Politics and Governance
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10589
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10589

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

The Invisible Architects of Public Engagement: Understanding the Different Types of Roles Played by Parliamentary Staff

Sofia Serra-Silva [1] and Cristina Leston-Bandeira [2]

[1] Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal
[2] School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, UK

Correspondence: Sofia Serra-Silva (sofia.silva@ics.ulisboa.pt)

Submitted: 30 April 2025 **Accepted:** 15 July 2025 **Published:** 7 August 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Understanding the Role of Political Staff and Parliamentary Administrations" edited by Gijs Jan Brandsma (Radboud University) and Anna-Lena Högenauer (University of Luxembourg), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i445

Abstract

Although public engagement has become a cornerstone of modern parliamentary functions, the role of parliamentary staff in shaping it remains largely neglected and understudied. Whilst the literature acknowledges that staff have been key in the development of public engagement in legislatures, we do not know in what ways. This oversight neglects a crucial aspect: the administration of parliament is not just a backdrop but the very foundation of a functioning parliament, being particularly noticeable and significant within the realm of public engagement, a relatively recent activity for parliaments beyond their traditional functions of legislation, scrutiny, and representation. This article addresses this gap by uncovering the hidden contributions of parliamentary staff in the development of public engagement. We adopt an interpretive qualitative research approach, drawing on 37 semi-structured elite interviews with officials and MPs of the parliaments of Austria, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. Through thematic analysis, we develop a novel typology that identifies six roles staff play in parliamentary public engagement: institutional innovator, knowledge facilitator, strategic decision facilitator, guarantor of institutional legitimacy, coordinator and operational manager, and evaluator and monitor. Our analysis shows the pivotal part these six roles play in navigating the complex interplay between the political and the non-political dimensions of a parliamentary setting, which have been crucial to push forward the agenda of public engagement within legislatures.

Keywords

officials; parliamentary administrations; parliamentary staff; parliaments; public engagement; roles; typology of parliamentary staff

1. Introduction

Parliaments across democracies are increasingly expected to be transparent, responsive, and meaningfully connected to the citizens they represent (Dryzek et al., 2019; Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Leston-Bandeira & Siefken, 2023). This expectation has led to a considerable expansion of public engagement initiatives by parliaments in recent years, ranging from accessible information provision to participatory mechanisms such as e-petitions and deliberative forums (Leston-Bandeira, 2016). While scholars have explored how parliaments develop these practices and engage with the public (e.g., Bernardes & Leston-Bandeira, 2016; Odeyemi et al., 2023; Prior & Stirbu, 2023; Serra-Silva, 2022), far less attention has been paid to the role played by administrative actors in developing these initiatives, despite research indicating the crucial role that staff play in the development and implementation of public engagement (Judge & Leston-Bandeira, 2018).

The development of the parliamentary public engagement function has meant an expansion of parliamentary functions beyond legislatures' traditional ones of legislation, scrutiny, and representation (Leston-Bandeira, 2014). This has represented significant institutional development and the need for very different types of skill-sets to the traditional parliamentary ones around the drafting and checking of legislation, such as digital communication skills. Parliamentary public engagement initiatives include five types of activities: information, education, communication, consultation, and participation, all of which are interconnected to provide for meaningful forms of citizen engagement (Inter-Parliamentary Union & United Nations Development Programme, 2022; Leston-Bandeira & Siefken, 2023). The expansion of parliaments' function of public engagement has, therefore, led to a considerable expansion in the recruitment of very different types of staff, and/or re-training of existing staff, in new competence areas. Yet, the contributions of parliamentary officials to the public engagement role remain largely underexplored and theorized in academic research. As a result, the literature on their role in public engagement remains fragmented and underdeveloped.

Despite often invisible to the public eye, these officials play a key role in operationalizing parliaments' public engagement activity. Officials operate at the nexus of political and institutional interests, navigating the complex interplay between elected members' preferences, institutional mandates, and evolving public expectations—making their role essential to understanding how parliaments connect with the public in practice. This article seeks to uncover and understand the hidden contributions of parliamentary staff, highlighting their pivotal role in fostering, developing, and implementing public engagement activity. Drawing from empirical data, we develop a novel typology that aims to identify the different types of roles played by parliamentary staff in public engagement. It is worth noting that administrative actors are also referred to as officials, staff, administrators, or secretaries; in this article, we adopt the terms staff and officials and use them interchangeably to refer to politically neutral civil servants who ensure parliaments' daily functioning (T. Christiansen et al., 2021), excluding staff employed by MPs and/or party groups. Our analysis focuses, therefore, on institutional roles developed by non-political staff.

