



How Parliaments Work: Parliamentary Processes and Procedures.

GPG's *Guide to Parliaments* series explores the key processes and functions of parliaments around the world. The Guide highlights the main elements relevant to the design and delivery of effective parliamentary strengthening projects. This note describes the most common parliamentary processes and procedures of interest to those involved in parliamentary development, including:

- How the work of parliament is scheduled and organised.
- How parliament reaches decisions by passing motions.
- The legislative process.
- The main mechanisms for parliamentary oversight of the executive, including questions, interpellations and ministerial statements.
- The operation of parliamentary scrutiny committees.
- Representing constituents' interests.

1. What is debated and when? The parliamentary timetable.

The way parliaments organise their work varies, but they normally operate within long, medium and short term structures.

The long term.

General elections provide the long term boundaries and the period between general elections is often referred to as a **Parliament**. Before a general election takes place, parliament is **dissolved** until the election provides newly mandated

members to form the new parliament. Most parliaments have **fixed terms** – generally of four or five years. Some, however, renew a proportion of their membership – often a half or a third – more frequently, usually every two or three years. In most countries a parliament can be dissolved earlier than its fixed term, for example if the government of the day loses a vote of confidence.

The medium term.

Most parliaments are divided into a number of legislative **sessions**, between which they are **prorogued**. While a parliament is prorogued, the legislature is still constituted (no election takes place and Members of Parliament retain their seats). Nearly one in five chambers, however, sit continuously, with no formal sessional break during the life of the parliament. The sessions in some countries last for more or less a year, while elsewhere their duration is only a few weeks and there can be several in a year, sometimes with lengthy breaks between. Legislation often has to be passed within a single session, though many chambers have provision to carry over legislation from one session to another.

The short term.

Within each session, parliamentary chambers have a pattern of daily sittings, often with meetings on fixed days of the week and breaks in between, when Members can concentrate on constituency work or take holidays (these are usually

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called recesses or adjournments, some have fixed hours of sitting each day whereas others are more variable. Parliamentary calendars are also often divided between plenary sittings and meetings of parliamentary committees or party groups.

2. Setting the Agenda: Who decides what parliament will debate?

Most parliaments have a daily **agenda** or **order of business** setting out the subjects to be debated each day and the decisions the parliament will be invited to take. The **business** of the parliament on future days may also be announced in advance, to a greater or lesser degree. The agenda is normally decided through a combination of items prescribed by the **rules of procedure** (see below) and items added at the discretion of various individuals and groups in parliament, including the Presiding Officer, the government and the political parties or blocs.

Business prescribed by the rules.

The rules of procedure may specify that a minimum amount of time, or specific days in the parliamentary calendar should be set aside for certain procedures (for example, asking questions of Ministers, hearing petitions from the public or debating reports from committees). They may also allocate a certain amount of time to particular groups (which may be divided proportionally among the political parties or blocs in parliament or given to individual parliamentarians to decide). Within the broad parameters set by the rules of procedure, the exact business to be taken each day will need to be decided. In some parliaments, this falls to the Speaker whereas in others it is the responsibility of the Executive.

Business Committees and Parliamentary Bureaux.

Many parliaments have established a specific body tasked with determining the agenda, in the form of a Business Committee or Parliamentary Bureau. This brings together the key players involved in running parliament, including the Presiding Officer and/or their deputies, representatives of the Government and representatives of the political parties or blocs (and sometimes others, such as committee chairs) to set the agenda. Whilst the business to be debated may be a decision of the committee or bureau as a whole, in most parliaments their role is

essentially consultative and the Presiding Officer or Government retains the ultimate authority to decide what will be debated. More information on the roles and individuals involved in these processes can be found in GPG's *Guide to Parliament* note on Parliamentary Points of Entry.

3. Playing by the rules: Parliamentary rules of procedure, Standing Orders or Bylaws.

In order to operate effectively, parliamentary chambers have rules of procedure, sometimes called standing orders, internal regulations, rules of order or bylaws. These are often considered to be the backbone of a well-functioning parliament and help define its character by describing the duties and the rights of its Members, the way in which business is carried out effectively and fairly, identifying the key elements of the organisation, and establishing ways of managing the chamber's work. Rules of Procedure generally cover a number of aspects of parliamentary work and organisation, including:

- Convening of Parliament.
- Appointing a Presiding Officer and governing bodies.
- Agenda setting and speaking time.
- The procedure for passing legislation.
- The rules of debate.
- Conciliation between two houses in a bicameral system.
- Mechanisms for scrutiny of the government.
- Financial procedures.
- Definition, rights and roles of political party groups.
- The mandate and organisation of committees.
- Petitions.
- Relations with other bodies.

