

Workshop Conclusions

As a result of the discussions, consensus on the creation of a set of expectations to encourage e-participation was achieved. For parliamentarians, these involve the need to achieve closeness, mutuality, empathy, and coherence with their respective electorates.

These expectations emerged as a way to deal with the difficulties in establishing of a set of principles. The expectations should be mutual, meaning that citizens, parliaments (as institutions), and parliamentarians (as legislators, representatives, and party actors) should be aware of, and should jointly agree to exercise them. In this way, closeness, mutuality, empathy, and coherence may be achieved through use of ICT. From the parliamentarian's perspective, they could be considered as a 'mission statement for online parliamentarians' which is designed to facilitate their effective use of ICT.

Mission Statement for Online Parliamentarians / Expectations for e-participation

1. **MPs should be accessible online**
2. The **use of the Internet as a means of communication by Parliamentarians should be inclusive**, which leads to suggestions about the deployment of ICT infrastructure.
3. Although **parliaments across Europe do provide technical facilities and support for parliamentarians who wish to use the Internet as a means of communication** (with the exception of party-related activity), it was agreed that MPs in countries where support is not so forthcoming should encourage their parliaments to do so.
4. There is a need to **further investigate what works and what doesn't in terms of public consultation and the role of parliaments and MPs**. Best practices and case studies were discussed as the most appropriate way of carrying out this investigation.

Recommendations emerging from the workshop:

1. The expectation patterns described below need to be concretised and agreed by all workshop participants in order to be **taken forth to the forthcoming EPRI conference** in the last quarter of 2005.
2. **Strategies, Tools, and Action Plans** need to be developed from these expectation patterns: this will be within the remit of the workshop participants' continued dialogue on the EPRI blog.
3. In line with accessibility to ICT infrastructure (and the inclusivity of parliaments), which is one of the expectations patterns outlined in this document; one suggested **policy outcome** of the workshop would be in terms of advice to the European Commission that parliamentary contact with citizens inbetween elections (particularly in the run up to the next European election) would be a way of brining marginalised groups into the democratic process. Involving parliaments in the rolling out of ICT infrastructure would be one way of getting this done.
4. Three areas of research have been identified, and need to be further developed: firstly, work should be done in the area of **consultations**. Secondly, **the roles of (civil society) intermediaries**, specifically in terms of networked and peer to peer communities need to be examined for their contribution to the democratic process. Finally, the difficulties of **dealing with SPAM and other emails** need to be addressed in detailed case studies.

Workshop Summary

This summary of the workshop discussion is structured by the major questions tackled in the workshop.

How do we ensure the transparency of parliament?

Should parliament offer detailed information online about parliamentary business to all interested citizens? Do citizens have a right to know what is going on in parliament? Agreement was raised quite easily on this as a guiding principle of democracy. Challenges were raised on how to best implement this on a technical level.

The example of the Scottish Parliament was raised, where advance notice of meetings is given on the website and webcasting is provided. In Hungary, information on votes in the parliament is available immediately on the website. In some cases, as noted by a couple of participants, detailed committee business is not distributed to the public. In some countries (notably the UK), third parties repackage information provided by parliaments.

Should citizens have the right to contact MPs through any channel?

Should email be treated as official communication between citizens and representatives? Should there be a principle guiding all MPs' activity in this sphere? The topic raised debate that focused on MPs' responsibility to respond to email. If this is adopted as a principle, there are a number of consequences that emerge.

Some participants highlighted the digital divide as an important barrier for many citizens: some people cannot use ICT to communicate. Others described their own problems in dealing with an overflow of emails. Other participants highlighted the fact that many of their colleagues in their own countries are unwilling to use ICT as a tool for communication. All three issues present barriers to the adoption of a 'right' to communicate with MPs through ICT-mediated channels. The use of blogs was highlighted as a complement to MPs' use of email.

Whose responsibility is it to support the use of technology by parliamentarians?

Are parliaments as institutions responsible for the uptake of ICT-related activity by members? What facilities are, or should be provided by parliaments to facilitate their members' activity? The general consensus was that parliaments, in most cases, provide adequate facilities for their members in terms of technology and its support.

However, the specifics vary from parliament to parliament; in Sweden, there is a lot of technical support, but there is a lack of assistance. The European Parliament has allocated at least two computers to each MEP, and are now in the process of discussing whether they should also be given laptops. Many parliaments provide and publish MPs' email addresses, and some provide filters to keep out SPAM. Assistance for dealing with online communications has thus become one of the major priorities for MPs.

Should the Internet be used to consult with the public?

Is it the job of parliaments to run online consultations? If so, who moderates them? Should they be representative? The discussion on this topic was lengthy, as the topic of consultation is a contentious one.

One of the main points raised was about the nature of consultation: what distinguishes consultation from information dissemination? One participant suggested that online consultations must be representative. A counter-argument to that suggestion was provided: consultations are about gathering in the best ideas and not necessarily representative opinions. Consultation was also suggested as an activity that can be done through research on discussion forums that are not connected to parliaments or parliamentarians.

Is there a requirement to try to make internet access more inclusive?

Do parliaments need to provide special internet access kiosks? Is it the job of parliament (or government) to ensure inclusive access to the Internet? Is this a political obligation? Should parliaments say “we want the Internet to be publicly available so that we can hear from the public through this channel?”

Current trends reveal that political reporting is moving away from the mainstream. The Internet becomes a far more important space for political discussion. The question was raised as to whether access to the internet is a human right. There is clearly a connection to be made between internet access and the role of parliaments and parliamentarians to use ICT to overcome the challenges of democratic participation.