

# How public engagement amplifies parliamentary representation

Cristina Leston-Bandeira

University of Hull

[@estrangeirada](#)

## Abstract:

Parliaments' role of public engagement has recently expanded considerably. Faced with declining levels of trust, parliaments have invested time and resources to new activities focusing specifically on engagement: educational resources, cultural events or training sessions for citizens among many others. This embodies a new role for parliament, besides legislation, scrutiny and representation. Most parliamentary public engagement aims to demonstrate to citizens the symbolic importance of parliament, following a rationale that if people can relate to it, they will trust it. This paper explores whether this new area of activity embodies forms of symbolic representation, where identity and meaning prevail, rather than the representation of interests; and whether they provide for dynamic processes of representative claims. Based on empirical evidence from five European parliaments, we explore whether this new role amplifies the way we perceive parliamentary representation, reinforcing its symbolic elements to the detriment of the accountability understanding of representation; but also whether it is more inclusive.

**Keywords:** public engagement; representation; symbolic representation; representative claims; parliament.

## Introduction

Public engagement has become the buzzword of politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As indicators of political apathy have increased and trust in politics has fallen, efforts to engage citizens into politics have become a standard theme of modern democracy and a central activity for many organisations and institutions. Parliaments are no different. If anything, they have come to portray political disengagement and, therefore, these institutions have been under particular pressure to develop a public engagement strategy. Whilst this is still a slow process for many legislatures, some have taken this responsibility seriously and, over the last decade, we have been witnessing a considerable expansion of parliamentary public engagement. In this paper we reflect on the role played by this new type of parliamentary activity. The development of public engagement takes place in great part because parliaments feel they have to actively engage with the public to offset rising levels of disengagement. But there is an inherent question of whether it makes any difference. Does it address issues of trust and disengagement? And does it change the nature of parliamentary representation? In this article, we focus mainly on this second question: how does parliamentary

public engagement fit with the parliamentary role? In particular, does public engagement constitute an activity of representation? And how does it fit with the wider role played by parliament?

The very essence of parliament is tied to traditional liberal conceptions of representation. We elect so that representatives act on our behalf, typically perceived as acting in our interests. As the legitimacy of representatives to represent our interests is questioned – based on indicators of political apathy and disengagement -, and as our increasingly complex societies become all the more difficult to be represented through aggregate representation, we need to re-consider our traditional conception of parliamentary representation. In this paper we borrow conceptual tools from the constructivist approach to representation to understand the role played by public engagement and whether this adds a new dimension to traditional forms of parliamentary representation.

Our analysis is divided into three parts. We first establish the characteristics of the political and social environment of the modern parliament. Whilst many of our expectations of parliamentary representation are framed by the liberal democratic principles embedded in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, governance and society have changed considerably over the past century. The traditional conception of parliament's role according to the principle of delegated accountability, where representatives decide on our behalf, is insufficient to explain how the modern parliament links society and governance. In this first part we make an overview of key changes affecting the role played by parliament in the linkage between governance and society over time, arguing that we have seen a transition through three different types of parliaments: the Gentlemen's Club Parliament, the Representative Parliament and finally the Mediator Parliament.

We then move on to analyse parliamentary representation beyond the traditional conceptualisation linked to elections and interests, which has dominated the legislative studies literature. We explore the symbolic nature of parliamentary representation, as well as its potential to frame dynamic processes of representative claims which vary according to context. We argue this enables to understand better the full complexity of parliamentary representation, particularly in a modern context where different forms of democracy coexist and the possibilities of interaction between legislature and citizen are much more versatile.

This then allows us to finally explore public engagement as a form of parliamentary representation and its role in the modern parliament, through the use of empirical evidence. We establish first the consistent expansion of public engagement as an increasingly significant activity for parliaments. We then focus on specific activities of public engagement to explore their potential in creating representative claims. Drawing from examples of five specific parliaments, we reflect first on the potential of cultural parliamentary events, followed then by an analysis of outreach initiatives.

This enables us to demonstrate the significance of parliamentary public engagement as a potential tool to strengthen the relationship between parliament and citizens.

### **Parliament's role between society and governance over time: from a Gentlemen's Club to the Mediator Parliament**

Parliament's role has changed over time following transformations in governance and society. Traditionally parliaments are said to play three key roles: legislation, scrutiny and representation; and from these many would argue that first and foremost parliaments exist to give "assent to binding measures of public policy" (Norton, 1992: 1); whether it is to formulate legislation, to scrutinise it or to provide (representative) legitimacy to it, the modern parliament's main purpose is to give assent to legitimised public policy. On top of this, however, since the beginning of the 21st century, the role of public engagement has also developed to a point that it can now be equalled to the other more traditional roles played by parliament. This is expressed in a number of ways, as we shall see below: the creation of new services specific to the delivery of public engagement activities; the investment in new staff specifically focused on the skills of communication and engagement; the development of activities whose sole purpose is to raise awareness and understanding of the institution of parliament; the creation, or strengthening, of processes that integrate the citizen's voice into parliamentary activity, such as petition systems. That is, activities that are not part of core parliamentary business and have one common purpose: to open the institution to citizens.

