



## Glossary of terms

October 2023

Various sources were used to select the terms and develop the definitions in this glossary, including glossaries and similar resources from the following parliaments: [Australia](#), [Botswana](#), [Canada](#), [Ireland](#), [Montenegro](#), [Nauru](#), [Singapore](#), [Switzerland](#) and [the United Kingdom](#). Other sources included the European Parliament's [Terminology for Parliamentary Work](#) and [The Plenary: a User's Guide](#), as well as the following National Democratic Institute publications: [Civic Participation Terminology: A Guide to Frequently Used Terms and Phrases](#) and [Violence Against Women in Politics \(VAWIP\): Defining Terminologies and Concepts](#).

### A

#### **Accountability**

The level of responsibility and action taken by government actors in line with citizens' priorities and legal frameworks. Accountability is assured through relationships which allow government and citizens opportunities to engage in two-way feedback. This enables the public to ensure that government actors are responsible, and that they act with integrity, in the interest of public priorities and in line with regulations. Accountability requires the government to acknowledge and take responsibility for decisions, actions and policies in light of agreed expectations, such as a legislative agreement between an elected official and their constituents.

#### **Act of parliament**

Usually a law passed (or adopted) by parliament. It is sometimes called a "statute". In this publication, the term "parliamentary act" may also be used to refer to other regulations, rulebooks or similar operational (and sometimes internal) acts unique to parliament. See also: *Law and Legislation*.

#### **Ad hoc committee**

A committee that may be formed to address a particular issue, subject or event, but that does not have standing responsibilities.

#### **Advocacy**

A process aimed at influencing government discussion, procedures and policies. It consists of a set of organized, strategic actions over a period of time, usually guided by civil society and citizens, directed at bringing about change through political participation to address issues.

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**Affirmative action**

A set of policies and practices, within a government or organization, aimed at ensuring better representation or inclusion of particular underrepresented or disadvantaged groups.

**Agenda**

The chronological list of all items to be discussed at a formal meeting (including plenary and committee meetings).

**All-party group**

An informal group formed by MPs, usually from different parties, who share a common interest in a particular policy area, region or country. See also: *Caucus* and *Cross-party group*.

**Amendment**

A change proposed to the wording of a proposal for a law during its passage through parliament – or to a motion, resolution or committee report – with the intention of improving it or providing an alternative option. Amendments may seek to alter a part of a text by deleting, adding or substituting words or figures in that text. They can usually be tabled by an MP, a group of MPs or a committee.

**Assembly**

See: *Parliament*.

**Audience**

A person or people to whom information is conveyed or messages are directed.

**Autonomy**

Political independence and self-government. The ability to operate without outside control. The capacity to make an informed, uncoerced decision.

**B****Bicameral**

Denotes a parliament or legislature that has two separate chambers or houses. In some cases, they have equal but distinct privileges and powers, and are separated in structure and statute. A bicameral system has a significant impact on the way parliament works.

**Bill**

See: *Proposal for a law*.

**Budget**

A plan typically prepared by the executive and placed before parliament each year (depending on national statute) showing what money the government expects to receive (revenue) and how the government proposes to spend it (expenditure).

**Bureau**

See: *Presidium*.

**By-law**

A law or rule governing the internal affairs of an organization, or a secondary law. See also: *Delegated legislation*, *Rules of procedure* and *Secondary legislation*.

## C

### **Caucus**

A group composed of all MPs from the same political party, or a meeting of party leaders or civic organizers, the purpose of which may be to show unity for a particular issue or to select a candidate for office. Sometimes, the term “caucus” is used for all MPs who are in Cabinet or who support the government. In some parliaments, cross-party or all-party groups are known as “caucuses”. The term may also refer to issue-based or thematic groups formed within parliament that include MPs from multiple parties. See also: *All-party group* and *Cross-party group*.

### **Citizen**

An individual who is a naturalized or native-born resident of a State, displays allegiance to that State’s political and legal authority, and is therefore entitled to the rights and protections of its laws, including the right to political participation.

### **Citizens’ assembly**

See: *Citizens’ jury*.

