



Parliamentary points of entry.

GPG's *Guide to Parliaments series* explores the key processes and functions of parliaments around the world. The Guide highlights the main elements affecting design and delivery of effective parliamentary strengthening projects. This note describes:

- The most important parliamentary interlocutors and their roles.
- Common internal governance structures found in parliaments.
- The work of parliamentary committees.

Introduction: Who controls parliament?

In most parliaments there is no single identifiable leader.

Parliaments exist in order to bring together elected representatives with different and often opposing viewpoints about how the country should be run, and to allow these competing voices to be heard. As such, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify one person who would represent the view of parliament as a whole.

So who speaks for parliament as an institution? This note looks at the four most significant points of entry for understanding and engaging with parliamentary leadership. They are:

1. The Presiding Officer or Speaker is the formal chair of parliament, a Member of Parliament elected by fellow MPs to be the highest authority in a parliamentary chamber.

2. The Secretary-General or Clerk usually has overall responsibility for the administration of parliament. In many countries, they are an expert in

parliamentary procedure, but in others their role is more akin to a chief executive.

3. The political parties. The leader of the majority party/governing party is likely to have considerable influence on the running of parliament. But the main **opposition party** will also have a powerful voice. And within all the major parties the Chief Whips will be responsible for controlling and shaping their MPs' behaviour.

4. The Committees. Parliamentary committees bring together MPs from many parties to do the job of scrutinising legislation, holding government to account and ensuring the effective running of parliament. Committees tend to become widely recognised sources of policy expertise, and the Chair, and possibly vice-chairs and rapporteurs, will exert influence on the parliament as a whole.

However, there are several groups with a say in how parliament is run.

1. Speaking for Parliament? The role of the Presiding Officer.

The **Presiding Officer, President or Speaker** is the formal chair of parliament and is normally a Member of Parliament elected to this role by fellow MPs, though in some cases they may be nominated by a monarch or chosen by a political party.

Status.

The presiding officer can be considered the highest authority in a parliamentary chamber and is usually a key interlocutor for parliamentary support programmes. As the head of the institution, they will wish to be aware of any links between the parliament and external bodies. Building

Contents.

Introduction: who controls parliament? (Page 1.)

1. Speaking for Parliament? The role of the Presiding Officer. (Page 1.)

2. Keeping the show on the road: Internal structures and administration. (Page 2.)

3. Political parties and the Loyal Opposition. (Page 4.)

4. Committees: where the real work is done. (Page 5.)

5. Conclusion: Where and how to engage with parliaments. (Page 6.)

+44 (0) 207 549 0350
gpggovernance.net
hello@gpggovernance.net

a relationship with the incumbent and their office is therefore a key step in the early stages of a project, with the aim of securing the presiding officer's support for (or at least consent to) any proposed activities with parliamentarians.

Powers.

The Speaker is always an influential figure in parliament, but the extent of their actual powers varies. Among their roles is to chair, keep order and call MPs to speak in debates, make rulings on parliamentary procedure and discipline Members who break the rules. Speakers also represent their chambers in formal and ceremonial situations and often chair various internal governance or administrative bodies. In addition, they may have powers to call and postpone sessions of parliament, determine the agenda, and exercise a casting vote in the case of a tie.

Politics.

Equally, the Speaker cannot always be assumed to play a neutral role within the institution of parliament. In some countries, their role is expected to be carried out in a politically impartial manner. Although elected as an MP with a party label, once they become Speaker, they resign from their party and abstain from party political issues, without a regular vote in Parliament (other than a casting vote in the event of a tie), though they continue to deal with constituency issues. Elsewhere, however, the election of the Speaker is largely determined by the majority party. As a result, the Speaker is in practice a leading voice of the party in power, speaking in debates and taking part in voting, while also representing the whole House ceremonially.

Deputy Speakers.

Most parliamentary chambers have a number of deputy speakers who stand in when the Presiding Officer is not available. Some chambers elect them; others agree panels from which they are drawn; or they may be determined by party political affiliation reflecting the balance of power in the chamber. In some cases, they may have their own specific duties, such as being responsible for debates on public finance. Depending on the extent of their powers and responsibilities, deputy speakers may also be key interlocutors for parliamentary support programmes.

