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**Participatory adaptation**

in contemporary parliamentary committees

**Carolyn M. Hendriks, Sue Regan and Adrian Kay**

The Crawford School of Public Policy

Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

E: carolyn.hendriks@anu.edu.au

E: sue.regan@anu.edu.au

E: adrian.kay@anu.edu.au
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ABSTRACT

Contemporary parliamentary institutions operate in a dynamic participatory and digital context. Recent studies demonstrate that many parliaments are rethinking how they reach out to the public in this changing environment. This article discusses the findings of empirical research that examined how and why parliamentary committees are adapting their public engagement practices. Parliamentary staff in six Australian parliaments were interviewed about the forms and extent of participatory adaptation in their committee systems, away from standard practices, such as written submissions and formal public hearings. The research finds while committees continue to rely heavily on standard practices, many are experimenting with novel forms of public outreach and engagement. This includes taking steps to boost their public presence, particularly online; expanding who they engage in committee inquires and how they go about this; and building consultative capacity of committee members and affected publics. The article argues that in an era of significant political and digital change, parliamentary committees need to adopt a more strategic approach to participatory reform to better connect and represent diverse publics.
Participatory adaptation in contemporary parliamentary committees

INTRODUCTION
The changing nature of contemporary political participation has implications for the work and legitimacy of legislatures. Citizens are turning away from formal political institutions as evidenced by declining party membership, voting turnout, and trust in political institutions (Mair, 2013; Wattenberg, 2002). Many citizens are distrustful of elites and established institutions and this has severely weakened the capacity of political parties and elections to deliver legitimate and effective popular political representation (Mair, 2013). At the same time, citizens are finding alternative ways to communicate and express their political preferences and engage in politics (Dalton, 2014; Theocharis and van Deth, 2016). Many of these informal opportunities have been afforded by information communication technologies (ICTs) enabling citizens to form groups and networks with those who share similar views (Allen and Light, 2015). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, have also given advocacy groups the opportunity to quickly mobilize large numbers of supporters and to coordinate online and offline campaigns (Mercea, 2012).

Collectively, these features of contemporary politics are changing how people view and engage in elections, political parties, political mobilisation and citizen participation (Dalton, 2014; Theocharis and van Deth, 2016). Yet the response and adaptation of extant parliamentary institutions to the dynamic nature of modern political participation remains unclear. As the political processes of dealignment and realignment play out, the structure and organisation of mass parties is unsettled and undermined presenting legislatures with uncertainties and surprises (Flinders, 2015), potentially straining legislative practices, such as those in committees, that are predicated on mass party democracy. The changing communicative landscape also presents legislatures with new opportunities and risks. ICTs, for example, have enabled legislative institutions and their members to communicate and engage with citizens directly via websites, Blogs, YouTube and social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook (e.g. Hansard Society, 2013; Leston-Bandeira and Bender, 2013). Yet the digital era has also intensified the mediatisation of political communication, fuelling the spread of misinformation and political polarisation (Sunstein 2007). Politics is
faster and more reactive than ever before (Stoker et al., 2016); issues that make it on the public agenda change rapidly from day to day under the pressure of 24/7 news cycles and interventions from social media (e.g. Maireder and Schlögl, 2014).

In this article, we consider how parliaments are adapting their practices in the dynamic context of contemporary political participation. Are they continuing to operate with standard routines, or are they reforming their practices given the opportunities and risks of partisan dealignment and digital technologies? To explore this question, we draw on empirical insights from the committee systems of six Australian Parliaments. More specifically, our study examines how contemporary parliamentary committees in Australia are communicating and engaging with the public in their inquiry work, and explores the forms and extent of adaptation away from standard participatory practices such as written submissions and formal public hearings. In six Australian parliaments, we interviewed 25 senior committee staff (Assistant Clerks, Secretaries and Executive Officers)¹ to explore what procedures their parliamentary committees currently use to engage with the public, and the extent of any experimentation with non-standard participatory practices. Their views and experiences provide a unique lens for understanding the diverse range of practical adaptations that committees are making to engage affected publics.

This research is particularly timely as parliamentary committees sit at the crossroads of a number of current trends in political participation. First, declining membership in political parties affects the capacity of committees to act as effective vehicles for agenda setting and political representation, which in turn influences which issues are delegated to committees. This has put some committees under pressure to provide more diverse avenues for public input to ensure that the concerns of potentially affected publics are represented and considered in committees’ deliberations. Second, for many citizens, ‘issues’ have become the central avenue through which they informally participate in politics (Bang, 2009). For parliaments, this means that the public interest in parliaments is less about the theatre of the assembly and more towards debates on issues that matter to the public. More than ever before, parliamentary committees and the participatory opportunities they offer have become important sites of political expression and representation (Dermody et al., 2006; ¹ The Parliaments have been generically labelled to protect the anonymity of our interviewees.)
Pedersen et al. 2015). Third, as legislatures work to rebuild public trust in democratic institutions (Leston-Bandeira, 2012a), committees represent an overlooked yet important site for democratic renewal because of their capacity to engage citizens and listen to their concerns (Hendriks & Kay, 2017). Indeed, in an age of declining mass democracy, the burden on committees to engage and represent the public would seem greater than ever: they represent one of the few remaining parts of the political system that actively facilitates public input, listening, deliberation and public judgment (Bächtiger, 2014).