### **Citizens’ jury**

A form of deliberative democracy in which small groups of people are brought together to hear evidence about a policy or legislative issue, and to debate and determine a judgement based on the evidence received. Citizens’ juries are used to inform issue-based advocacy campaigns or decision-making by public officials on complex policy matters.

### **Citizens’ legislative initiative**

A public participation method that allows citizens to submit legislative proposals on a constitutional and/or legislative matter. See also: *Advocacy* and *Petition*.

### **Citizenship**

The right of national identity bestowed by a State on individual members of that system by birth or application. Citizenship carries an expectation of allegiance.

### **Civic education**

Programmes that introduce the basic rules and institutional features of a democratic political system, and that provide knowledge about democratic rights and practices, such as constitutional rights, gender equality and collective action. Civic education programmes aim to impart the necessary knowledge and skills needed to effectively participate in the community, government and politics.

### **Civic engagement**

The involvement of citizens and citizens’ organizations in, or their commitment to, the political or community process as they fulfil their rights and responsibilities.

### **Civic space**

The legal, political, social and economic environment that enables people, without hindrance, to organize, communicate and participate with each other to consider and influence issues that matter to them.

**Civil servant**

A person who works for the administrative service of a government, which is known as the “civil service” or the “public service/administration” and usually includes government (executive) departments as well as various bodies and agencies. Depending on the nature of a country’s laws, civil servants may be eligible to work in other branches of government, including the legislature or the judiciary, in addition to subnational government offices.

**Civil society**

People in the community not associated with the government. Also, the groups and organizations outside of government in which people participate. The term also refers to all sorts of voluntary, collective activities organized around shared interests, values and objectives.

**Civil society organization (CSO)**

An association of people who work for a common cause. This umbrella term can include non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations and other diverse organizations.

**Clerk**

See: *Secretary General*.

**Coalition**

An alliance, temporary or permanent, of different people or organizations that come together for a common cause or to engage in a joint activity, usually focused on advocating with the government for change. In the parliamentary context, a coalition is often an alliance formed by two or more political parties for the purpose of gaining more representation.

**Code of conduct**

A document adopted by many parliaments that explicitly codifies acceptable standards of behaviour and general conduct for MPs. A parliamentary code of conduct may also apply to parliamentary staff, or there may be a separate code of conduct for staff at the level of parliament or the entire public administration.

**Committee**

See: *Parliamentary committee*.

**Communication**

The process of exchanging information, opinions and ideas through dialogue and interactions between people, or between government institutions and people.

**Community**

People living in the same place or area, or a group of individuals that have particular characteristics in common.

**Conflict of interest**

In the parliamentary context, a situation in which someone in a position of trust or authority has competing professional or personal interests that directly challenge their role as a person representing the public interest, leaving them unable to fulfil their duties impartially. A conflict of interest exists even if no unethical or improper act result from this situation, and where there is an appearance of impropriety that can undermine confidence in the person/position/office.

**Constituency**

A specific geographic area or electoral division in a country that an MP represents, also known as a “riding” or “electoral district”. The term may also refer to a portion of the population represented by a particular elected leader or organization.

**Constituent**

A citizen who votes or lives in an MP’s area of representation.

**Consultation**

The process through which the opinions, views and suggestions of the community are sought on an issue or an activity.

**Cross-party group**

A group of MPs from two or more political parties who work together towards a common goal. Usually, a cross-party group is not an official parliamentary body and can also include external stakeholders as well as MPs. See also: *All-party group* and *Caucus*.

**D****Debate**

A discussion in which the arguments for or against a subject are presented according to specific rules. In the parliamentary context, debate is a mechanism by which a chamber deliberates on matters under consideration and provides members with the opportunity to publicly register their support for, or rejection of, an idea based on the priorities of their constituency and/or party.

**Decision maker**

A person who has the authority to create or change communal, organizational or governmental policies, programmes or laws.

**Delegated legislation**

Secondary, subordinate or subsidiary legislation. Also, a process by which the executive authority is given powers by law to make secondary legislation in order to implement and administer the requirements of that law. Examples of delegated legislation might include regulations, standards, ordinances and other types of statutory instruments and by-laws. See also: *By-law* and *Secondary legislation*.

