This evidence deals primarily with how engagement is understood within the current political landscape, as well as exploring citizens’ political attitudes. In addressing this question, the author defines engagement as a consistent and meaningful dialogue between an institution and individual(s). The institution in question is the UK Parliament, a key mediator of citizen engagement. Recommendations for future improvements are centred around an informed citizenry and more effective use of existing resources. A list of referenced texts is provided at the end of this document.

Executive summary

1. It is important to be realistic about citizens’ political attitudes and aspirations
2. It is inaccurate to equate voter turnout with democratic engagement, with no consideration of why citizens vote (or why they do not vote)
3. Engagement is a two-way form of communication, which necessitates establishing what constitutes ‘success’
4. Low levels of citizen trust in political institutions – and a lack of satisfaction as to how they run – is not a new phenomenon
5. The gap between approval of Parliament in theory and approval of Parliament in practice risks creating a landscape of inevitable dissatisfaction
6. Public expectations of politicians are complex and often contradictory
7. These contradictions are often exacerbated by reactions to political scandals
8. Populism (which is often fuelled by political scandals) represents the antithesis of meaningful engagement
9. Some level of opposition to parliamentary politics is inevitable, given the divisive nature of politics and the non-partisan status of parliaments
10. Education and political literacy are essential to improving engagement
11. Social media is a useful tool for improved discussion, despite the continued emergence of ‘echo chambers’
12. Parliaments must modernise their approach to web technology, moving away from ‘broadcasting’ and towards meaningful discussion
13. Physical accessibility is both a symbolic and a practical consideration within discussions of democratic engagement

Interpretations of engagement

1. It is important to be realistic about what citizens actually want from politics; specifically, what citizens are prepared to commit in terms of time and energy. Contemporary citizen engagement is characterised by many academics as a desire
for influence rather than involvement, with clearly-defined points of entry and exit. Moreover, Ruth Fox (Director of the Hansard Society) has previously argued that participation is often visible only when citizens perceive their own self-interest to be in jeopardy (2009, p.675-676).

2. Clearly, any discussion of citizen engagement must consider what citizens want (and don’t want) from politics. However, academic studies frequently over-simplify these discussions by diagnosing widespread apathy or disengagement based on voter turnout figures (implying that low turnout and low engagement are synonymous). In reality non-voting is far from self-explanatory. Just as the act of voting can be highly symbolic and expressive, to refrain from voting can be equally meaningful. It is perfectly possible for a citizen to be engaged, yet not vote. Conversely, a citizen may vote and still be profoundly disengaged. Engagement is a consistent and meaningful dialogue between an institution and individual(s). It is not encapsulated by voting, or by any other single act.

3. The term ‘dialogue’ is a crucial point of consideration, since engagement is a two-way form of communication. Parliamentary openness is not engagement. Nor is citizen participation. Engagement is defined by the dynamic between the two. It is important to differentiate engagement from broadcasting; from a “monologue in disguise”, presented as if it were a conversation” (Coleman, 2004, p.115). Parliament’s efforts at communicating to citizens must be met with citizen participation in order to constitute real engagement. It is therefore important to establish a realistic quantifier of ‘success’ in this regard.

Citizens’ attitudes to politics, politicians and institutions

4. The Hansard Society’s most recent Audit of Political Engagement notes an encouraging majority (73%) in citizens’ recognition of Parliament as essential to UK democracy; however, only 30% reported satisfaction with the actual running of Parliament (2017). Ipsos MORI data shows that dissatisfaction with Parliament is not a recent phenomenon, having been consistently evident between 1995 and 2010 (2011). In terms of trust, data from the Eurobarometer shows a similar trend:
Levels of trust in the UK Parliament, based on survey information from the European Commission's ‘Eurobarometer’, indicating ‘distrust’ as a consistent majority view (2016)

Uniformly low levels of trust in political institutions contributes to a sense in which approval of Parliament is mostly theoretical. In other words, Parliament’s importance is widely acknowledged, but its performance is seen to consistently fall behind.