Our article offers important insights into how committees in Australian parliaments are engaging the public in parliamentary inquiries, and the extent to which they are adapting (if at all) their standard participatory practices. We begin by discussing the public aspects of parliamentary committees and the role of public engagement therein. Next, we present our qualitative study of public engagement in parliamentary committees across six Australian parliaments. We find that some committees are adapting the way they have conventionally engaged with the public, but change is modest, highly variable by issue, and undertaken in a cautious and ad hoc fashion. We discuss the types of adaptations and the drivers and barriers to participatory reform in committees. In the final sections of the paper, we argue that committee systems need to adopt a more strategic and coordinated approach to participatory reform if they are to remain publicly relevant and fulfil their potential as sites of political representation.

PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Parliamentary committees represent an influential case of institutional adaptation to the changing nature of modern politics as, in recent history, they have been sites of reform. For example, the UK’s current structure of select committees was introduced in 1979 in response to a diagnosis of excessive executive dominance, the so-called ‘elective dictatorship’, alongside a turbulent decade in politics around questions of Scottish nationalism and EU membership. More recently the British Parliament in 2010 reformed how select committee chairs and members are chosen following the report of the ‘Wright Committee’ (Russell, 2011).

Despite their capacity for reform, committees have escaped much of the empirical attention in recent literature on the relationship between citizens and parliaments. To date, most
Specific empirical studies of public engagement in parliamentary committees are rare. Instead much of the empirical work has focussed on the impact of committee work (e.g. Hindmoor et al., 2009; Benton and Russell, 2013) or on specific trends in committee reporting (Halligan and Reid, 2016). More recently there have been studies examining the impact of particular parliamentary reforms on participatory practices in committees, for example, changes in the British Parliament in 2012 to make public engagement a ‘core task’ for all select committees (Flinders et al., 2015). There have also been some recent studies aimed at ‘taking stock’ of engagement practices in specific parliaments, for example in the Scottish parliament (McLaverty and Macleod, 2012) and the Western Australian parliament (Drum, 2016). Our research builds on this nascent literature on parliaments and their publics by offering novel insights into how and why committees are adapting their participatory practices. Before discussing the findings of this research, we first provide an overview of Australian parliamentary committees – the focus of our empirical analysis.

**PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES**

Australia’s political system is a federal system that draws heavily on the traditions of Westminster parliamentary tradition - often dubbed ‘Washminster’ (Thompson, 1980). It provides a diverse parliamentary context with eight parliaments – one at the Federal level and seven at the state (and territory) level. All eight parliaments in Australia have their own committee system. All but three parliaments have two houses each with its own standing committees (which are appointed for the life of a Parliament and serve investigatory or scrutiny roles), select committees (appointed for a specific purpose and having a limited life) and domestic or internal committees (which focus on the operation of the parliament).
In bicameral parliaments, joint committees are common where members from upper and lower houses consider issues that require simultaneous inquiry from both houses. In terms of composition, committees in Australian parliaments are predominantly populated by members of the governing party and official opposition, despite the increase in minor party representation in some parliaments due to electoral reforms.

Australia represents a ‘most likely’ case of participatory adaptation in parliamentary committees. It is a nation that is regularly cited internationally as a world leader in participatory governance and democratic innovation, particularly in executive government at the local and state level (see Carson and Hartz-Karp, 2005; Hartz-Karp 2005). Australian-based scholars are also at the forefront of research and experimentation in innovative forms of public engagement (e.g. Carson et al, 2013; Weymouth and Hartz-Karp, 2015) and deliberative democracy (e.g. Curato et al, 2017). Surveys also find that many Australians are supportive of greater citizen participation in their democratic system (e.g. Evans and Stoker, 2016). New participatory opportunities and platforms are also opening up through digital technologies (e.g. Vromen, 2007), with Australia having one of the highest rates of internet and smartphone usage in the world (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Some Parliaments across Australia have been scrutinising the participatory practices of their committees. For example, the Federal Parliament’s Standing Committee on Procedure tabled a report Building a Modern Committee System and recommended that committees improve the way they communicate with the public and do more to adapt to emerging information technology (House of Representatives, 2010). There have also been some documented cases of parliamentary committees experimenting with innovative forms of public participation (e.g. Dermody et al 2016; Hendriks 2016), and survey research that finds that some committee chairs are keen to expand how they communicate with the public (e.g. Drum, 2016).