2. Keeping the show on the road: Internal structures and administration.

Compared to the size of a typical government, with numerous departments and a large civil service, parliaments are small organisations. However, the structures of parliamentary administrations tend to be complex. They have both political and non-political elements, with elected politicians taking senior roles in some aspects of the administration and public servants leading in others. Parliaments often create governing bodies in the form of committees or bureaux, bringing these key people together to make decisions on how parliament should be managed and run. A simplified diagram of parliamentary administrative structures can be found below (this diagram only suggests the balance of administrative power, not political power, in parliaments). Within this general structure, there will be significant variations in each parliament, but there are invariably administrative staff in key positions who can play an influential role in parliamentary strengthening.

Secretary General or Clerk.

The most important administrative figure is likely to be the **Secretary General or Clerk**, the senior administrative official who leads a team of (usually) non-political staff to ensure the day-to-day operation of parliament and execute the decisions of the political leaders and bodies within the institution. The Secretary General is often an experienced parliamentary specialist, but they also have a significant general management role to perform. In many parliaments, whilst politicians come and go according to the outcome of elections, staff spend their whole career in parliament, providing a valuable element of continuity and acting as a collective institutional memory.

As the ultimate management authority for the permanent staff of parliament, the Secretary General or Clerk will be responsible for all the parliamentary directorates and a large number of staff performing a range of different roles. These include internal functions such as IT, media, security and building maintenance, but will also include all the services provided to MPs to support the scrutiny of legislation, committee work and the running of the plenary session.

Political parties.

Parties often nominate representatives to the Bureau or Commission, but each party will also have internal decision-making structures to reach a common view or party line. There are also inter-party routes for dialogue and the resolution of conflict before matters come to the bureau, known in the UK as the 'usual channels'.

Funding and auditing procedures.

The arrangements for agreeing and disbursing parliament's budget are often complex and vary considerably. Responsibility for this process may rest with the parliament itself, the government, or an independent body.

Executive Bureau or Commission.

Highest decision-making body in parliament, usually made up of MPs, and often chaired by the Speaker. Membership may include representatives chosen by the Speaker personally or nominated by political parties. May include ex officio members such as chairs of certain committees.

Advisory Committees.

Other committees of MPs usually exist to advise the Commission or Bureau. These may include committees to oversee various aspects of the functioning of parliament (administration, finance, services, etc.). Other common structures are Liaison Committees (a committee composed of the Chairs of each parliamentary committee) and Permanent Bureaux (which may include a nominee from each political party or bloc).

Secretary General or Clerk.

Acts as the Chief Executive of parliament. Ultimately responsible for the permanent staff of parliament, delivery of core services and accountable for expenditure.

Facilities: IT, Catering, Security.

Procedural Services: Legislation, Oversight, Committees.

Information Services: Broadcasting, Outreach, Library.

Finance & Human Resources.

International Relations.

Individual MPs and their offices.

In most cases, MPs may choose and employ their own staff and advisers. They may receive an allowance for these purposes, or resources may be provided personally or from their party.

These include:

Committee staff.

Within the administration, there are specialist offices and staff serving particular parliamentary functions. **Committee staff** are assigned to support legislative, oversight and investigatory committees. Ideally, each committee should have a dedicated staff member, with additional staff providing research and administrative support as needed. Well-functioning committees are characterised by a high degree of trust between staff and MPs, with Members providing political leadership and decision-making, and staff trusted to oversee administrative arrangements and supply detailed policy expertise. The smooth operation of a committee also depends on a good working relationship between its Chair and its principal Clerk or Secretary.

Research Staff.

Information services for MPs, sometimes known as the parliamentary **Library**, consist of researchers who can provide policy analysis and support, usually to both individual parliamentarians and committees. They are often also responsible for maintaining an archive of parliamentary material and other documents of interest.

Financial Scrutiny.

Some parliaments also employ staff with economic qualifications to provide policy support in dealing with **finance and budgets**. An increasingly common structure is a legislative budget office (based on the US Congressional Budget Office) tasked with analysing the government's fiscal plans, and in particular the annual budget, but more wide ranging units also exist to provide committees and MPs with financial analysis of policy proposals.