Making the rules.

Drawing up rules of procedure can be contentious, not only because they are often quite technical, but also because (for example) they need to provide a balance between the rights of majority and minority parties and groups, and between efficiency on one hand and the desirability of detailed scrutiny of new laws and the work of government on the other. They are also a way in which a parliament can demonstrate its democratic values to the public. Many different approaches are taken, reflecting the diversity of parliamentary structures found internationally. Some are quite brief, and

allow for considerable discretion by the Presiding Officer. Others are very detailed and try to provide guidance in almost any situation that might arise. Rules that are set out some parliaments' rules of procedure are, elsewhere, specified in a country's Constitution.

Understanding the rules.

Even the most detailed Rules of Procedure are unlikely to cover every eventuality and most are supplemented by rulings from the Presiding Officer or custom and practice that has developed over a period. Some parliaments have manuals that bring together and explain the rules of procedure and detail of how they have been implemented in practice.

Breaking the rules.

The **Presiding Officer** and/or their deputies is usually responsible for ensuring that the rules of procedure are followed in plenary sessions (during committee proceedings this responsibility normally falls to the **Chair**). Parliamentarians can raise a **point of order** during debate if it appears to them that the rules of procedure have been broken, for example, if the Member of Parliament who is speaking is not addressing the subject of debate or has used offensive language. Normally, the Presiding Officer or Chair rules on a point of order, but their ruling can be challenged in certain circumstances, for example if the majority of parliamentarians believe it is incorrect (in some parliaments appealing the Chair's decision is common practice, but in others this is not allowed, or is rare and represents a serious challenge to their authority). More information on what happens to parliamentarians who have been found to break the rules can be found in GPG's *Guide to Parliaments* note on Ethics.

4. How parliament takes decisions: debates, motions and votes.

Conduct of debate.

Parliaments are essentially deliberative bodies where debates are held in a more or less adversarial fashion before a decision is taken. The Presiding Officer normally has the role of calling parliamentarians to speak during debates, either choosing the order at their discretion or according to a pre-determined speakers' list. All parliaments have rules for the conduct of debates, to balance the wish to ensure that all views are heard, including minority opinions, with the need

for business which has clear majority support to be completed in a timely way. Common rules include:

- Time limits on speeches. These may vary depending on how many parliamentarians wish to participate in a debate; or may differ for Ministers, committee chairs, leaders of political parties/blocs and ordinary Members of Parliament.
- Dividing the number of speeches allowed in a debate between political parties/blocs according to their proportions in parliament.
- Rules against repetition or irrelevance which aim to ensure that parliamentarians address the subject at hand and do not prolong debate needlessly.
- Rules requiring politeness and courtesy and that all speeches are heard with respect.
- Rules preventing the use of props or reading out written material.
- Limits on the number of times a parliamentarian can speak in a single debate.
- A 'quorum' (minimum number of parliamentarians who must be present) in order for debate to take place.

Filibustering: a parliamentary tradition.

Filibustering is a term used to describe attempts by MPs to make very long speeches in order to keep debate going until after any deadlines for decisions have been reached, thus preventing a decision from being made or delaying it to a future date. Sometimes referred to as **talking out** a Bill, the filibuster is seen by its proponents as an important check on the misuse of power, by fending off decisions supported by the majority but deeply resented by a minority in parliament. By contrast, others see it as a frustrating and ultimately purposeless waste of valuable parliamentary time which unreasonably stops the majority party from governing effectively.

Motions and amendments.

A motion is a mechanism used by parliaments to take decisions. A motion is normally a sentence expressing an opinion or endorsing a course of action, which parliament can debate, amend and then accept or reject.

Example of a motion for debate:

- » The motion proposes that parliament agrees with the Government's decision to build new roads and thinks

that the first road should go to the North of the country.

- » An amendment is proposed to delete the word 'North' and replace it with 'South'.
- » There is a debate and vote on the amendment. If it is accepted, the motion now proposes that the first road should go to the South of the country.
- » At the end of the debate, there is a vote on the motion (as amended). If the motion is carried, it becomes a **resolution** or **order** of parliament.