Public engagement in Australian parliamentary inquiries typically proceeds as follows:

- Identifying key stakeholders/publics
- Notifying the public about the inquiry and calling for (written) public submissions
- Conducting any relevant site visits or ‘inspections’
• Convening public hearings with invited witnesses
• Tabling the committee report in parliament as a public document

This standard participatory procedure is designed to address the terms of reference of an inquiry and produce a report based on evidence. Most committees in Australian parliaments shape their public engagement practices to fulfil their role as ‘collectors, collators and reporters’ of policy evidence. Some participatory practices fulfil the evidentiary requirements of parliament better than others. Parliamentary privilege guides the collection of evidence by imposing a formality on the processes of evidence-collection. Thus, for public input to count as ‘parliamentary evidence’, the source needs to be identifiable (i.e. comments need to be attributable) and it needs to be on the public record (Derigo, 2009). For this reason, committees in Australian parliaments make a strong distinction between formal and informal proceedings. Formal proceedings, such as written submissions and the calling of witnesses to public hearings, allow parliamentary privilege to be easily granted. Informal proceedings include site visits, meetings, seminars and roundtable discussions. Informal proceedings can be used for a range of purposes (preliminary scoping exercises, collective discussions, garnering community views) but in most cases do not constitute formal evidence because they are not conducted as formal meetings of committees and traditionally are difficult to capture on public record. However, as we show further below, changing participatory practices are blurring the distinction between informal and formal proceedings as, supported by technology, some committees are enabling a greater range of public input to be captured for the public record.

**TYPES OF PARTICIPATORY ADAPTATION**

To examine how Australian parliamentary committees are adapting their standard participatory practices to their changing political and digital context, we undertook a

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2 In all Australian parliaments, parliamentary privilege applies not only to elected representatives but to anyone taking part in proceedings of Parliament, such as witnesses appearing before committees (Parliament of Australia, 2017). The proceedings of committees are accepted as proceedings of Parliament and, thereby, attract the same privileges and immunities as Parliament itself. The main immunity is the right of freedom of speech, long regarded as essential to allow Parliament and its committees to conduct inquiries effectively without ‘interference’ (Parliament of Australia 2017).
qualitative study of six parliaments across Australia (state parliaments in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), New South Wales (NSW), Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia (WA) and the federal parliament). In each parliament, we conducted semi-structured interviews with parliamentary staff whose work includes managing and convening public engagement for committees (25 interviewees in total). The interviews also explored the drivers and barriers to participatory adaptation. In addition to interview data, the research draws on relevant secondary documentation, such as committee reports, internal parliamentary documents, and articles and papers from practitioners working in committee systems across Australia.

The interviews revealed that staff working for Australia’s parliamentary committees place a high value on public input into the work of committees. It is seen as central to the committee process and public submissions and other forms of input are considered to be highly valued by elected representatives. Staff offered many examples of how committees have been seeking new or alternative ways of connecting and engaging with the public. The extent of participatory adaptation varied from committees experimenting with one new approach (for example, convening a roundtable discussion in addition to public hearings) to other committees that have embraced multiple participatory innovations. Consider, for example, the Federal inquiry into the Child Support System (House of Representatives, 2015) that had a community engagement strategy entailing an on-line questionnaire, community statements, ‘snapshots’ (written inquiry updates) and YouTube clips used throughout the inquiry.

Our analysis of interviews with committee staff suggests that four main types of participatory adaptation have been occurring in different parliamentary committees across Australia.

**Adaptation 1: Employing new ways to promote and publicize committee work**

Committees in Australian parliaments are employing new ways to make their inquiries more visible to the public. Many parliamentary committees now use the internet to

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3 Within the six parliaments, we interviewed staff from eight different houses. In the federal and Victorian parliaments, we were able to include both the upper and lower houses.
announce and publicise an inquiry and some use social media platforms, such as Twitter or Facebook, to announce or invite public input. For example, Twitter was used to advertise the New South Wales inquiry into water augmentation (NSW Parliament, 2016a). These adaptations reduce the reliance of committees on advertising in print newspapers, which is increasingly considered costly and ineffective. Reforms also included making greater use of specialist media outlets to target certain groups, such as using local or regional media as well as professional journals. To improve public awareness about particular inquiries, some committees have used inquiry-specific branding and have designed inquiry logos, pamphlets and digital flyers. The Federal Parliament has been active in this regard, for example, the House of Representatives designed a logo and flyer for their inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students (House of Representatives, 2016). Here an underlying motivation for participatory adaptation is to help the public differentiate ‘this particular inquiry’ from previous or other on-going inquiries. More user-friendly summary reports have also been used to improve accessibility of public communication.