The article's research question is: What roles do parliamentary staff play in shaping public engagement activity by legislatures? To answer this, we draw on qualitative data from elite semi-structured interviews with both MPs and officials conducted in three national parliaments: Austria, Portugal, and the UK. These cases were selected not only for their institutional diversity, but also because each parliament was undergoing notable engagement-related reforms at the time of fieldwork. This approach enables us to trace staff contributions

during *critical junctures of institutional change*—key moments of significant institutional reform in how these institutions connect with citizens, when officials' role is likely to be more visible, contested, and consequential for the design of engagement strategies and tools.

Through the narratives of those directly involved in public engagement efforts, we identify six different roles played by staff in public engagement: institutional innovator, knowledge facilitator, strategic decision facilitator, guarantor of institutional legitimacy, coordinator and operational manager, and evaluator and monitor. In doing so, this study contributes to the growing literature on public engagement in representative institutions, advancing our understanding of the central yet often invisible work of those who support and sustain these transformations from within legislative institutions. It also makes a broader contribution towards the understanding of how legislatures work, by spotlighting the critical role played by parliamentary staff, particularly in areas that go beyond the traditional functions of legislation, scrutiny, and representation.

2. Parliamentary Officials and Public Engagement

The body of literature on parliamentary officials within national legislatures remains relatively small but is steadily expanding (e.g., Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; T. Christiansen et al., 2021, 2023), although often concentrated on Anglo-Saxon legislatures (e.g., Crewe, 2017; Geddes & Mulley, 2018). This growing body of work highlights the indispensable role of parliamentary administrations, noting that "it would be practically impossible for parliaments to play a meaningful role within a given political system without the support of a well-resourced and independent administrative structure" (T. Christiansen et al., 2021, p. 480). Despite their central role in supporting democratic institutions, parliamentary officials remain "almost completely concealed from public view" (T. Christiansen et al., 2021, p. 481). Scholars have long addressed the invisibility of legislative staff (e.g., Fox & Hammond, 1978; Laube et al., 2020; Romzek & Utter, 1997). Some have even argued that keeping staff—particularly those who advise elected members—out of sight serves a legitimising function, helping to stabilise the political system by preserving the primacy of elected representatives (Laube et al., 2020). This *structural invisibility* has contributed to the underrepresentation of parliamentary officials in legislative studies, even as their responsibilities have expanded in both scope and complexity. For instance, their growing professionalisation has not only enhanced parliaments' capacity to perform their core functions, but also reduced their dependence on the executive (Egeberg et al., 2015).

The marginalisation of these "background workers"—according to Star and Strauss's (1999) conceptualisation of *invisible work*—can be traced to enduring assumptions about the role of administrative actors. Rooted in the classical theory of neutral competence (Kaufman, 1956), these assumptions portray civil servants as impartial executors of political decisions, rather than as actors who exercise agency, discretion, and strategic influence. Within the Weberian ideal of bureaucracy, these professionals are envisioned as career officials, selected on the basis of objective criteria, and expected to uphold the principles of neutrality (Weber, 1978, as cited in Barberis, 2011). This understanding as a politically neutral apparatus reinforces long-standing methodological and normative biases that perceive elected representatives as the primary or sole agents of institutional action in parliamentary settings, leaving the contributions of staff underexplored and under-theorised.