The modern parliament is expected therefore to play an active role in reaching out to the public and this has consequences in the way representation acts. This is a very considerable change to how parliaments have operated in the recent past, which has been mainly within a political bubble with an insiders' focus, according to the principle of delegation whereby "popular sovereignty is exercised through delegation from citizens to politicians and collective actors" (Müller et al, 2003: 3). The 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal democracy expansion in Europe enshrined the institutional arrangement – with parliament at its core - through which the management and definition of governance are delegated from citizens to political actors and institutions. This institutional arrangement assumes that citizens are only called to participate in the political system every four or five years, when elections take place. However, this principle of delegation has been increasingly questioned, particularly recently by the rapidly rising interest for, and experiments with, participatory democracy (Fung and Wright, 2003; Rosenberg, 2007; Smith, 2009). As participatory democracy expands, the traditional chain of delegation is questioned to give way instead to the integration of citizens in public policy deliberation. This requires a fundamental shift in the way

parliaments operate and their relationship with citizens, and ultimately on how we understand parliamentary representation. Most parliamentary activity is still of course very much an insider's business – between the political class, pressure groups and the media – but there is increasing pressure on parliaments to open up to citizens rather than relying on their *delegated* legitimacy. Although in a very different social context, in many ways parliaments are being called upon to perform roles that were at the basis of their origins.

From occasional assemblies for consultation in medieval times to institutionalised bodies for binding decisions in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, legislatures have had in fact very different functions over time and, crucially, have played differing roles in the mediation between society and governance; this has implications to what we expect of parliamentary representation. In his detailed comparative analysis of medieval parliaments in Europe, Marongiu shows that these predecessors – *curia*, *courts*, *concilia*, *estates* - were developed firstly as occasional public relations reunions, which were “summoned by sovereigns whenever it seemed opportune to ask [secular and ecclesiastical dignitaries] counsel or opinion” (Marongiu, 1968: 45), being also used to publicise special events. As these reunions became more regular and larger, their relevance and formality expanded eventually leading to the new *parlamentums* (Marongiu, 1968: 25). The first parliaments were therefore about communication. As Loewenberg and Patterson said back in 1979, “today's legislatures arose in response to the need of communication among the scattered holders of power in medieval Europe” (1979: 9). But as parliaments became institutionalised and part of the governance chain, their focus shifted to the relationship with the executive and to the function of legislating. Likewise, in the Athenian style of *agora* direct democracy, communication and discussion were a very important element of these gatherings. Parliaments are not new therefore to roles outside the strict remit of law making. Bagehot listed in fact the teaching function as the third function of Parliament, back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bagehot, 1992 - orig. ed. 1867-: 38). What is very different, however, is the context of today's society and the complexity of the role(s) performed by parliament.

It is not merely the fact that we have today a universal franchise – enlarging very considerably the base of potential interest and involvement – but also that our social-demographics and access to information are acutely different, with strong implications for the potential of participation in politics and for our demands on representation. Our advanced industrial societies are characterised by a considerable expansion of access to education and to information (Inglehart, 1990; Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2011). Today's citizens have 24/7 access to information at a click of a button and have the educative tools to critically assess these according to their own needs and interests. As coined by Norris in 1999, today's public is composed of *critical citizens*, who are able to independently make judgements about politics. What is more, we are a much more particularistic

type of society, where citizens combine a multiplicity of very specific identities and experiences, which ultimately shape who they are and their expectations; in short, our societies are composed of much more fluid groupings of people, where dealignment and volatility of political choices dominate (Dalton, 2004) and where, therefore, the aggregation of interests is all the more difficult.

This is a sharply different reality to say 1950s Britain. Then a bill would be introduced, discussed and passed in parliament, with only a few public outputs; perhaps a news item in some broadsheet newspapers. In the meanwhile, perhaps one or two interest groups may have been consulted. Today, before that bill has even been introduced it will quite likely have been discussed extensively already on social media, a multiplicity of relevant interest groups will have put pressure through a variety of means and any citizen will not only be able to watch the debate from the comfort of their home, but also comment it from the ease of their phone's twitter app. Besides this, whereas in the 1950s the commentary upon legislation under discussion would probably be seen as the realm and expertise of specific representative groups (such as parties), today virtually every topic is open to comment by many of us. Thanks to the information we have access to, we feel we can have an informed view on many matters – in particular those that touch us personally. This has implications for the role played by parliament, in particular parliamentary representation, and how well accepted this is.

Since the medieval occasional gatherings, parliament's overall role in society has changed therefore considerably, as has society itself. The medieval consultative reunions led eventually to what we name as the *Gentlemen's Club Parliament*. The Gentlemen's Club Parliament was a small, elitist, gathering of dignitaries, with a very fluid and close linkage to government. This is a time of very limited franchise; those voting are those also in power. Parliament is mainly about the big debates and minimal legislation, with no real linkage to the rest of society. This would eventually lead to the *Representative Parliament*, from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to its end. This parliament is concomitant with the development of mass parties and the expansion of the franchise. Governance becomes mediated by the party system, and parties become the key political actors. As governance grows, legislation becomes increasingly a task for the Executive, and parliament turns more and more towards scrutiny and representation. Political participation takes place mainly through elections, every four or five years and parliament acts according to the delegation model. Parliamentary representation is closely associated to the electoral chain and specific interests; it is in effect mainly embodied into the notions of substantive and of descriptive representation (Pitkin, 1967).

With the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the *Mediator Parliament* emerges. The focus shifts from the executive to citizens. Legislation, scrutiny and representation are still key functions of parliament, but besides

this legislatures are expected to actively reach out to the public. It is the development of the public engagement function, whereby parliament needs to be seen as open and transparent, but also enabling citizens to put forward their views on governance. Parliament becomes the most exposed political institution and assumes a key role as mediator between society and governance. The external environment of the Mediator Parliament is characterised by an informed citizenry and expanding forms of participatory democracy. Despite all talks of political apathy, we have today a very active citizenry; if they can act and speak for themselves, their perceptions of those elected to represent change inevitably.