Adaptation 2: Using digital interfaces to collect and manage public input

Committees are also making use of digital technologies to collect and manage public input. For example, some committees have been experimenting with using online questionnaires to elicit input from relevant groups and citizens. For example, some committees use on-line questionnaires to translate complex terms of reference into simple questions, and this can help elicit evidence from affected publics who might be deterred from providing input. For example, the Victorian Assembly developed an on-line survey to encourage young people to contribute to their farming inquiry (Parliament of Victoria, 2012).

Digital technologies are also used by committees to manage large volumes of public submissions. The rise of online activism and mobilisation has meant that for some high profile or controversial inquiries committees can be overwhelmed with public input especially when they come in the form of an on-line campaign pro forma (for example that has been promoted by a particular advocacy group). In some cases these e-campaigns do not speak to the specific terms of reference of an inquiry. To deal with mass forms of public input some committees have developed sophisticated ways to manage public inputs, most frequently by using their own tailored on-line questionnaire or pro-forma submission. For
example, the Senate anticipated receiving significant public interest in their consultation on Dying with Dignity legislation (Senate, 2014) and designed a pro-forma submission on their website. Over 4,700 submissions were made via the pro-forma. The aforementioned Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee’s 2014 inquiry into child support received over 11,000 questionnaire responses (House of Representatives, 2015). According to committee staff, this driver for innovation is both about finding better ways to deal with larger volumes, but also channelling public input into a format that is more ‘usable’ because it can easily be treated as a public submission (being relevant to and prepared for the inquiry.)

**Adaptation 3: Increasing accessibility to affected publics**

Committees in Australian Parliaments are also taking steps to be more accessible to affected publics. Some committees, for example, have reduced the formality of public hearings by offering interested people the opportunity to make shorter personal statements, which are then recorded and transcribed by Hansard. For example, at public hearings to discuss the ‘No Jab, No Pay’ federal legislation (which sought to tie the receipt of welfare payments to a child’s immunisation record) (Senate, 2015), community members were able to self-nominate, register and make short two-minute statements. In the Federal Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (Parliament of Australia, 2015a), formal written submissions were dispensed with and the public hearings (whilst still procedurally formal) were open Town Hall-style forums, with self-registration of contributors, rather than invited witnesses. For some inquires, committees are making a number of adaptations alongside formal procedures such as greater use of site visits, informal community meetings or discussions with affected publics. These informal settings provide committee members opportunities to learn more about the issues and meet and listen to affected publics. In many cases, the information brought to light in these more informal and accessible gatherings do not enjoy parliamentary privilege and are not published. This effectively means that while more accessible, these informal modes of public input can have less evidentiary value than a formal public hearing – a theme we return to in the discussion.

For some issues, committees may undertake extensive outreach work with relevant stakeholder groups and use these groups as a conduit to access ‘hard-to-reach’ publics. For example, a publicly trusted organisation may be commissioned to help elicit public input,
as was the case in the NSW Parliament’s Inquiry into Elder Abuse in New South Wales when it partnered with the NSW Law Society (NSW Parliament, 2016b) to host a consultation meeting with 30 Aboriginal Elders.

**Adaptation 4: Building participatory capacity**

Some parliamentary services are seeking to build the capacity of elected officials and stakeholders who might participate in the committee process. For example, according to parliamentary staff of the NSW parliament, a cultural awareness training program is now run for any committee members involved in inquiries concerning Indigenous affairs. The same parliament also runs workshops for community sector stakeholders on how to engage effectively with the committee process. These capacity-building adaptations aim to ensure that members and stakeholders can participate effectively and are equipped to help bring the voices of marginalised groups into an inquiry. These adaptations suggest that some committees are looking beyond procedural changes and seeking to shift the broader participatory culture of those being consulted and those listening.

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4 Parliament C, interviewed by authors 22 August 2016.
CAUTIOUS AD HOC ADAPTATION

While we find evidence of participatory adaptation in Australia’s parliamentary committees, most committees continue to rely heavily on conventional procedures for engaging the public, such as written public submissions and public hearings. Adaptation tends to operate within and alongside these standard procedures for public engagement in committees. In other words, most committees are cautiously adapting their standard participatory procedures, rather than embarking on radical reforms. Against the standards of democratic innovation (Smith, 2009), most adaptations we have identified are not particularly novel or innovative. Nevertheless, they do signal that parliaments are beginning to reconsider how they connect and engage with the public.