MPs' personal staff.

MPs normally also employ personal **assistants, researchers or advisers** to perform a range of tasks, including providing briefings, writing speeches and handling constituency matters. These staff are not normally politically neutral as their role is to support the MP as a politician. Thus their pay and conditions may exist outside the purview of the Secretary General. Depending on their level of resources, the political parties themselves may also employ central staff to manage their affairs in parliament (see next section).

Parliamentary officers.

Many countries have **independent office holders** or public **watchdogs** affiliated to

parliament and charged with overseeing an aspect of government activity to ensure its proper conduct. Their remit often includes advising on public services, monitoring the efficiency and economy of provision, receiving and investigating public complaints, and monitoring and enforcing standards and ethics regimes (for more details about these, see GPG's *Guide to Parliaments* note on Parliamentary Ethics). The link between these offices and parliament is designed to underpin their independence from government and may include parliamentary involvement in their appointment and dismissal (including by pre-appointment and confirmation hearings) and a specific and often dedicated parliamentary committee to which the office reports and which approves its budgets and oversees its activities. The staff of these offices are usually independent of the civil service and are sometimes directly employed by parliament.

3. Political parties and the Loyal Opposition.

Parliamentary strengthening programmes have frequently avoided political parties. But the actions of the political parties will have a direct and powerful impact on the effectiveness of a parliament. The parties are the main vehicle for negotiation in parliament, determining parliamentary business and finding compromises on legislation. The parties will be the main source of advice and guidance for their MPs during the election campaign and once they are elected. The parties are the principal route to a political career in most countries, and thus have a significant hold over their MPs' behaviour.

Blocs, caucuses and party groupings.

In multi-party systems, party groupings are the basis of a good deal of the practical organisation of parliamentary politics. This is often enshrined in formal mechanisms, such as allocating membership of committees in proportion to the party's representation in the chamber as a whole; balancing the number of speakers in debates from each party or group on the same proportional basis; and sometimes providing an entitlement to resources such as offices, staff or funding.

In many countries, the only way that parties and their MPs can receive financial or personal staff support, or be members of parliamentary committees, is by organising themselves in parliamentary groups. Where

there are considerable numbers of parties represented, members of different parties sometimes ally themselves together to form a party bloc or caucus.

The parliamentary parties or blocs will sometimes have a small staff to support the operation of the party in parliament, and will often elect MPs to positions within that structure.

Political Party Whips.

In addition to these formal mechanisms, the cultural forces of party membership are equally influential. The political party will often control many forms of patronage for their members, such as employment of staff, constituency resources and access to a political career in parliament (and government, for the majority party). These sources of control (and others) are used to secure compliance and discipline amongst MPs.

Party discipline tends to be strong in Westminster systems, where a vote against the government can cause the government to lose its authority, and weaker in presidential systems, where it is more common for members to cross party lines on a given vote, perhaps supporting the interests of their local area or following the policies of a minority group within their own party.

Minority Parties.

A central factor in a multi-party democracy is the presence in parliament of one or more political parties that did not win the election but still have seats in parliament. These parties form the **opposition** to the government. The extent to which they enjoy a degree of authority and opportunity to promote their own favoured policies and agendas depends on a number of factors, including:

- Whether the executive is based in parliament or separate from it.
- Whether a single party normally wins a majority of the seats in parliament, or the system more typically results in the formation of coalitions or minority governments.
- Whether the culture is one of strong executive government by one party or based more on consensus between the parties.

In some parliaments, opposition groups may be able to appoint chairs of committees,

request interpellations and regularly ask questions of the Government (see the GPG *Guide to Parliaments* note on Parliamentary Processes for more information on the parliamentary procedures used to hold the Executive to account). In others, they may not be able to introduce legislation or may be limited in the time they have to speak in a debate.

4. Committees: where the real work is done.

Committees are to be found in every parliament. While the debates and decisions in plenary sessions are usually more visible and more often reported in the media, and so come to the notice of the public, much of the practical work of a parliament actually takes place 'behind the scenes' in committees, and many politicians would say that their most important work is done here.