### **Representation in the Mediator Parliament**

The modern legislature – the Mediator Parliament - exists therefore in a very different environment from the one that led to many of the institutional arrangements that still today justify parliament's legitimacy. A fundamental principle of this institutional arrangement is the basis of representative democracy: that parliaments are elected on the principle that representatives will act on behalf of their represented. This is the fundamental principle that provides legitimacy to parliamentary decisions. However, in the context of the modern parliament, the primacy of this representative legitimacy is increasingly being questioned; both through indicators showing disapproval of the institution's performance (e.g. low voter turnout, low trust in parliament) and through the expansion of non-representative forms of democracy. This has two major implications: to re-think representative democracy as the main form of government and to reconsider the meaning of parliamentary representation. Reflecting on this helps us understand why parliamentary public engagement has developed, but also the potential role it can play as linkage between public and parliament.

### ***Parliamentary representation beyond interests and elections***

The view of representation as a mechanism through which the interests of a community are expressed has dominated the legislative studies literature, despite other strands of political science having developed considerably more complex and varied conceptualisations of representation. The typical debates emerging from the legislative studies literature centre on the discussion about the style and focus of parliamentary representation, or about the match between descriptive and substantive representation. The debate on the style and focus of representation has revolved around the old Burkean dilemma between the trustee and delegate type of representation – e.g. the extent to which a representative should be guided by their own judgement or by their representatives' interests (Birch, 1971; Eulau et al, 1978; Judge, 1999; Thomassen, 1994; Thomassen

and Schmitt, 1999). Put in modern terms, should an MP act according to their own understanding of a specific issue (trustee), or should they follow the view of their party (delegate). Another key focus has been whether better descriptive representation leads to better substantive representation. Adopting parts of the framework established by Pitkin's (1967), this literature has focused on the idea that the more representatives mirror the social characteristics of the society they represent, the more likely they are to be able to represent their interests effectively; a line of reasoning followed through in particular by the literature on gender and politics (Phillips, 1995; Celis and Childs, 2008).

The legislative studies literature assumes therefore a specific understanding of representation: the representation of interests; the debate being merely about the extent to which representatives actually represent specific interests and the extent to which there should be some individual judgment from the representative in this process of representation. One way or another, it is about representing interests. However, we argue that this is a narrow way of understanding parliamentary representation, particularly in the context of modern society where it is so much more difficult to identify homogenous groups of interests. Political theorists have demonstrated that representation is a far more multifaceted activity; we argue this is equally applicable to *parliamentary* representation.

Not only are voters today moved by far more particularistic issues, but there is also considerable cross-over between different groups of people. For example, let's consider Jane living in Hull. Her social-economic profile puts her into a working class grouping. But she has many more other identities beyond class. She is also a working single-mum of a teenager and she enjoys going out on a Saturday night with the girls when possible. Then there is Sarah, who lives in Bristol; her social-economic profile places her in the upper middle class. She is also a working single-mum of a teenager and also enjoys going out on a Saturday night when possible. These two women may have very different day-to-day routines and very different socio-economic profiles. But any issues relating to how women cope with work and family, or teenagers, will be of interest to both. Incidentally, they are also both Welsh originally and have a very strong Welsh identity. In different contexts, they may be moved by different types of issues for different purposes; or they may simply connect to a specific idea, because overall they identify themselves with this. In short, it would be very difficult to fit them into one box category at all times; they are moved by specific and different issues according to each specific context.

Besides the focus on "interests", parliamentary representation has also been conceptualised predominantly in relation to the key moment of elections, often taken as the only constitutive element of the representative relationship between MP and constituent. As David Judge states, "in such an account the period between elections is something akin to a participatory black

hole” (2014, p.135). Elections provide the legitimacy for the representative link and the key mechanism to demonstrate approval or disapproval of representatives. And yet, in today’s world of considerable expansion of non-representative forms of democracy, the once isolated importance of elections has waned considerably. This is not because elections do not matter; they are obviously the main mechanism supporting our democracies, but simply because of the expansion of the many other forms of participating in democracy (and ironically perhaps also because of the many more elections we vote in today also).

Pateman’s much celebrated 1970 book on *Participation and Democratic Theory* emerged already then as a recognition of “the impetus of demands (...) for new areas of participation to be opened-up” (p.1). Since then these calls and actual forms of participation have multiplied and become all the more complex. If for a long time participative democracy was essentially about informal politics taking place in parallel with formal politics, this has changed considerably more recently. See, for example, the expansion of locally based participatory budgets since the 1986 pilot in Porto Alegre, Brazil or of mini-publics style of deliberation (Fung and Wright, 2003; Rosenberg, 2007; Smith, 2009; Geissel and Joas, 2013). The expansion is real, well documented and increasingly integrated into formal political institutions. If elections matter, what happens in between increasingly matters too. This has consequences for our understanding of parliament and its representative role.

Cain, Dalton and Scarrow’s 2003 book utilised extensive empirical evidence to demonstrate that pressure for political reform had already led to systematic reinforcement across advanced industrial democracies of new modes of democracy, namely direct and advocacy democracy. The expansion of advocacy modes of democracy is of particular significance for our discussion of parliamentary representation, as it illustrates how conceptualising this relationship only around the elective chain increasingly misses out a considerable part of modern politics. Advocacy forms of democracy include situations where “citizens directly participate in the process of policy formation (...) although the final decisions are still made by elites.” (Cain et al, 2003, p.11); such as petition systems and public hearings – both of which have expanded considerably across parliaments. Importantly, however, the authors show that the expansion of these forms of democracy has been **concomitant** to equal expansion of representative democracy, reflected, for example, in the creation of new representative institutions (eg. devolution). Likewise Saward has shown that different models of democracy (deliberative, direct, participatory, representative) should not be seen as separate and opposing systems (2001, p.363; 2010, p.162). Young goes as far as to say that “representation and participation are not alternatives in an inclusive communicative democracy, but require each” (2000, p.132). The expansion of new modes of democracy does not question therefore the significance of



representative democracy and of the elective chain as a key form of ensuring political legitimacy, but they do indicate that we need to widen considerably our understanding of representation, parliament and democracy, if we are to fully grasp the role of the Mediator Parliament.