We turn now to analyse where and why these participatory adaptations are occurring. According to our interviewees, there is considerable variation in the appetite for, and extent of participatory innovation within and between Australian parliaments, particularly in the uptake of social media tools but also more generally. Some of this variation reflects the (inherent) differences between committees, houses and parliaments in Australia. Yet much of the variation in the form and extent of participatory adaptation is due to the nature of the inquiry topic. Our analysis finds that participatory adaptation was more common for highly complex, salient or sensitive policy issues. Examples of innovation are most common in committees inquiring into social policy issues, such as the work of the federal Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (Parliament of Australia, 2015a) or the inquiry into Elder Abuse undertaken by one of the Standing Committees of the New South Wales Legislative Council (NSW Parliament, 2016b), referred to above.

On the one hand, this picture of cautious and piecemeal participatory adaptation suggests that the standard consultative procedures of Australian parliamentary committees are adequately serving the needs of committees and their members. Yet on the other hand, according to parliamentary staff we interviewed in most committees, this is not the case. Instead, staff questioned the ongoing capacity of traditional approaches to engaging the public in committee inquiries, particular against the backdrop of declining public trust in

5 In this regard, our findings in the Australian context are consistent with Flinders et al.’s (2015) research on the British Parliament.
formal political institutions. More specifically, staff spoke of the potential dangers of relying solely on conventional participatory processes, arguing that it is imperative that they reform their participatory practices in order to remain relevant and connected to the people they serve. Our interviewees expressed concern that they risk being “left behind” or ignored by the public if they do not change their public outreach and engagement practices. Others felt that it was essential that parliaments and their committees were at the forefront of innovating. As one interviewee explained:

“We have to modernise Parliament and make it more relevant to people. We have to take control ourselves.”

Drivers and barriers of participatory adaptation
Overall most staff we interviewed were optimistic about the capacity of committees to adapt to the changing participatory and political conditions of contemporary politics. Interviewees described how committees and their members are looking for new ways not only to inform affected publics but to engage with them. However, when committee staff were probed about where and why participatory adaptations are occurring, we found there are both drivers and barriers to participatory reform (for an overview, see Table 1).

Table 1: Drivers and Barriers to Participatory Adaptation in Australian Parliamentary Committees

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drivers</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Changing public expectations and participatory preferences</td>
<td>• Resources</td>
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<td>• Dynamic communicative context</td>
<td>• Parliamentary illiteracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Increased complexity of policy issues</td>
<td>• Participatory disinterest or fatigue</td>
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<td>• Changing nature of politicians, parties and their role in parliament</td>
<td>• Community expectations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Parliamentary procedures and parliamentary privilege</td>
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According to our interviewees, one of the most significant drivers for adapting participatory practices in committees is the changing participatory expectations and preferences of the public.

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6 Parliament E, interviewed by authors, 19 September 2016.
public. For example, some committee staff commented that in their experience the public is increasingly demanding continual engagement and regular feedback in the form of updates, newsletters, footage online and via social media. At the same time, staff spoke of the need for committees to provide opportunities to connect with affected publics beyond ‘evidence-gathering’. This is especially important for contentious issues where parliamentary committees have to build and establish public trust and legitimacy before they can consult. So, for example, they make connections with communities in advance of hearings by undertaking community scoping visits or arranging informal meetings while doing site visits.

Relatedly, committee staff in Australian parliaments also commented on the changing communicative context of contemporary politics. According to many interviewees, digital technology offers committees opportunities to shift away from standard (and often more costly) approaches to communicating with the public. For example, rather than advertising the terms of reference of an inquiry in newspapers, some committees are able to make use of new communicative opportunities afforded by digital technologies, particularly websites, email and twitter. For committee staff, this typically means doing the same standard approaches, plus using alternative communicative platforms.

Committee staff also spoke of how contemporary committees operate in a crowded communicative space. Citizens can access multiple sources of information across diverse mediums and this makes the task of attracting public input and promoting informed public debate more difficult. Some interviewees referred to the danger of committees being ignored or left behind and the need to be able to “cut through” and get above the “white noise”. In response to this driver, some committees have invested heavily in branding committees with logos and publicity material to be more publicly present and relevant.

There is no doubt that the communicative context is also creating challenges for committees. On the one hand, digital technologies make reaching out to the public easier but according to parliamentary staff they also pose procedural and practical risks. Procedurally, committees have been particularly cautious in their use of interactive (rather

\footnote{Parliament B, interviewed by authors, 11 August 2016.}
than merely promotional) forms of social media, such as encouraging debate on Facebook or via Twitter, because of its ‘informality’ and thereby the lack of control over the content of debate. Digital technology also poses practical challenges in managing and processing large volumes of public input, which can occur in highly salient inquiries. This has led to committees conducting online surveys and establishing pro-formas to channel public input into more manageable formats, and ensure that public input relates to the committee’s Terms of Reference, as we discussed above.