**Deliberative democracy**

A concept based on the principle that legitimate democracy arises from the public deliberation of citizens. Activities associated with this process might include citizens’ juries, town hall meetings, public debates and other citizens’ forums.

**Democracy**

The belief in freedom and equality between people, or a system of government based on this belief, in which power is held either by elected representatives or directly by the people themselves. Also, a basic right of citizenship to be exercised under conditions of freedom, equality, transparency and responsibility, with due respect for the plurality of views, and in the interest of the polity.

**Diversity**

The inclusion, in activities and decision-making, of people from various backgrounds of ethnicity, religion, age, gender and sexual orientation.

**Draft law**

See: *Proposal for a law*.

**E****Electoral district**

See: *Constituency*.

**Electoral management body (EMB)**

A body or bodies responsible for electoral management, usually impartial and independent from political influence. In some countries, national and local government institutions are trusted to handle the electoral process, while other countries establish an independent EMB. Different countries use various names for this kind of body, such as “electoral/election commission”, “electoral council”, “department of elections”, “election unit” and “electoral/election board”.

**Executive**

The branch of government that carries out or administers laws. The executive may also refer to the head of the government (President, Prime Minister, Head of State, etc.) and members of Cabinet and their staff, as well as the civil service, which implements policies and administers public programmes and resources through government departments and relevant offices. In a democratic system, the executive is held accountable by parliamentary oversight and checks and balances. In this publication, the terms “executive” and “government” are used interchangeably.

**G****Gender-sensitive**

An approach that acknowledges the way in which gender informs activities and decisions by taking account of, and responding to, the unique views, perspectives and needs of men, women and gender non-conforming individuals.

**General secretariat**

See: *Parliamentary administration*.

**Government**

See: *Executive*.

Note: In this publication, the terms “government” and “executive” are used interchangeably, and the traditional definition of the three branches of government (executive, legislative and judicial) is not used.

**H****Hansard**

The official record or transcript of debates in a parliament. The term “Hansard”, which is mostly used in Westminster-style parliaments, originated from the name of the printer in England who began preparing reports of parliamentary debates in the 18th century. The other terms in use are “transcript”, “record” and “stenogram”.

**House**

See: *Parliament*.

**I****Impact assessment (IA)**

In the parliamentary context, a structured process for considering the implications, for people and their environment, of proposed legislative actions in preparation for a policy debate, or in the event that there is an opportunity to amend (or even, if appropriate, abandon) a proposal. An impact assessment can be applied at all levels of policy development and decision-making, or can be related to a specific project.

**Inclusion**

In a parliamentary context, inclusion relates to both the institution of parliament, and the responsibilities and actions of members to fulfil their mandate as representatives of that institution. Inclusion in the institution relates to the processes and actions that ensure all operations and activities are structured in a way that gives individuals equal opportunities to participate and contribute to decision-making. Inclusion related to the actions of members to fulfil their mandate describes the methods used to ensure all individuals and groups, particularly those who are vulnerable and underrepresented, have equal opportunities to inform the law-making, oversight and representation processes.

**Independent member of parliament**

An MP who does not belong to a parliamentary (political) party. In systems that have a small number of central, dominant parties, this term can also refer to a member who represents or belongs to a party that is outside those dominant parties.

**L****Law**

A body of rules of action or conduct prescribed by a controlling authority (usually passed by parliament), which has a binding legal force and must be obeyed and followed by citizens, subject to sanctions or legal consequences. Also, the whole body of binding customs, practices or rules of a community prescribed or formally recognized and enforced by a controlling authority. See also: *Act of parliament*, *Bill*, *Law-making* and *Legislation*.

**Law-making**

The legislative process or the act of legislating, i.e. the process by which laws are made. See also: *Act of parliament*, *Law* and *Legislation*.

**Lawmaker**

See: *Member of parliament (MP)*.

**Leader of the opposition**

Depending on the structure of the institution, the leader of the party that has the second largest membership in each chamber, also referred to as the “opposition”. The leader of the opposition is responsible for leading opposition debates, setting the agenda for the opposition, and shaping the opposition’s general vision and priorities in coordination with other members of that party or coalition. See also: *Opposition*.