There are many different types of motion, including **non-binding** or **advisory** motions which express parliament's views, but the government can ignore if it chooses, **binding** motions which require action, and **procedural** motions relating to the conduct of business (for example to postpone or end a sitting or to sit in private). Some types of motion have become particularly well known:

- **Early Day Motions** (in the Westminster tradition) are statements of opinion put forward by individual MPs. They are recorded and published in the form of motions, but not normally intended to be debated. Their purpose instead is to attract support (in the form of signatures) from other MPs to demonstrate the weight of feeling on a certain subject. In other parliaments, this function is fulfilled by written declarations.
- **Motions of Censure** are generally directed at Ministers (but sometimes other public office holders, such as judges) facing allegations of serious wrongdoing. Motions of censure which are passed may result in resignation, either as a formal requirement of the motion, or due to the reputational damage involved.
- **Motions of No Confidence** are directed at the government as a whole. If a motion of no confidence is passed, this indicates that the government can no longer command a majority in parliament. In parliamentary democracies, this can be the trigger for the creation of a new coalition or a general election.

Votes.

Votes are the normal means by which differences of opinion are settled in parliaments. In many cases, a **simple majority** is all that is required for a vote to be won, though there may be higher thresholds for votes relating to constitutional changes, or changes to the procedures of the parliament (commonly, a **two thirds majority**). In the event of a tied vote, many

parliaments make provision for the Presiding Officer to use a **casting vote**. In some cases, they are free to cast this vote as they choose. In others, they are required by the rules of procedure to vote in a certain way. In some, but not all parliaments it is possible to record an **abstention**. Amongst the common ways of recording votes are:

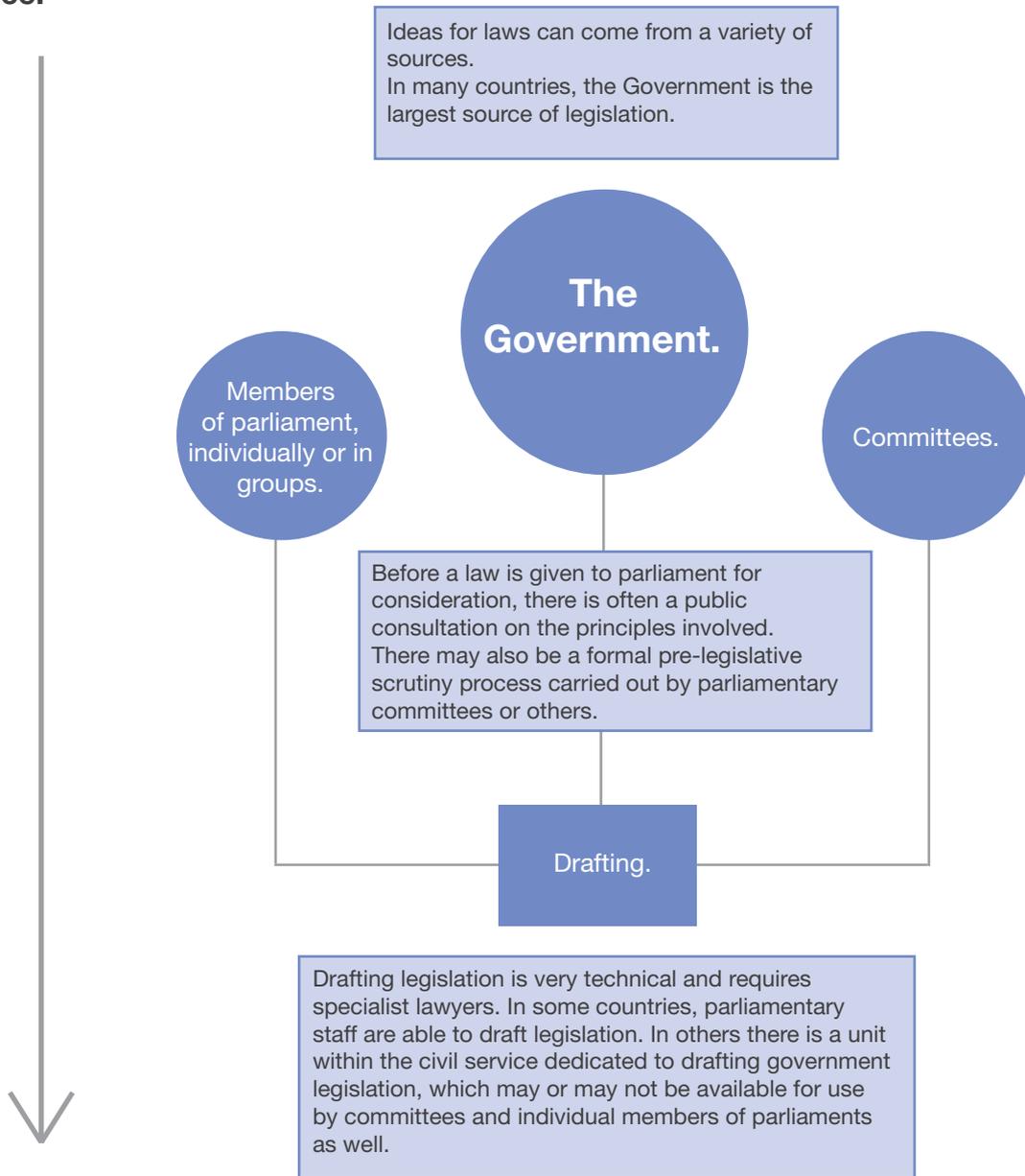
- Vote by **show of hands** or by standing/sitting. The vote is counted by the Presiding Officer and/or officials present in the Chamber.
- Vote by show of **voting cards**. Similar to the above, but it may be permissible for Members to give their voting card to another Member of Parliament to vote on their behalf if they are unable to be present.
- Vote by **roll call**. Each Member's name is called in turn and they signify their vote. This process can be time consuming in large chambers and is sometimes reserved for instances where the Presiding Officer's count is challenged or the outcome is very close.
- **Electronic voting** systems. Often these are linked to a Member's desk or the use of their ID card. Again, rules vary on whether a Member can allow another Member to vote in their place.
- Vote by physically walking through corridors ('**lobbies**') adjacent to the Chamber, as in Westminster and some Commonwealth parliaments. Votes are recorded by officials and counted by Members of Parliament known as '**tellers**'.