Another driver of participatory adaptation identified by committee staff was the increased complexity of policy issues that are referred to committees. A number of interviewees explained how, for example, in many recent environmental and social policy committee inquiries, they had to completely ‘rethink’ how they sought to engage and communicate with the public. For such issues staff also referred to the challenge of the increasingly divided and contested nature of evidence, for example in inquiries into Coal Seam Gas (e.g. NSW Parliament, 2012). In some complex policy areas, there has been a broader push to include different voices and forms of evidence. For example, the Federal Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition (Parliament of Australia, 2015b) reached out in a range of ways to Indigenous communities seeking out informal, experiential evidence.

Finally, committees are also adapting their participatory practices in response to the changing nature of politicians, parties and their role in parliament. Staff explained how they were encouraged by members to bring in perspectives from ‘everyday people’, partly because they cannot always rely on their parties for policy positions. It is not that members reject the voices of established experts or interest groups, but that elected representatives wish to hear directly from ‘affected publics’ and not always through the voices of an organized interest group. Staff also talked about how politicians are changing; they are becoming increasingly social media savvy and expect to connect with the public using these tools in their committee work. Whilst staff asserted that some politicians are a driving force for participatory adaptation, a caveat was mentioned – the concern that members might not want to involve certain publics for fear of politicizing an issue.

While committee staff saw great value in engaging affected publics more productively and inclusively in committees, they identified numerous internal and external barriers to participatory adaptation. According to many interviewees, the most significant challenge to
adapting participatory practices is constrained resources; committees have limited staff, skills and time and this constrains their capacity to undertake community engagement differently or more extensively. The point was also made that public engagement is only one of many roles that parliamentary committees undertake.

Another internal barrier identified by staff was the institutional stickiness associated with parliamentary procedures, such as parliamentary privilege, that can prevent participatory adaptation in committees. More informal methods, including the use of social media, present a challenge to the safeguarding of parliamentary privilege, and this can inhibit more extensive use. As one staff member put it: ‘we are always worried about this.’ So while some participatory adaptations (such as digital technologies) are potentially making committees more accessible, they paradoxically generate forms of public input that have less evidentiary value than standard procedures such as a formal public hearing. Indeed the enduring use of written submissions and public hearings, according to some commentators, is in large part due to their formality and the ability for parliamentary privilege to be comfortably granted (Derigo, 2009).

It is interesting to note that interviews did not identify the members or political parties as barriers to participatory reform. On the contrary, staff described that most members were generally supportive of using innovative practices. This finding is consistent with Drum’s (2016) survey results from his study of committee chairs in the Western Australian Parliament. However, the relationship between political parties and participatory innovation in committees is a topic that deserves greater empirical scrutiny. Further research could usefully examine the extent to which party politics stifle innovation; or whether there is any evidence that new political movements (seeking to capture the party apparatus) are supportive of committee innovation? It could also be the case that individual politicians may push participatory innovation to raise their profile and demonstrate leadership potential, as has been the case in some parliaments (see Hendriks 2016).

Staff also cited a number of external barriers affecting the capacity of committees to adapt their participatory practices. Some interviewees, for example, described how they believe

8 Parliament C, interviewed by authors, 22 August 2016.
that the public are by and large ignorant of what parliamentary committees do. Several raised the issue of low levels of community awareness of parliament and committee work and how this ‘parliamentary illiteracy’ presents a barrier to be overcome before any sort of meaningful engagement is possible. A few interviewees also lamented that it can be very difficult to engage everyday people in committee inquiries because some issues are not perceived by the public as relevant or interesting. Others reflected on the fact that committee work can sometimes be a disappointment to the public either because of the difficulties of showing the impact of committee work or because people had not realized that committees are advisory (and not decision-making bodies). Staff relayed how some committee members are concerned about how to manage these community expectations successfully, especially for controversial or politically sensitive issues. Some interviewees expressed concerns about the additional challenge of connecting to, and engaging with, the public in a world of fast and abundant communication. In other cases, for example for high profile or controversial issues, staff have also experienced the challenge of trying to engage with publics that have been over-consulted and suffering participatory fatigue.

**STRATEGIC PARTICIPATORY ADAPTATION IN COMMITTEES**

The findings from this study indicate that changes to participatory practices in contemporary Australian parliamentary committees are rarely driven by strategic initiatives by parliaments or their committees. Instead we find that most experimentation with new or non-standard public engagement is ad-hoc, piecemeal and issue-based. On the one hand, this piecemeal approach enables ‘bespoke’ adaptations to be developed on a case-by-case basis in the context of specific inquiries, for example, on particularly sensitive or controversial issues. Yet such an ad-hoc approach does not necessarily lead to their reproduction over time, still less participatory adaptations across committees or parliaments. In other words, piecemeal participatory adaptation does not foster the kind of culture change and organisational learning that effective participatory reform requires (Nabatchi et al., 2012). Nor does it position parliamentary committees well in a landscape of changing political and participatory expectations.