### ***Symbolic representation in a dynamic process of claims***

The legislative studies' traditional perspective of parliamentary representation has therefore been very limited, focusing on a one-dimensional view of a relationship between principal and agent around the formal electoral chain and centred on interests. This however is insufficient not only to understand the complexity of representation, but also crucially to understand parliament's representative role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in particular how public engagement fits with this. For a more useful understanding of public engagement in the Mediator Parliament, we need to return to Pitkin's initial framework and linger on the concept of symbolic representation, as well as borrow the conceptual tools developed by the constructivist approach to representation; the so-called 'constructivist turn' to political representation, which shifts its understanding from "a rational individualist to an environmental or contextual account of preference formation" (Disch, 2011, p.102) and in particular Michael Saward's concept of the 'representative claim' (2006; 2010). As Saward himself put it: "We need to move away from the idea that representation is first and foremost a given, factual product of elections, rather than a precarious and curious sort of claim about a dynamic relationship" (2006, p.298).

In her seminal essay (1967), Pitkin provided us with a fourfold conceptualisation of representation: as (authorisation) formalistic, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive representation. Whilst descriptive and substantive representation are the main concepts adopted from her framework, together with an acceptance of the formalistic, it is symbolic representation that we wish to linger on. Both descriptive and symbolic representation relate to representation as *standing for* the represented; descriptive specifically refers to the extent to which representatives mirror the characteristics of their represented – that is the representative does not act for specific interests, representation takes place because there is a 'likeness' between represented and representative (1967, p. 61). Symbolic representation also refers to standing for, not on the grounds of likeness but of symbols, which by their presence make the meaning of representation be present (1967, p. 92). Pitkin gives the example of a flag: in itself, just a piece of cloth, but it can engrain (make present) a whole nation's identity. Symbolic representation does not limit itself, therefore, to either the acting for specific interests or to an electoral link between representatives and represented.

Symbolic representation offers in fact a crucial dimension to understanding the relationship between parliament and citizens in the Mediator Parliament context. It relies essentially on subjective meanings given to representation. Applying this to parliament, it could encompass symbols such as the legislature's building, the idea of democracy or a collective sense of historical heritage. As Pitkin says 'since the connection between symbol and referent seems arbitrary and exists only where it is believed in, symbolic representation seems to rest on emotional, affective, irrational psychological responses rather than on rationally justifiable criteria' (1967, p. 100). By focusing on symbolic representation, we centre on connections that allow for identification between citizens and parliament; from this perspective, it does not matter how parliament is performing or our evaluation of this performance, what matters is whether citizens identify parliamentary symbols of representation and the affective meanings they give to these. If parliament has little or no visibility, then it is unlikely that the public may be able to develop any subjective meanings about parliament other than what the media may occasionally portray. Likewise, however, tools such as new media could provide for an opportunity to affect symbolic representation more effectively, by giving a more direct portrayal of the institution and raising its visibility; just as a simple parliamentary education activity may create a unique opportunity to tap into young people's development of symbolic representation.

Representation is therefore also about connections, as demonstrated by Young (2000: p.128-132). It embodies social intersubjective processes of meaning-formation between different actors, according to variable contexts. Although parliamentary representation has developed associated with the liberal principles of accountable government subject to the scrutiny of the people, representation is not just about accountability; it is also about irrational connections between the represented and the present, e.g. representatives. Through their contemporary analysis of representation, Brito Vieira and Runciman reinforce this argument by explaining representation as a form of identification, a way of sharing a common identity (2008, 80-81). The expansion of advocacy democracy tools such as petitions also demonstrates that parliamentary representation cannot be perceived merely from the perspective of representatives acting for the interests of represented; those same represented can now also present their own interests directly to parliament. What is more, as shown above, the advanced industrial society citizen encompasses such a specialised, volatile and complex multitude of interests that it is effectively not possible for all citizens to be represented at all times within a parliamentary institution. We need therefore to address the relationship between parliament and citizens besides a static one-dimensional representation of aggregate interests; and this is where public engagement can play a role.

Saward's constructivist approach to the representative claim (2010) gives us further tools to understand parliamentary representation and how this fits with public engagement. Political representation is just one of several nested domains of representation that are interwoven in a complex system that makes up our society, and it encompasses cultural and aesthetic types of representation (2006; 2010). Saward sees representation as a dynamic process, context driven and shaped, of "claim-making" and "claim-receiving" that goes beyond formal and public institutions, where claims of representation are made and received (or rejected) in a variety of contexts, which are not bound by the electoral link. Each time "claims" may take different meanings, according to the subject and object of representation, but also to the ideas being portrayed in the act of representation. According to this perspective, representation doesn't take place only when, for example, an MP may be putting a question to the government about fisheries on behalf of the main industry of their constituency, but also when the same MP may be visiting the local market; likewise a representative claim takes place when a school group visits parliament and is guided through that visit by a parliamentary official; just as a representative claim happens when someone puts forward their views about a specific piece of legislation, be it through a formal call for evidence or through informal means such as a comment on Twitter. As Saward puts it: "If, as I have suggested, representation can be seen as a widespread process of claim-making and claim-receiving, within and outside formal political structures, then representation "happens" in a great variety of spaces and scales in any society" (2010: p.161).