5. The Legislative Process.

Passing legislation is probably the most complex process for any parliament, and each parliament approaches it differently. Even parliaments based on the same original model (such as the Westminster tradition) often differ significantly in their treatment of legislation, and have introduced different processes as a result of history or the need to adapt to a specific context. The diagram below provides a simplified schematic guide to the main legislative stages in most parliaments.

The Legislative Process.

Source.



Entry into Parliament.

The first stage is for Parliament to agree to consider the piece of legislation. In some parliaments, this will be a formality, where the Bill is 'introduced' and features such as its title, subject and supporters are specified. In others, there will be a debate and the Bill could be rejected at this stage.

In the case of legislation proposed by individual MPs or groups of MPs, there may be requirements relating to the minimum or maximum number of sponsors a piece of legislation can have, or the number of Bills that can be introduced within a certain time period.

Parliament agrees in principle.



Once the Bill has been introduced, many parliaments hold a debate on the principle of what the Bill is trying to achieve, before they start looking at its exact provisions and wording. If the legislation is not supported by a majority in parliament at this stage, then it does not normally proceed any further.

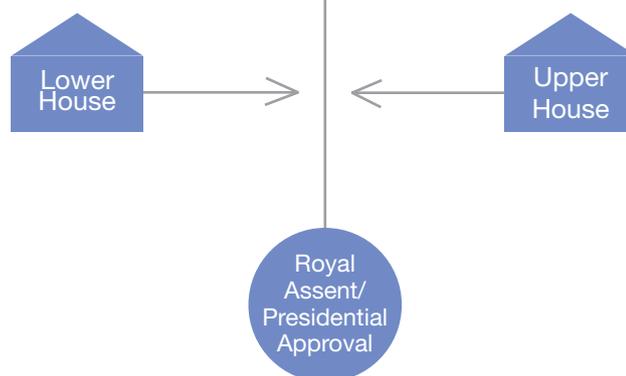
Detailed consideration of the text:

This stage is usually the most complex and varies significantly between parliaments. The text of the legislation is considered in detail and changes (amendments) are made. There are normally rules on the types of amendments which can be made and who can propose them. In many parliaments, this work is given to committees to undertake as it can be very lengthy and would take up too much of the limited time available for plenary sessions. Often, the committees charged with considering legislation have specialist expertise in the subject area and sometimes they undertake their own public consultation.

Final agreement on text.



The final text of the legislation must be agreed in plenary. In bicameral parliaments, both houses must agree the same text. When legislation is controversial, this can be a difficult process. Some bicameral parliaments use formal conciliation committees or joint sittings of the two houses to resolve disagreements. In others, there is a time limit on how long disagreement can continue before the legislation falls, or one house is given the power to overrule the other in certain circumstances.



Review.

The story does not necessarily end once parliament has passed the legislation. There are a variety of processes for post-legislative review, which range from informal reviews (sometimes carried out by parliamentary committees) to determine whether a piece of legislation is being implemented correctly and having the desired effect, to judicial and legal reviews, which in some countries can result in legislation being struck down if it is found not to comply with the constitution or other legal provisions.