**Legal framework**

In this publication, “legal framework” is an inclusive term referring to the constitutional, legal and/or regulatory provisions that apply in a given country. Its use recognizes the existence of different systems in different countries and the fact that, under some systems, there may be provisions on a particular issue at more than one level (e.g. in the constitution and in law).

**Legislation**

A law or a set of laws that have been passed by parliament. The word is also used to describe the act of making a new law. See also: *Act of parliament*, *Law* and *Law-making*.

**Legislative drafting**

The act of writing a bill or an amendment to a law. Also referred to as “legislative technique”.

**Legislator**

See: *Member of parliament (MP)*.

**Legislature**

See: *Parliament*.

**LGBTQI+**

An evolving acronym that stands for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning and intersex”. The '+' represents minority gender identities and sexualities not explicitly included in the term “LGBTQI”.

**M****Motion**

A proposal for action put forward in parliament for consideration, debate and decision.

**Member of parliament (MP)**

A person elected (or in some systems appointed) by the people to represent them in parliament. In a bicameral parliament, the term can refer to members of both chambers. Other terms in use in some systems include “delegate”, “deputy”, “senator” and “congressperson”.

**N****National human rights institution (NHRI)**

A body that plays a crucial role in promoting and monitoring the effective implementation of international human rights standards at the national level. For instance, an NHRI can perform core protection functions such as the prevention of torture and degrading treatment, and can play a role in advancing aspects of the rule of law pertaining to those core protections. NHRIs can take various forms, such as human rights commissions or ombudspersons, hybrid institutions, consultative and advisory bodies, and other types of human rights institutes and centres. See also: *Ombudsperson*.

**O****Official**

In this publication, the term “official” refers primarily to office-holders or high representatives of the executive or parliament. In some countries, the term “official” is used for staff members.



**Ombudsperson**

In the parliamentary context, an ombudsperson ensures that public programmes and services are adequately supporting the citizens for whom they are intended. Ombudsperson offices can serve as a liaison between citizens and government services, programmes and agencies, ensuring that those resources are in compliance with regulatory frameworks and human rights standards. See also: *National human rights institution (NHRI)*.

**Opposition**

The parliamentary minority party or parties. In some systems, the “opposition” refers to the political party or parties in parliament that do not form the government. It is also possible that the party or parties that form the government do not have a majority in parliament. See also: *Leader of the opposition*.

**P****Parliament**

A national body of elected (or sometimes appointed) representatives that makes laws, debates issues and holds the government to account.

**Parliamentarian**

See: *Member of parliament (MP)*.

Note: in the United States Congress, the term “parliamentarian” refers to the individual (and their respective office) who is responsible for maintaining precedent and compliance with the legislature’s rules of procedure. There is a separate “parliamentarian” for each chamber in Congress.

**Parliamentary administration**

A set of administrative services and administrative staff that serve a parliament. Offices and staff of the parliamentary administration are professional, neutral and impartial in their work and actions.

**Parliamentary committee**

A body comprised of MPs who are appointed, on either a temporary or a permanent basis, to debate or closely examine matters closely related to specific policies, issues or circumstances, in line with the committee’s scope of work. The theme, structure and nature of parliamentary committees are established by a chamber’s rules of procedure. Depending on these rules, the composition of a committee may reflect that of the whole parliament or include diverse party representation. In some parliaments, the term “commission” is used instead of, or interchangeably with, “committee”.

**Parliamentary control**

See: *Parliamentary oversight*.

**Parliamentary democracy**

The system of government where the people elect representatives and the representative body chooses the executive to govern the State, with that executive held accountable by parliament (the elected body).

**Parliamentary oversight**

The close examination and investigation of government policies, actions and spending that is carried out by parliament to ensure they are reaching their intended beneficiaries appropriately, equitably and with integrity.

**Parliamentary secretariat**

See: *Parliamentary administration*.

**Parliamentary service**

See: *Parliamentary administration*.

**Parliamentary scrutiny**

See: *Parliamentary oversight*.