Declining public trust in democratic institutions predicated on mass participation in political parties has serious implications for how parliamentary committees engage with the public. As citizens become distrustful of established political practices and institutions,
parliaments have to rethink how they engage with the public in order to secure democratic legitimacy (Leston-Bandeira, 2014). The hollowing out of mass party machines, along with their possible capture by new political movements, has potentially significant consequences for parliamentary committees, particularly which issues are delegated to committee, and how the concerns of potentially-affected publics are represented and considered in committee deliberations. Moreover, as membership in major parties declines, their capacity to develop and legitimately advocate for particularly policy agendas is weakened. In such a context the task of agenda setting shifts to other actors and venues, one of which is the parliamentary committee.

Committees also need to adapt to the changing communicative landscape of modern politics. Today the world of political communication is fast and more intense (Stoker et al., 2016). There are multiple avenues of expression and voice yet less spaces for reflection and listening (Ercan et al forthcoming). In this communicative abundance, parliamentary committees provide an important formal political institution that contributes to public deliberation by allowing citizens and affected groups to give testimony and share their perspectives, and to provide elected representatives the opportunity to listen to a broader range of ‘evidence’ and reflect on complex policy issues. More than ever before committees need to be responsive to their changing role as important sites of political expression and public deliberation by providing diverse opportunities for public engagement.

Committees also need to respond proactively to the changing participatory preferences of citizens. Increasingly citizens are engaging in politics via specific issues that they care about, such as the environment, education, consumer rights or health (Bang, 2009). They are also doing so in informal and practical ways. For example, they read about and share information and stories on social media, they sign online petitions, they boycott or consumer particular products, they crowdfund, they tweet, and they blog and comment online (Theocharis and van Deth, 2016; Loader et al., 2014). As one of parliaments’ most outward-reaching institutions, committees have an important role to play in ensuring that affected publics are connecting and providing input on significant issues. To do this effectively, committees need to be constantly adapting to the participatory preferences of citizens to ensure that they are reaching relevant publics and engaging them in ways they can, when they can.
Below we offer four suggestions for how parliamentary committee might adopt a more strategic approach to participatory reform.

First, a strategic approach to adapting participatory practices in committees would build capability among staff and encourage the sharing of innovative practices. In all but one Parliament we studied there was little evidence of regular interaction between committee staff within or between parliaments to share lessons in relation to public engagement, for example, through professional networks, or regular meetings. Some groups and fora do exist, such as the Australia and New Zealand Association of Clerks-at-the-Table (ANZACATT), and its Annual Presiding Officers and Clerks Conference, and the Australasian Study of Parliament Group (ASPG) with its annual conference and journal. However, a number of interviewees felt that additional fora and platforms were needed to facilitate more practical applied knowledge exchange among parliamentary staff both within and between parliaments. One notable exception here is the Victorian Parliament where committee staff from both upper and lower houses regularly interact, facilitated by their offices being located on the same floor. Victorian committee staff also described a strong sense of collective identity around committee work across the parliament as a whole.

A more strategic approach to participatory reform would involving creating and fostering communities of practice amongst committee staff within and between parliaments (see Wenger 1998). Again the recent experiences of the Parliament of Victoria are illuminating. Here the committees are actively adapting their standard participatory procedures as part of the Parliament’s broader strategic agenda to ‘open up’ to the public (Parliament of Victoria, 2014). Because participatory reform is being driven at the institutional (rather than committee or even inquiry) level, committees in the Parliament of Victoria have been more willing to experiment with ‘riskier’ participatory adaptations, such as using interactive aspects of social media in their inquiries to engage with affected publics.

Second, a more strategic approach to participatory adaptation would also foster stronger links between the public engagement work of parliamentary committees and the wider public education and engagement activities of parliaments (such as open days, school education programs and so on). One reinforces the other and so may engender a wider understanding (within both parliament and committees) of the role of public engagement in
committees. The recent experiences of the Victorian parliament would seem to demonstrate that a strategic approach to participatory reform facilitates synergies across parliament.