Secondary or Delegated Legislation.

The diagram above describes how 'primary legislation' is made (i.e. how a Bill becomes an Act). Most Acts include within them provisions to make 'secondary' or 'delegated' legislation on certain restricted matters without the need to go back to parliament and pass further laws. Instead, when the parent Act is approved by parliament, it is also agreed that a specific person (normally the government) can make or change the law in the future by issuing regulations, executive orders or bylaws which will be subject to a lesser degree of scrutiny by parliament.

Examples of Delegated Legislation.

- » Allowing the fee for obtaining a passport to be changed.
- » Enabling newly created public bodies to be added to an existing list of bodies covered by a certain Act (for example, to give them Freedom of Information or Equality duties).
- » Permitting updates to be made to a standard publication such as the Highway Code or Police Code of Conduct.

Parliamentary procedure for delegated legislation.

Normally, the parent Act will specify what sort of parliamentary procedure applies to its delegated legislation, if any. In some cases, the delegated legislation may be considered by a committee rather than in plenary. In others, it may not be considered at all, or is only considered if a formal objection to it is registered.

How to prevent abuses.

The idea of delegated legislation is to allow relatively minor amendments or updates to the law to be made without burdening parliament with the need to go through the whole legislative process again. However, the process is open to abuse, for example if the scope of the delegated powers is drawn too widely when the parent act is passed. For this reason, parliaments have established scrutiny committees and other bodies to check the nature of delegated powers included in each piece of legislation before it is approved and to report any potential loopholes. Delegated legislation is subject to the same judicial review processes as other legislation and the government could also be challenged on the grounds that it has exceeded the legal scope of the powers which were delegated.

6. Holding the Executive to Account: parliamentary oversight mechanisms.

The relationship between government and parliament varies from country to country, but one of the fundamental roles of parliament is to oversee the Executive, to monitor its performance and to hold it accountable for its actions. There are a variety of oversight mechanisms which enable MPs to do this.

Grilling Ministers: Questions, Interpellations and Statements.

Most parliaments have a mechanism which requires the Executive to respond to questions submitted to it by MPs. Depending on the parliamentary system, Ministers may or may not be Members of Parliament as well, but even if they are not, there are often provisions requiring Ministers to physically attend parliament to answer questions or explain and defend their policies in person.

Questions.

Written questions are asked by Members of Parliament about the work of individual government departments. There are often rules about the form in which the question can be asked, and the time limits within which it must be answered. Written questions may ask for detailed information or statistics, so the answers may be prepared by government officials. However, they are normally answered in the name of the Minister, who is ultimately responsible for their accuracy and content.

Oral questions require attendance by the Minister in parliament to answer questions verbally. The rules for these questions often differ from those for written questions and may be designed to allow a short debate on the subject of the question, and to enable the Member of Parliament asking the question to ask a supplementary question or to comment briefly on the answer.

Urgent questions are allowed in some parliaments, requiring Ministers to attend parliament at short notice to comment on an issue of immediate concern.

Interpellations.

Many parliaments employ an **interpellation** or **interrogation** procedure to scrutinise a Minister closely on a single issue, usually in the form of an hour or half-hour question and answer session in parliament. These may be used where there is suspicion of wrongdoing on the part of the Minister or evidence of a serious failure in the

government department involved. To trigger an interpellation, there is normally a requirement for a certain number of parliamentarians to support the process. Interpellations may culminate in a vote on a motion of **censure** or **no confidence** in the Minister.

Statements.

Ministerial statements enable Ministers to update parliament on their policies and may be delivered in person or in writing. Oral statements by Ministers are often accompanied by time for questions from Members of Parliament. In many parliamentary democracies, there is an expectation that Ministers will announce any policy changes to parliament first (before promoting them in the media, for example).

Confirmation and pre-appointment hearings.

Governments make many appointments of senior public officials, including ministers, the judiciary and the heads of state-run companies, senior military posts and the boards of public bodies. Some of these may be subject to approval by parliament through **confirmation hearings**. These are a regular feature of presidential systems where ministerial and other nominations by the president are subject to scrutiny by parliamentary committees. In some cases, either the relevant committee or the plenary has the right of veto over an appointment. Even where there is no veto, however, the impact of a negative report about a candidate can lead to their withdrawing from the post concerned. While many confirmation hearings are routine, they are increasingly seen as a way in which there can be more transparency in the appointments process for posts which can wield significant political power, helping to protect the public's interests and rights.

Public finance oversight.