The dynamic value of the representative claim fits very well also with the profile of the modern voter where fragmentation and particularistic interests predominate. Rather than fitting into homogenous groups, we move between different groups and identities, led by different issues on different occasions and in different contexts. It also helps us to step away from a fossilised understanding of parliamentary representation, which determines the value of a specific action according to how legitimate or democratic it is; representation does not happen only in a formal and electoral situation, "a representative claim is a claim to represent or to know what represents the interests of someone or something" (Saward, 2010: p.38). And the symbolic value of that claim may be the main element that matters, rather than an actual rational output or a formal electoral basis. The meaning and identity given to a specific representative claim, and whether they connect with it, may often be what touches people. The higher levels of satisfaction that specific MPs enjoy (as opposed to MPs in general – Leston-Bandeira, 2013a: p.257) indicate the value of representation as connections – constituents are able to identify more clearly with these representatives and to establish connections through identification.

The value in adopting the representative claim approach to understand parliamentary representation is that “seeing representation as a dynamic process of claim-making, and not, for example, as a static fact of electoral politics, can help us to make sense of great changes in the daily politics of representation.” (Saward 2010: 3). It can help us understand why participatory and representative modes of democracy are not opposed, for instance, but complementary; or why the public connects with politics through issues, rather than formal party politics and why this is not a problem of modern democracy, it is simply a characteristic. Just as it can help us understand that the Mediator Parliament needs to be understood through a wider lens than the traditional delegation one. It also takes us away from the dominant focus on individual representatives and their constituencies, recognising the role played by other representative channels, such as the institution itself.

It has therefore important consequences for how we understand parliamentary public engagement. This is dismissed by many as marginal, as it does not constitute the main business of parliament. Indeed it is not in itself about the development of core parliamentary business, but it is by no means marginal. Public engagement performs important functions of representation and connectivity. The recent expansion of public engagement activities may in fact contribute towards a shift in the nature of our modern parliamentary representation. This shift does not question the traditional electoral value of representation, but it *expands* it to a much wider and flexible form of representation, which may be expressed in many more activities than those strictly linked to a formal representation of interests, or indeed beyond the MP-constituency link. In the following section we explore how parliaments have developed public engagement and how this provides for ‘representative claims’ opportunities.

## **Parliamentary public engagement and representation**

### *The development of public engagement since the turn of the century*

Parliamentary public engagement has expanded greatly since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many parliaments have had a public engagement role for some time, but this consisted of very small units focused on specific activities, often disconnected and not necessarily tagged as public engagement services; it encompassed visiting services, for instance, or the provision of information about the institution, namely with a focus on education. But these were very limited sectors of parliamentary activity and with little, if any, expansion over a long period of time. The difference over the last decade and a half is the professionalization of this role, through a consistent and strategic investment in this area. This investment is reflected in the creation of new services

specifically responsible for the delivery of the engagement agenda and in the significant development of new activities.

The UK case is a good example to illustrate this expansion. Until 2006/07, public information was managed by the Library Department (House of Commons, 2007: p.102); since 2007/08 this has been renamed into the Department of Information Services (House of Commons, 2008: p.92), recognising the expansion of its outward-facing services besides the provision of information and research for internal purposes. In 1999/00 the Library Department comprised 203 members of staff (House of Commons, 2000: Annex B); ten years later it had expanded to 307, of which 104 worked specifically in the outward-facing information services.<sup>1</sup> What is more, two of its main directorates today are wholly focused on outward-facing services, with one of these being named Public Engagement (House of Commons, 2013: p.46).

As political disengagement became more prominent in the public discourse, parliaments took on an active role in promoting services specifically focused on engaging with the public. As the Directors of the Information Services of the UK Parliament have explained, the main focus used to be “on those people who approached Parliament seeking information” with the new emphasis being “to take Parliament to all citizens across the UK” (Pullinger and Hallam-Smith, 2010: p.13). It is a shift from a passive assumption to an active role beyond traditional parliamentary business. This change of focus in the UK Parliament happened from 2005 onwards. But the start of this process overall can be dated to 1999, with the election of the new Scottish Parliament. This parliament was introduced on the basis of four founding principles,<sup>2</sup> which still prevail very strongly today. One of these principles is to be open and encourage participation and, as a result, this parliament has had a strong public engagement agenda right from its inception (Leston-Bandeira and Bender, 2013b: p. 293).

But these are merely two examples, many other parliaments have followed similar paths since the turn of the century, as two recent international reports have shown (IPU, 2012; Hansard Society, 2011). Of course this development is still very uneven across different legislatures, but there is a clear overall path down the route of developing public engagement as a major role of parliament. Table 1 summarises the different purposes encompassed within public engagement, illustrating the type of tools and activities that parliaments have been developing. At the most inactive, parliaments may simply just provide (very limited) information about the institution, but, at the most active, institutions, such as the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, offer almost all that is listed in Table 1.

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<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Official, (2010, 4 November). Email message to author.

<sup>2</sup> *Report of the Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament - Shaping Scotland's Parliament*, December 1998, accessible at: [http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/PublicInformationdocuments/Report\\_of\\_the\\_Consultative\\_Steering\\_Group.pdf](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/PublicInformationdocuments/Report_of_the_Consultative_Steering_Group.pdf) (accessed 11 June 2014).