Third, a strategic approach to participatory reform could boost the democratic capacity of committees to act as important sites to represent the views of affected publics. As argued above, committees provide an important democratic resource for re-engaging the public in the work of parliament in an era of partisan dealignment. Taking this role seriously involves committees reaching out to the public for more than ‘evidence’ and thinking about how they can engage potentially affected publics more inclusively (Hendriks & Kay 2017). For example, our research finds that committees rely heavily on organised interests and articulate members of the public – a finding consistent with studies in other countries (Bonney, 2003; Davidson and Stark, 2011; Halpin et al., 2012). Moreover, we find that across all parliaments we studied, committees rely heavily on a self-referential process for selecting who to consult with in any given inquiry. According to several parliamentary staff, consultation for an inquiry typically begins with a list of people or groups that have either previously engaged in committee work or are prominent spokespeople for a particular policy issue known to committee members or parliamentary staff.9 This closed-loop system may be part of the explanation of why the routines of public engagement by committees are resistant to pressures for change. However, a strategic approach to participatory reform could encourage committees to be more inclusive by reaching out to affected publics in innovative ways, for example, by using stratified random sampling to engage everyday citizens (e.g. Hendriks 2016), or by experimenting with informal participatory mechanisms to attract ‘hard to reach’ or marginalised publics (e.g. Dermody et al., 2006).

Fourth, a more strategic approach to participatory adaptation would enable committees to address some of the broader institutional challenges of innovating within parliaments, such as the evidentiary standards required of public input. The practicalities of changing the status of evidence within parliamentary committees is not straightforward, and a theme that is worthy of further exploration. As a starting point, committee systems could usefully clarify and even raise the evidentiary value of the different forms of informal public input,  

9 Parliaments A, B and G, interviewed by authors, 11 August 2016; 15 August 2016 and 31 August 2016, respectively.
such as workshops, discussion groups, informal meetings, so that the outputs from these informal modes could have more weight in committee deliberations and their reports. Parliaments could also usefully clarify when parliamentary privilege applies, and improve the public availability of any relevant perspectives or policy knowledge obtained through informal consultations. For example, committees could routinely publish summaries of meetings or forums and thereby enable a broader range of policy perspectives to inform public debate.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary parliaments operate in a dynamic political and communicative landscape. Citizens are increasingly distrustful of formal political institutions and preferring to engage in politics in informal ways online and offline, rather than via political parties. How parliamentary committees are changing in this dynamic participatory and communicative context has been the central inquiry of this paper. Our empirical analysis of six Australian parliaments finds that, despite being a most likely case for innovation in public engagement, committees are adapting cautiously to the opportunities and challenges presented by new political and ICT developments. Committee secretariats remain relatively closed organizations where adaptations to how they engage with different publics tends to be ad hoc and piecemeal. For example, we find some cautious uptake of digital interfaces, such as Facebook and Twitter, for inviting public input and broadcasting committee findings, as well as some experimentation with informal participatory approaches to make committees more accessible to ‘hard to reach’ publics. There have also been attempts in a few committees to build participatory capacity in parliamentary members and civil society groups.

This study has brought to light the perspectives of committee staff on the drivers and barriers to participatory reform. Several committees are experimenting with new forms of communication and engagement in response to changing community expectations about public involvement in public decisions, and the extent and speed of feedback from public institutions. Staff reported that members of parliament are increasingly requesting to consult more extensively with affected publics. Elected representatives want to hear beyond the experts and organized groups, and collect experiential ‘evidence’ from ordinary people.
These are the views of managers and staff responsible for committees; and we recognise that these may differ from those of elected representatives, experts, interest groups, and affected publics. Further research is needed to better understand how different groups view the role of public engagement in parliamentary committees and how it has been adapting (or not), and how it might be improved.

Experimentation with new participatory procedures tends to emerge out of particular inquiries, rather than as part of a broader strategic goal by parliaments or committee system to reform participatory practices. Most instances of participatory adaptation represent incremental responses by committee staff to gather relevant evidence for their reports. In other words, participatory adaptation is emerging to assist committees fulfill their epistemic task of ensuring that committees collate all relevant evidence on a particular issue under inquiry. Our research also found there was considerable variation across jurisdictions suggesting that participatory adaptation may be more likely in some particular institutional contexts than others. Further research could usefully shed comparative light on how participatory adaptation varies between different institutional, organisational and cultural features of different parliaments.

The participatory potential of contemporary parliamentary committees is yet to be fully realised. In an era of fast and abundant political communication, parliamentary committees provide rare spaces for informed and inclusive public deliberation. They bring important information and perspectives into the political arena and provide important conduits for citizens, groups and experts to express and share their views. How well committees can play these roles in our contemporary democratic systems relies on their capacity to change and be relevant, connected and responsive to diverse publics. To this end, we argue that committee systems need to shift from ad-hoc participatory incrementalism to adopting a coherent agenda of reform that pushes all committees to experiment beyond conventional practices to engage more productively and inclusively with the public.
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