exchange of ideas, and participants develop a sense of ownership over the project and its results.

²³ See: [Sexual harassment in schools - The Young Women's Movement](#)

²⁴ See: [Barriers to sport and physical activity for young women - The Young Women's Movement](#)

²⁵ See: [Increasing employment opportunities for women from ethnic minorities - The Young Women's Movement](#)

²⁶ See the evaluation: [YWL report 2024](#)

CASE STUDY

Young Women Lead: a co-production approach



Young Women Lead is an annual programme delivered in partnership by the **Scottish Parliament** and the Young Women's Movement. The programme aims to address the underrepresentation of young women and non-binary people in politics through skill development and network-building.

The programme has been running since 2017 and has involved over 125 Young Women Leaders. Regional iterations of the programme are also offered alongside the national programme.

Each iteration of the programme brings together around 30 participants aged 18-30 from across Scotland to conduct an inquiry on a topic of their choice. Since 2017, inquiries have been conducted on sexual harassment in schools,²³ young women's participation in sport,²⁴ and the transition from education to employment for ethnic minority young women.²⁵ Outputs from these inquiries have fed into government reviews and parliamentary committee work, as well as city-level policies.

A 2024 evaluation of the project found that participants appreciated the co-production approach to the inquiry project.²⁶

One participant said:

“It was clear there wasn't another agenda from someone high up saying we needed to focus on certain issues that fit their narrative, we truly had the space to design this together, and it was refreshing to know this was a space where we were the ones making the change.”

Top tips



Allow enough time for co-production – it will take longer



Trial the approach on a small scale before attempting something more ambitious

Section 4: Useful materials on engaging underrepresented groups

- » Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (2022) [Parliamentary Workplace Equality & Diversity Networks](#)
- » Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (2024) [Disability-inclusive Communications Guidelines for Parliaments](#)
- » INTER PARES (2024) [Beyond Numbers: Stories of Gender Equality in and through Parliaments](#)
- » Leston-Bandeira, C. (2023) [Research findings on breaking barriers to engagement with parliaments](#). Blog post and visual summary
- » United Nations (2007) [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) / OHCHR
- » United Nations (2007) [Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)
- » Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2021) [Leadership for Inclusion: What skills and qualities do parliamentarians need to be able to promote inclusive change?](#)

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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