Parliaments have a key role in ensuring that the Executive is accountable for the public money it spends, preventing corruption and misapplication of funds. In many states, it is a longstanding constitutional principle that parliament must authorise government expenditure **before** it takes place. Historically, this has ensured that governments cannot ignore parliaments or remain in power despite losing a majority in parliament, because they would not be able to fund their operations.

The Budget.

The procedure for authorising a government's annual budget is complex, but the chart below provides an overview of the main features in most parliaments. Some parliaments have separate procedures for authorising the raising of money through taxation and the spending of money by the government. For simplicity, this diagram assumes that the processes are dealt with together as part of the same budgeting process.

The Budget.

The Government prepares its annual budget and presents it to parliament. This is normally an important parliamentary occasion and debate on the Government's budget statement may last for a number of days.



Finance Legislation.

The budget statement is translated into legislation, which must be approved by Parliament. In many parliaments, the **Finance Committee** plays a key role in scrutinising the detail of this legislation and this may represent the bulk of its annual workload.



Implementation.

Once parliamentary approval has been received, the Government can start spending the funds.



Review and Audit.

At the end of the financial year, the government's accounts are checked by a national auditing body. Expenditure may also be reviewed by parliamentary bodies such as the **Public Accounts Committee** or **Finance Committee** to ensure it represents value for money.

Value for money.

Parliaments also have a role in scrutinising past expenditure, ensuring that funds were spent on the purposes for which they were requested, but also looking more generally at questions of value for money. Many parliaments have established a dedicated cross-party Public Accounts Committee, linked to the national audit body, to fulfil this function.

Public Accounts Committees are appointed to examine government accounts and the use of public expenditure. The committee does not normally consider issues of policy, but focuses on value for

money, efficiency and effectiveness and ensures transparency and accountability in the public finances. A Public Accounts Committee may also be formally linked to the national auditing body and may provide a channel for it to report its findings to parliament.

7. Parliamentary Scrutiny Committees and Inquiries.

There are many different types of committees in parliaments around the world. Among the tasks commonly delegated to parliamentary committees are the detailed scrutiny of draft legislation, investigation of policy issues, and the running of parliament itself. GPG's *Guide to Parliaments* note on Parliamentary Points of Entry explores the roles of the members and staff of committees and the operation of internal parliamentary committees in further detail. This note deals with the particular function of committees established to oversee and scrutinise government activities.

What is a scrutiny committee?

The purpose of scrutiny committees is to oversee the Executive and to monitor its performance, normally through an evidence gathering process which may involve collecting written documents and holding hearings with Ministers, government officials and other interested parties (usually called a **committee inquiry**). They may also be called oversight or investigative committees.

Permanent committees have been established by many parliaments to oversee different policy areas, such as health, education, environment, etc. (for example, the UK **select committee system** or the US **congressional standing committees**). These committees 'shadow' the relevant government department and hold it accountable for its work. In some parliaments, these committees are also responsible for considering legislation in their subject area, whereas other parliaments establish separate committees for legislative work and policy oversight. Whichever model is chosen, committees may be given specific roles or tasks, either formally within the rules of procedure or informally through guidance issued under the auspices of the Speaker or President of the Parliament or collectively by agreement between the committees themselves. These may include examining financial information or accounts or looking at international agreements and treaties.

Ad hoc investigative committees may be established alongside the permanent committees to look into a certain subject, normally for a set time period. These

committees may be set up to investigate a suspected incidence of wrongdoing or misconduct; or they may be established to consider a specific technical matter or issue of public concern which does not fall neatly into the remit of one of the permanent committees.

Joint committees may be provided for in bicameral parliaments, drawing members from both houses.

The Chair and members.

Members may be elected to a committee place, or appointed by the Presiding Officer or the Government. 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. In this case, members may be selected from within their own party. The number of members on a committee varies widely between parliaments, and between different committees in the same parliament.