5. This raises the following question, linked to what Pippa Norris refers to as a ‘democratic deficit’ (2011): is there an agreeable point of compromise between citizens’ democratic aspirations and the abilities of political institutions to serve them? Matthew Flinders warns of an environment in which citizens’ demands eclipse what the political sector can realistically deliver (2012; 2012), rendering public disappointment inevitable. There is a case for arguing that the ‘tipping-off point’ for this democratic deficit has already been overstepped.

6. This situation is compounded by the often contradictory demands put on politicians as public figures, particularly the difficulty of balancing constituency work and parliamentary responsibilities (Norton, 2013; Norton, 2002). The current political landscape (facilitated by broadcast media) dictates that politicians be relatable yet professional, personable yet elite. To quote Stephen Coleman, they must be “ordinary enough to be representative, while extraordinary enough to be representatives” (2005, p.15).

7. The difficulty of meeting these expectations is made more difficult by the fallout from events such as 2009 expenses scandal. As Steven Fielding points out, the 2009 scandal’s significance lay not only in its revelations, but also its fitting “very easily into an already-established narrative in which politics and corruption were close bedfellows” (2011, p.227). Also significant was that the “desire to politically tar and feather the sinners” did not materialise into proactive engagement (Fox, 2009, p.676). This links back to the characterisation of ad-hoc democratic participation in Paragraph 1.

8. This particular thread of political opinion – automatically aligning ‘politics’ with the ‘corrupt’ mainstream establishment – is one of the hallmarks of populism. Whether populism is actually gaining momentum in the UK is an open question, but its relevance to engagement is precisely in terms of its dismissal of ‘informing’, in favour of pre-existing ‘common sense’ (Stoker, 2006, p.137), and in its “forcing [of] voters to make a choice about what they think when they do not think” (Chwalisz, 2015, p.18). Populism therefore represents a contrasting mindset to that of informed, meaningful engagement.
Recommendations for improvement

9. It is worth reiterating that politics is inherently divisive. Parliaments are political institutions that must define themselves as impartial, therefore occasional criticisms of ‘facelessness’ – even ‘irrelevance’ – are to be expected. Parliament’s administrative responsibilities are extremely difficult to negotiate smoothly, given the definitively unstable nature of politics. As mentioned in Paragraph 1, it is important to be realistic about prospective improvements.

10. Strengthening Parliament-public connections necessitates improvements in education and the spread of political literacy. Failing to do so undermines balanced reflection, opening the door to populism (see Paragraph 8). In this context academia itself can be a source of criticism; “self-referential as well as self-reverential, and often unreadable for anyone but a specialist” (Riddell, 2010, p.552). A more open working practice between academics and parliaments is required, in order to foster greater political literacy and strengthen engagement.

11. Another key resource for improved engagement is social media. As a tool, social media is conducive to the informal, fluid means by which (particularly younger) citizens engage with contemporary politics. However, it is important to consider social media alongside the points on ‘dialogue’ made in Paragraph 2 & 3. Social media discussions often demonstrate an ‘echo chamber’ effect, in which communicators seek out sources of agreement rather than challenge, jeopardising the extent to which a meaningful dialogue has been achieved (or even sought out).

12. Parliament still utilises web technology primarily as a broadcast medium rather than a discussion format. In this sense the potential of social media remains unrealised, as it is employed as an extension of existing communication techniques rather than a means for innovation. A cultural change is required in order to curb this ‘top-down’ approach. A number of parliamentary committees and departments have begun to acknowledge the importance of building forums through social media, which must be encouraged as a practice.

13. Accessibility and openness are not just cultural concerns; they are inherently practical. John Parkinson notes that in many cases, the symbolic ‘opening up’ of legislative buildings is followed by a reduction in the amount of administrative work that takes place within them (2013, p.444). Responsibilities then transfer to other (equally inaccessible) locations (Parkinson, 2013, p.444). In this case we can see a distinction between engagement as a premise and as a practice. Parliament’s ongoing Restoration and Renewal project will serve to shed additional light on this distinction. The physical accessibility of Parliament is both a useful metaphor for the accessibility of engagement, and a key practical consideration.
Sources and suggested texts