Committee powers.

A parliamentary committee is essentially a group of parliamentarians appointed to undertake certain specified tasks on behalf of the parliament as a whole. Their basic function is to prepare material for plenary sessions so that the full chamber can make informed decisions. Some parliaments (for example the US congress) give their committees a great deal of autonomy while others retain more powers in the plenary. Generally, however, the parent chamber either refers matters to committees or empowers them to choose issues to examine. Committees then gather information, develop expertise and seek the evidence that is needed to underpin well-informed decisions on legislation and other aspects of public policy.

Committee tasks.

Among the tasks commonly delegated to parliamentary committees are the detailed scrutiny of draft legislation, the oversight and scrutiny of government activities, interaction with non-parliamentary organisations and the general public, and the running of parliament itself. Committees can be permanent or time-limited, established to examine and revise draft legislation or investigate particular issues or the general policy areas of particular departments of government. There are sometimes joint committees of both chambers in bicameral systems. GPG's *Guide to Parliaments* note on Parliamentary Processes explores the procedures relating to the appointment and work of parliamentary committees in further detail.

Key committee figures.

The **Chair** of a committee has the lead role in guiding its work and determining its priorities. The choice of chair is sometimes pre-determined (either by party affiliation, government choice, or selection by the presiding officer) or they may be elected by the parliament as a whole, or by the committee itself. Some committees also appoint **Vice Chairs, Rapporteurs** or **Sub-committee Chairs**. Often, membership of a committee is linked to party affiliation, so a number of seats on the committee are reserved for each political party or parliamentary bloc, in proportion to the number of seats they have in the parliament as a whole. Committees should also have a dedicated secretariat including a **Secretary** or **Committee Clerk**, who is normally the first point of contact for the committee, as well as specialist staff in the relevant subject area.

Committees and public engagement.

Whilst the general public may be more aware of proceedings in the plenary chamber of parliament, the most effective public engagement can take place with committees. Parliamentary committees have the time to examine government policies and their effects on citizens in detail. They may hold hearings with particular interest groups or campaigners to hear their views and visit areas of the country to gather first hand evidence. An effective committee builds up significant subject expertise and also operates on a consensual, cross-party basis. For these reasons, their recommendations, whilst not always accepted by government, carry weight and can have a significant influence on the direction of public policy. Citizens and civil society groups who wish to engage with parliament often find that committees are the most effective route and public satisfaction with parliament has been found to be significantly higher amongst those who have had contact with parliamentary committees than in the population as a whole.

However, this is not always the case. Although committee meetings in many parliaments are open to the public, some only allow their committees to hold closed sessions and limit their role to a liaison function between MPs and Ministers.

All-party groups.

Many parliaments also have a number of informal all-party friendship groups of MPs that work in a similar way to committees, but have no formal status within the parliament. These are often centred on a common

interest in a subject (for example, a sport or a business sector). These groups are generally seen as effective ways in which parliamentarians can inform themselves about specific subjects, respond to outside concerns and have direct contact with expert external audiences. Groups which promote contacts and dialogue between MPs in two countries are also common and are valued by parliamentarians as an important supplement to diplomatic communications between countries.

The funding and administration of all-party groups is sometimes provided by external individuals or organisations, which can give rise to allegations of bribery or insufficient transparency. There are also some risks of confusion with formally constituted committees. This has led some parliaments to establish registers of all-party groups requiring them declare external sources of funding and other assistance.

5. Conclusion: Where and how to engage with parliaments.

This note has provided a short summary of the main points of entry for those wishing to engage with parliaments. It has focused principally on the pattern of administrative power with a parliament, and how the organisation is run. We have only touched on the political dimensions of parliamentary functioning. Subsequent *GPG Guide to Parliaments* notes will explore in more detail some of the themes that emerge from this analysis. However, the key theme of this note, and all of GPG's work with parliaments is that parliaments offer multiple points of entry. Understanding the main leadership roles is the first stage in plotting a parliamentary programme, but each strategy needs to be informed by a detailed understanding of the context and power dynamics in each parliament.