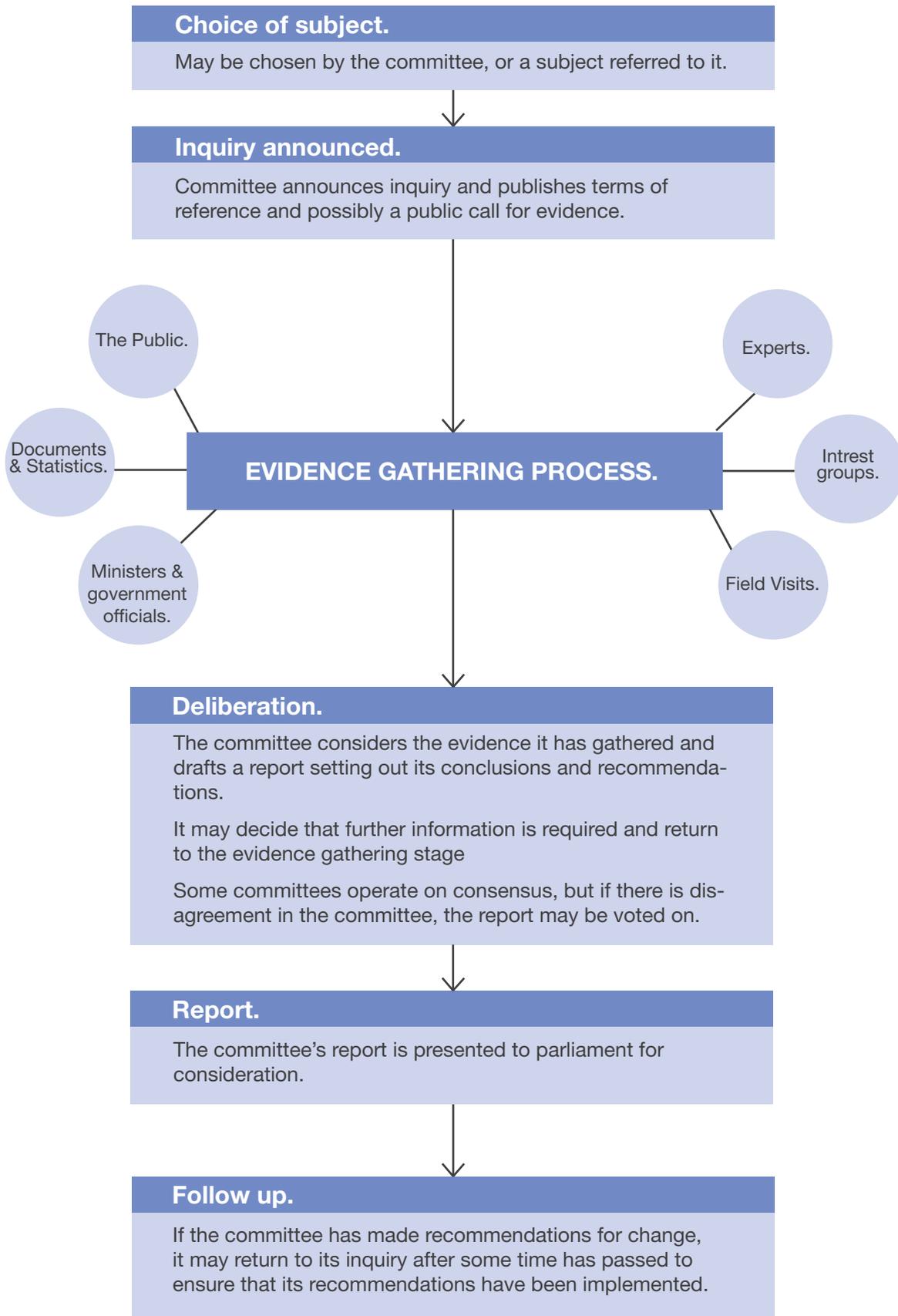
The Chair of a committee has the lead role in guiding its work and determining its priorities. The choice of chair is sometimes pre-determined, either by party affiliation, government choice, or selection by the presiding officer. Alternatively, the Chair can be elected by the parliament as a whole, or by the committee itself. Some committees also appoint other members to specific roles, such as **Vice Chairs** and **Rapporteurs**.

Committee powers.

In principle, committees only have the specific powers which the parliament as a whole has decided to delegate to them. In order to enable them to carry out their investigative functions effectively, committees are normally empowered to hold **hearings** with interested parties from outside the parliament, gather **evidence**, and produce a **report** which is given to the parliament as a whole for consideration and decision on any further action. Often, committee hearings are held in public, but in some countries this is not permitted. Some parliaments delegate stronger **investigative powers** to committees, enabling them to require people to produce documents or to attend their meetings and to punish them for refusing to do so or for providing false information.

The diagram below sets out the main stages of a Committee inquiry or investigation, although the exact steps will vary in each parliament.

Structure of a committee enquiry



Public and civil society participation.

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.

8. Representing Constituents' Interests.

Parliaments are essentially representative institutions and a key part of the role of parliamentarians is to represent the concerns of the people who elected them to the government. The nature of the relationship between voters and their elected representatives is central to any system of parliamentary democracy and is shaped by the **electoral system** in use in the country.