**Table 1 – Public engagement objectives and respective parliamentary tools and activities**

<b>Public engagement objectives</b>	<b>Tool / Activity</b>
Access to the institution	Visits; Access to public galleries; Information on how to contact the institution;
Provision of information	Parliamentary website; Social media; Leaflets and other printed material; Reports on parliamentary activity; Use of different formats (text, video);
Transparency	Availability of information in open data format; Availability of information on all aspects of parliamentary activity; Availability of information on the governance of the parliament; Availability of information about MPs, including salaries, expenses and conflicts of interest; Information searchable by MP and type of activity;
Education	Programmes specifically developed for schools, children and young people; Games; Training programmes for adults; Training programmes tailored to specific groups; Facilitation of Young people’s parliament; Programmes focused on the parliament’s historical and cultural heritage; Material produced specifically for different types of audiences;
Listening	Calls for evidence; Calls for questions and ideas; Social media; Analysis of comments given by the public; Analysis of indicators on access to parliamentary website, social media etc; Feedback given to public; Analysis of feedback received; Crowdsourcing of ideas for legislation and scrutiny; Participation in outside events;
Problem solving broker	Forums for citizens to raise issues; Guidance on which action to take for specific issues and problems;
Integration with community groups	Parliamentary sessions held outside the actual institution; Development of parliamentary activity through non-parliamentary channels;
Integration of participatory tools	Petitions; Public consultations; Public consultation and discussion of specific legislative initiatives; Crowdsourcing of ideas for legislation and scrutiny;

Facilitation of deliberation	Active moderation of web forums/consultations Active processing of information received;
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There is therefore a clear expansion of public engagement. Although we still lack evidence about its actual impact on the public, increasingly engagement is becoming an important activity for parliaments. In the next section we analyse the constitutive elements of parliamentary public engagement to identify its potential in performing a representation role.

### *Representative claims in public engagement*

In order to explore how parliamentary public engagement provides opportunities for representative claims, we will focus on five specific parliaments: European, French, Portuguese, Scottish and UK. The selection of these five parliaments follows a wider project on the management of parliaments' image,<sup>3</sup> but they also include interesting variation to make them worthwhile case studies for the purpose of this analysis. These case studies include legislatures very active in developing engagement (European, Scottish and UK), although not necessarily focusing in the same areas, and two less active legislatures (French and Portuguese) (Leston-Bandeira and Bender, 2013b). For the purpose of this analysis we focus on cultural and outreach types of activities.

Even before the current development of engagement, parliaments have had traditionally a strong focus on cultural events. After all, these institutions constitute in their own right important cultural and historical outlets; however, this has become a far more complex enterprise now. Activities include visits to the institution<sup>4</sup> and exhibitions, which all five case studies organise. Visit numbers have increased in all five institutions,<sup>5</sup> sometimes thanks to extra types of tours put on offer. For instance the Portuguese parliament now has visits focused on political activity, other on the historical print of the building, plus Saturday openings, democracy day opening, European heritage day, etc.<sup>6</sup> The European Parliament inaugurated its own Visitors Centre in October 2011 specifically aimed at supporting this type of activity,<sup>7</sup> and the UK Parliament has a planned Education

<sup>3</sup> *Managing Parliaments' Image*, ESRC (RES-000-22-4072): <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/project/36DED02A-B852-4269-AC2F-D653E9AB72E0> (accessed 11 June 2014).

<sup>4</sup> By 'visits' we refer to guided tours. It does not include attendance of parliamentary sessions.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews with parliamentary officials in all five institutions between November 2010 and January 2013, plus annual reports of respective institutions.

<sup>6</sup> Assembleia da Republica, Visitas Guiadas, [www.parlamento.pt/EspacoCidadao/Paginas/VisitasPalacioSBento.aspx](http://www.parlamento.pt/EspacoCidadao/Paginas/VisitasPalacioSBento.aspx) (accessed 11 June 2014)

<sup>7</sup> *The Parliamentarium*: [www.europarl.europa.eu/visiting/en/visits/parlamentarium.html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/visiting/en/visits/parlamentarium.html) (accessed 16 June 2014).

Centre to be able to host expanding numbers of school visits.<sup>8</sup> A guided tour of a building may hardly seem an act of representation. However, if we view it in its context and question its constitutive elements, it becomes apparent that claims of representation do take place.

Saward established five elements constituting a representative claim within the following general form: “A *maker* of representations (‘M’) puts forward a *subject* (‘S’) which stands for an *object* (‘O’) that is related to a *referent* (‘R’) and is offered to an *audience* (‘A’).” (Saward, 2010: p.36); the object is the idea being represented. To apply this we need to focus on a specific activity. For example, the *Nuit Blanche*<sup>9</sup> initiative of the French National Assembly. This consists of a contemporary art exhibition open to the public held in the parliament’s building at night. In 2012 this had 5000 visitors on its one night opening.<sup>10</sup> The event provides for endless representative claim opportunities, open to different interpretations according to the experience of each member of the public attending the exhibition. By organising this event, the Assembly is putting forward ideas of democracy for the public to relate to, even if led by non-political purposes. One representative claim may be the National Assembly (M) utilising its own space to share contemporary art (S) as evocative of perceptions of power (O), to the public (A). Members of the public attending the exhibition may accept or reject this claim, or may see it as evocative of other political ideas such as the French Republic’s history or, still, slavery abolition as members of the public commented in 2012.<sup>11</sup> This is not a political event and the audience is not having their interests directly represented, it is still nevertheless a representation moment. It is symbolic representation where the space, objects in exhibition and the environment, create a situation the public relates to.

The other four parliaments organise similar events and exhibitions, some of these with only tangible links to politics, or at least formal, institutional, politics. The Scottish Parliament’s recent Great Tapestry of Scotland exhibition is one example,<sup>12</sup> as is its long-standing Festival of Politics, which includes a wide range of activities from music, theatre to debating over two days in August.<sup>13</sup> The UK Arts in Parliament programme in the summer of 2012 to coincide with the Olympics in

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<sup>8</sup> The Parliamentary Education Centre, [www.parliament.uk/education/visit-parliament-with-your-school/faqs-and-subsidy/the-education-centre/](http://www.parliament.uk/education/visit-parliament-with-your-school/faqs-and-subsidy/the-education-centre/) (accessed 16 June 2014)

<sup>9</sup> *Nuit Blanche* is an Arts festival taking place at night, usually held in Autumn or Winter. Several major cities across the world have held this festival, with Paris hosting it since 2002: [www.paris.fr/pratique/culture-patrimoine/nuits-blanches/p6806](http://www.paris.fr/pratique/culture-patrimoine/nuits-blanches/p6806) (accessed 11 June 2014).