**Parliamentary staff**

Employees working for the parliamentary administration who provide professional and impartial support and services to enable MPs to fulfil their legislative responsibilities. In this publication, the term “parliamentary staff” does not include political staff who provide support to individual MPs or parliamentary (party) groups. It should be noted that parliamentary staff are categorized differently across the globe, and the term may refer to individuals who work under either partisan or non-partisan capacities in parliament. In this publication, the term refers to individuals who are non-partisan. Typically, parliamentary staff are separate and independent from the executive's civil service.

**Participation**

The process through which people, individually or in groups, get involved in an activity or decision.

**Petition**

A document presented to parliament by a person or group of people asking for action on a particular matter. The term “petition” can also cover any submission – proposal, criticism or complaint – made to parliament.

**Presiding officer**

See: *Speaker*.

**Presidium**

The collective governing body of parliament. Its composition varies among countries. The presidium might consist of individuals such as the Speaker and Deputy Speaker(s), but could also include a board with political responsibilities that brings together leaders from the different parliamentary (party) groups. In bicameral systems, each chamber usually has its own governing bodies.

**Proposal for a law**

A proposal for a new law or changes to an existing law, tabled by MPs or the executive, to be considered by parliament.

**Public Accounts Committee (PAC)**

A specialized parliamentary committee with responsibility for scrutinizing the budget and public expenditure. It is usually found in Westminster-type parliaments. In this publication, the term refers to all types of parliamentary committees that are responsible for oversight of government spending (such as committees on budget, finance, expenditure or similar).

**Public engagement**

The various methods and processes through which the community is involved in an activity, process or decision, including education, information, communication, consultation and participation.

**Public**

All the members of a community in general, regardless of their citizenship status.

**R****Rules of procedure**

The rules approved by parliament to regulate its proceedings and govern the way it conducts its business.

**S****Secondary legislation**

Types of legislation created by ministers (or other bodies) under powers given to them by a law passed by parliament. Secondary legislation is used to fill in the details of law, providing practical measures that enable the law to be enforced and operate in daily life. A piece of secondary legislation usually has the words “rule”, “order” or “regulation” in its title. Many pieces of secondary legislation are referred to as “statutory instruments” (or SIs), which are the most common form of this type of legislation. See also: *By-law* and *Delegated legislation*.

**Secretary General**

Typically the most senior permanent officer of parliament, who advises on procedure and records the decisions of the house. This person is also usually the administrative head of the parliamentary administration. In some institutions, the role of Secretary General and the responsibilities listed here may be performed by more than one individual or by several offices of jurisdiction.

**Speaker**

The highest authority and principal presiding officer of the parliament, or of the house or chamber in bicameral parliaments. The Speaker is usually an MP elected at the beginning of each convocation by fellow MPs to preside over the parliamentary chamber or, in a unicameral system, to preside over the parliament.

**Standing orders**

See: *Rules of procedure*.

**Supreme audit institution (SAI)**

A body responsible for auditing public financial administration and the management of public funds. It plays a central role in the efficient, effective, transparent and accountable use of the public resources approved by parliament through the annual budget process. In some jurisdictions, the SAI may be known as the “national audit office”, “court of auditors”, “audit bureau”, “board of audit” or “auditor-general”.

**Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

Global goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that, by 2030, all people enjoy peace and prosperity.

Together, the SDGs constitute the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: a series of 17 interlinked goals designed as “the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all”.

## T

### Tabling

The act of formally putting forward a question, motion, bill or amendment; a formal presentation of a document to parliament.

## U

### Unicameral

Denotes a parliament that has just one chamber, consisting of elected (or appointed) MPs. A unicameral parliament is defined under a nation’s statute and is guided by the institution’s rules of procedure.

## V

### Vote

The action taken by MPs to make a decision on pending legislation, amendments and other items requiring their discretion, in plenary or a committee setting. Voting regulations are codified in a chamber’s rules of procedure. Typically, members must be present to cast a vote, which is recorded on paper or through an electronic system. In some jurisdictions, however, voting may take place virtually (such rules were commonly enacted by parliaments during the COVID-19 pandemic). Members can also vote by voice or “*en-bloc*” through unanimous consent.