The nature of parliamentary representation.

Parliamentary representation is usually based on some form of regional or constituency system, in which parliamentarians represent a particular district. There are two common forms:

Single Member Constituencies/Districts:
Where each district elects a single Member of Parliament to represent it.

Multi-Member Constituencies/Districts:
Where each district (or the whole country)

elects more than one Member of Parliament to represent it.

Districts or constituencies may also be complemented by representation for larger territorial regions, and states sometimes establish different constituencies and forms of representation for different parliamentary institutions (for example, the upper and lower houses). There may also be provision for women, minorities or other groups to be represented via special seats, quotas or other mechanisms where they would otherwise be underrepresented.

Representatives or delegates?

Generally, Members of Parliament are seen as 'representatives' of the people rather than 'delegates' of those who elected them. This means that they are not bound by the opinions of their constituents, but make up their own mind on local and national interests. In most democracies, political party affiliation has a large influence both on the people's choice of representative and on the representative's policy decisions when in office.

Direct democracy: recalls and petitions.

Where trust in political parties has declined, efforts to introduce elements of direct democracy have appeared. For example, 19 US states have introduced the powers of recall for constituents to hold a referendum to remove their representative if they are dissatisfied with them.

Most countries have ways for members of the public to petition parliament, either through their MP or, increasingly, directly to an administrative office or dedicated petitions/complaints committee. Public petitions tend to be used in two main ways:

- » As a tool for campaigns. By collecting a large number of signatures, campaigners hope to demonstrate the importance of an issue and the depth of public concern. Presenting the petition to Parliament may aim to persuade Members of Parliament to change their views on a subject or to support or oppose a piece of legislation or important parliamentary vote.
- » As part of a formal complaints mechanism. Citizens who feel their rights have been infringed, and who have exhausted other avenues for redress, can complain by means of a petition. The process may be overseen by an ombudsman or other independent figure, who will initiate an investigation

if they decide that there is a basis for the complaint; alternatively this may be the responsibility of a dedicated parliamentary committee.

What happens to a petition after it has been submitted to Parliament?

- » The procedure applying to petitions can often be minimal. They may simply be written into the record, or read formally during a session. Other parliaments hold debates on petitions or set aside specific time slots in which they can be presented and debated.

Connecting parliament with the public: e-petitions

- » Petitions are increasingly seen as an effective tool for parliaments to improve outreach and communication with the public. In recent years, some parliaments have created websites the public can use to create and sign petitions electronically (e-petitions). The aim is to provide an easy way for people to make their views known to parliament and to become more engaged in parliamentary activity.

Parliamentary outreach and information for the public.

Parliaments are instruments for public representation, yet they can often appear to the ordinary citizen to be daunting and remote institutions, characterised by complex and little understood processes. For parliaments to be truly representative, citizens must have access to information about parliamentary proceedings, legislation, and policy, and be able to engage appropriately with parliamentarians and legislative processes to make their views known. The extent to which this happens in practice varies widely, however.

Meeting in public.

While the plenary sittings of most parliaments are open to the public, it is often harder for citizens to attend the meetings of committees or even to find out when they are sitting and what they are discussing. Some parliaments produce verbatim transcripts of debates in plenary and committee sessions, and records of their decisions, very soon after the event and make them available online and in printed formats, while others do this much more slowly or on a more limited basis. Increasingly, parliaments are providing descriptive information about their work and biographical details and analysis of the parliamentary activity of their Members, but this is still far from universal.

Outreach.

Many parliaments have developed outreach strategies for the provision of information about their activities and to increase public engagement in their work. These tend to be characterised by a desire to make the institution open, transparent and inclusive of public opinion while simultaneously increasing popular understanding and appreciation of parliament's role. Common features of parliamentary outreach strategies include the use of a parliamentary website, televising parliamentary proceedings, digitising parliamentary record, online consultation on draft legislation or matters of public concern, and establishing visitor centres to facilitate physical access to parliament. Effective outreach strategies also recognise that the provision of information is not a one way street. The promise of greater consultation raises public expectations and needs to be backed up by a sense of tangible impact when citizens do engage with parliament.

Innovation.

Some parliaments are developing innovative techniques to improve access and information, for example, online games and tools designed to increase the public's knowledge of parliamentary process, sponsoring youth parliaments which may be allowed to sit in the main parliamentary Chamber, or enabling the public to comment on legislation under consideration by parliament via an online platform. The UN's International Day of Democracy has been used by more than 70 parliaments as an occasion to establish links with citizens, particularly young people.