<sup>10</sup> LCP Assemblée Nationale, *Nuit Blanche: 5000 personnes ont visité l’assemblée nationale*, [www.lcp.fr/videos/reportages/140919--nuit-blanche-5000-personnes-ont-visite-l-assemblee-nationale](http://www.lcp.fr/videos/reportages/140919--nuit-blanche-5000-personnes-ont-visite-l-assemblee-nationale) (accessed 11 June 2014).

<sup>11</sup> [www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/evenements/nuitblanche2012/index.asp#!prettyPhoto\[iframes\]/0/](http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/evenements/nuitblanche2012/index.asp#!prettyPhoto[iframes]/0/) (accessed 12 June 2014)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/visitandlearn/74240.aspx> (accessed 12 June 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Festival of Politics 2013, <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/visitandlearn/12512.aspx> (accessed 12 June 2014).



London is another example. Taking place over several weeks, it included dance, art, poetry and music, all within the Palace of Westminster. These types of events have little to do with what we perceive to be representation, but they do all create representative situations where the institution provides for opportunities for citizens to relate to various ideas symbolically incorporating parliament. As Loewenberg states “although it would appear to be the most abstract aspect of representation, symbolic representation finds a specific application in the contribution that legislatures make to nation building, to giving a set of separate communities the sense that they belong together as a nation” (Loewenberg, 2011: pp.33/34).

Parliaments organise this type of event mainly to promote understanding of the institution and likeness – the assumption being that if citizens can relate to the institution, they will be more likely to be receptive towards it;<sup>14</sup> but there is scope to say that these constitute also a type of representation. These events provide for opportunities for the development of subjective and intersubjective representations of the institution of parliament; and subjective representations can play as strong a role in influencing people’s perceptions of politics, as rational political outputs can (if not stronger). Following exactly this principle, Fielding has demonstrated, for instance, the potential impact fiction can have in determining people’s views of politics, even if based on fictional narratives, rather than real ones (Fielding, 2014). There is limited information about direct impact of this type of initiative, but one survey by the UK Parliament on the effects of visits showed a change towards more positive perceptions towards the institution (Pullinger and Hallam-Smith, 2010: p.12).

Whilst they embody symbolic representation moments, one could argue that this type of event does little, however, to reach beyond a very small group. They are more likely to attract a non-political public than a political event would, but it probably constitutes mainly of a well-informed public who are less likely to feel disengaged by the very fact they actively participate in this type of initiative. Attendance is also likely to be mainly from a public residing in, or near, the capital (or city hosting parliament), particularly in the case of a large polity such as the European Union, in the case of the European Parliament. Digital engagement can help address this gap, something the European Parliament has embraced as a key focus of their engagement strategy (Leston-Bandeira, 2014). Or subsidised trips to parliament, as the UK Parliament has introduced for school visits,<sup>15</sup> which have led to an increase in participation from state, and outside London, schools (Pullinger and Hallam-Smith, 2010: p.11). But we are still probably focusing on a restricted public, likely to look for these opportunities in the first instance. Whilst this type of symbolic representation does not substitute

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<sup>14</sup> Idea mentioned repeatedly by parliamentary officials in interviews in the five parliaments, from November 2010 to January 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Transport subsidy - <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/education/docs/Visiting-Parliament/Education-V2/schools-transport-subsidy.pdf> (accessed 16 June 2014).

other more traditional and formal forms of representation, it could help make parliamentary representation more inclusive if it attracted a public less likely to engage with parliament. This is where outreach activities provide for interesting insights.

By outreach we refer to activities where parliament actively seeks out to engage community groups more likely to be classed as outsiders. Both the Scottish and UK parliaments have been proactive in developing outreach. The Scottish Parliament has had programmes working with communities outside parliament for some time. As early as 2004, this parliament set as a priority to “move beyond the usual suspects (...) trying to work with community groups, to reach those people who would normally be disengaged from the democratic process”, as explained by its then Director of Access and Information (Modernisation Committee 2004: Ev20-24). This work carried on through a variety of initiatives such as the community partnerships project, where parliament worked with specific groups over several months on ways to develop capacity to participate in parliament’s work<sup>16</sup> and since 2012 through a more integrated approach with committee work and the Parliament Days, when the legislature gets out of Edinburgh.<sup>17</sup> The UK parliament has also recently invested considerably in outreach, namely through its network of regional officers who work with local community groups and organisations; for instance Barnardo’s, Dimensions UK or the Citizens Advice Bureau.<sup>18</sup> This activity takes place face-to-face, as well as online in close association with dynamic digital communities such as WeNurses or MoneySavingExpert.<sup>19</sup>

Again these activities do not constitute traditional forms of representation – although some sessions include participation of actual representatives, the purpose is not the representation of specific interests for an identifiable output, it is simply about raising awareness and understanding of parliament; though some may eventually lead to actual participation in a parliamentary discussion of specific interests.

Focusing again on a specific activity allows us to identify representative claims encompassed in this activity. For instance, the coverage on Twitter of the debate on the Melbourne declaration on diabetes by the UK parliament’s outreach team and the community led online platform OurDiabetes, June 2014.<sup>20</sup> One representative claim may be the Parliament’s Outreach Team and Our Diabetes<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Official (2011, June), Scottish Parliament, Interview with the author.

<sup>17</sup> Parliament Days - <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/gettinginvolved/55307.aspx> (accessed 19 June 2014)

<sup>18</sup> See for example North East outreach ([www.parliament.uk/get-involved/outreach-and-training/parliament-outreach-by-region/north-east/](http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/outreach-and-training/parliament-outreach-by-region/north-east/)) or the sessions listed under the Training the trainer programme ([www.parliament.uk/get-involved/outreach-and-training/training/](http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/outreach-and-training/training/)) (both accessed 16 June 2014).

<sup>19</sup> [www.wenurses.co.uk/](http://www.wenurses.co.uk/) ; [www.moneysavingexpert.com/](http://www.moneysavingexpert.com/) (accessed 16 June 2014).

<sup>20</sup> 18 June 2014, [www.our-diabetes.org.uk/2014/06/diabetes-parliament-tweetchat/](http://www.our-diabetes.org.uk/2014/06/diabetes-parliament-tweetchat/) (accessed 16 June 2014).

(M) utilising twitter to discuss views about the possibility of a global network of parliamentarians for diabetes (S) to express the challenges in supporting diabetes patients (O), to politicians, health professionals, opinion makers and the public active on twitter (A). Again, this is not specifically a traditional moment of representation, but representative claims do take place very clearly.

What is particularly interesting about this claim is that its constitutive elements are in great part outside of the institutional chain of representation. It is mainly led and developed by a specific community group (those affected by diabetes) and within their own terms and space; still, the context is channelling parliamentary representation, which thanks to this more flexible approach is reaching public who would not normally follow a parliamentary debate. An analytics report of the event showed that 55 contributors participated in the discussion, with a potential reach of the hashtag of 372,734 people (Cragg, 2014). A traditional parliamentary debate would have struggled to achieve the reach and diversity of people engaging, had it not been for this online event; as the report noted, participation came “from diabetes consultants and diabetic specialist nurses to patients with diabetes and parents of those with diabetes; from Cardiff and Vale UHB (who is one of the largest NHS organisations in Wales - a surprise given health is a devolved power!) to JDRF UK (the largest Type 1 diabetes charity); to diabetes device manufacturers and everything in between. We also had Jamie Reed MP (Shadow Health Minister) and Adrian Sanders MP (who moved the debate) engage in the chat.” (Cragg, 2014).

This type of activity developed in association with active community groups have great potential to result in further engagement and actual participation in the political process. People engage though issues and ideas, not because they want to be politically active. This is just one example, but it illustrates the development of representative claims in varied contexts. It also demonstrates that the modern parliament is a Mediator Parliament, where representation takes place well beyond the formal chain of delegation. This dynamic process of representative claims allows for flexible and inclusive forms of representation, though they also require considerable resources to be taken through effectively. Parliamentary officials often talk of how outsiders become insiders once they have been through a public engagement activity; the problem may be however that there are far too many outsiders and it remains unrealistic to think that these activities can encompass it all.

## Conclusion

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<sup>21</sup> Our Diabetes defines itself as: “(...) a community led, community focused platform that enables people with diabetes to be empowered, educated and supported in their condition.” [www.our-diabetes.org.uk/about-us/](http://www.our-diabetes.org.uk/about-us/) (accessed 16 June 2014).

This article has sought to understand the consequences of public engagement for parliamentary representation. Public engagement is an expanding and increasingly professionalised and complex activity for parliaments. Whilst we still lack consistent evidence evaluating the impact of public engagement, we wanted to explore its potential as parliamentary representation. By combining different theoretical approaches and utilising empirical evidence we have sought to understand the role played by public engagement, refuting the idea that this constitutes marginal activity. The modern parliament is a very different institution to the one conceptualised by the liberal democratic tradition, coexisting with a radically different society and citizenry. Public engagement is simultaneously a consequence of this new environment, as well as a part solution to understand the modern parliament and its mediating role between governance and society.

As we have shown, from the elitist and closed Gentlemen's Club parliament of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when no interaction with society at large was expected, we moved to the Representative Parliament in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when linkage with voters was performed through the chain of representative delegation, to recently starting to develop towards the Mediator Parliament. The environment of the Mediator Parliament is characterised by a questioning of traditional forms of representative democracy, expanding forms of participatory and advocacy types of democracy, as well as an informed and critical citizenry which encompasses both a politically disengaged public and a highly participative one; crucially, this is an environment where interaction between the legislature and citizens takes place every day, not every four/five years. In this context, public engagement plays an important part in the interface between parliament and citizens. However, the legislative studies literature has not developed the tools yet to fully understand the consequences of this new dimension of parliamentary activity. This is why we employed the conceptual tools developed by the 'constructivist turn' approach to political representation.

Understanding parliamentary representation through its context and ideas, rather than its delegated process and legitimacy, allows a much more comprehensive understanding of the role played by the Mediator Parliament. It expands considerably the remit of parliamentary representation and its potential to forge links between the institution and the public; and this is where parliamentary public engagement activities can play an important role. This becomes particularly clear once we apply Saward's concept of 'representative claims'. Through the analysis of empirical examples of public engagement activities, we demonstrated the development of a variety of representative claims.

Whilst public engagement is not the core business of parliament, it does perform important linkage functions. In particular, it provides space for the development of informal types of representative claims, which are far more flexible and dynamic than a formal parliamentary act

would be. This has the potential to draw a public who would not usually engage in a parliamentary representation activity, as well as to amplify considerably its impact. Some public engagement activities have a strong symbolic nature, which has the potential for very wide ranging representative claims being open to different intersubjective interpretations according to each participant's context. Whilst some of these activities are not very inclusive, our analysis also showed that some parliaments have found ways to develop public engagement that promotes participation from a wider public. This can work particularly well when developed through community groups and away from the parliament's actual location – although it also requires considerable resources and a new way of perceiving parliamentary business. Public engagement performs therefore an important representative role. This does not substitute by any means the traditional delegated representation. It simply amplifies it, enabling a far more positive insight into the relationship between parliament and citizens.

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