This conventional understanding of neutrality warrants closer scrutiny. As Öhberg et al. (2017) note, public servants operate in inherently politicised environments and, while not overtly partisan, they influence political processes through their advice and expertise. Baxter (1991) likewise argues that officials shape implicitly

political decisions, exercising subtle forms of agency. P. M. Christiansen et al. (2016) further highlight that besides policy advice, civil servants offer political-tactical guidance—deciding not just what is communicated to elected officials, but how, when, and through which channels, with Yong et al. (2019) pointing to tensions that can develop as a consequence. Though often framed as neutral, such contributions reveal a more strategic role. Acknowledging this complexity moves us beyond idealised bureaucratic models toward a more realistic view of how administrative actors shape parliamentary action, not only in traditional core legislative work, but also in new adjacent areas. As parliaments have become more professionalised and complex institutions (Loewenberg, 2011), they have come to rely on staff managing a broader array of functions—from security to catering—far beyond the traditional domains of legislation, scrutiny, or representation.

One such domain is public engagement: a relatively recent and multifaceted parliamentary activity (Leston-Bandeira, 2014; Leston-Bandeira & Siefken, 2023; Serra-Silva, 2022; Walker et al., 2019), which requires skills and expertise beyond the traditional clerkly profile that supports parliamentary business activity—skills such as communication, digital, facilitation, and teaching, which would not traditionally have been part of parliamentary job descriptions and which consist today the core of sustaining parliaments' attempts to better engage citizens. Judge and Leston-Bandeira (2018, p. 168) argue that parliamentary public engagement relies heavily on "non-partisan institutional claim-makers or parliamentary officials." Whereas in other areas of parliamentary work staff may indeed be almost invisible, often in the case of public engagement, staff are the only actors the public has contact with.

A small number of studies have acknowledged the singular importance of officials in supporting the development of parliamentary public engagement (e.g., Judge & Leston-Bandeira, 2018; Leston-Bandeira, 2014; Pollak & Slominski, 2014; Serra-Silva, 2023), but we still lack systematic analyses of their concrete contributions and institutional influence in shaping these processes. The centrality of officials to public engagement often surfaces indirectly through the methods employed in existing research, with officials emerging as key informants in many studies. Scholars routinely rely on interviews with parliamentary staff (e.g., Dai & Norton, 2007; Feulner & Guéguin, 2023; Judge & Leston-Bandeira, 2018; Serra-Silva, 2022; Sheldon, 2023) with some using surveys of officials (e.g., Coleman, 2006). These methodological choices suggest a recognition—implicit if not always theoretically developed—of the knowledge and agency officials bring to public engagement processes within parliaments.

Despite this, analysis is rarely centred on the specific role of parliamentary officials in public engagement or the unique challenges they encounter in this capacity. In much of the literature, *officials act as storytellers*, providing crucial insights into parliamentary engagement processes, yet they are rarely positioned as the protagonists of these narratives or the targets of such analysis. As an exception to this, Judge and Leston-Bandeira (2018) show that through their work on public engagement, parliamentary officials perform a representational role: the institutional representation of parliament, whereby the institution is (re)presented to the public primarily by non-elected officials, due to the nature of public engagement activity which places officials in direct contact with citizens, with MPs often absent. But they do not explore the different facets of this role. Similarly, research focusing on parliamentary officials often neglects this increasingly critical aspect of their work nowadays: engaging citizens. The recent *Routledge Handbook of Parliamentary Administration* (2023) briefly notes that many parliaments are "opening up their proceedings and indeed their buildings to the public," placing new demands on staff and requiring "additional skills and resources" (T. Christiansen, et al., 2023, p. 10). Yet, this dimension remains largely unexplored, both theoretically and empirically.

Parliament's public engagement activity encompasses five types of activities: disseminating information about parliamentary business, educating the public about parliament and its processes, communicating parliamentary business, facilitating consultation mechanisms to bring citizens' views on matters being discussed in parliament, and providing opportunities for participation in decision-making (Leston-Bandeira & Siefken, 2023). While elected representatives are often the public face of these initiatives, case studies from the European, Scottish, and UK parliaments suggest that much of this work is carried out by parliamentary staff rather than politicians themselves (Judge & Leston-Bandeira, 2018). It is these non-political institutional figures who often bear the responsibility of fostering public understanding, building trust, and shaping the perception of parliament as an accessible and legitimate institution (Judge & Leston-Bandeira, 2018). In more practical terms, they are often those who deliver public engagement initiatives, not elected representatives. See, for instance, the delivery of a parliamentary education workshop or the consideration of whether to admit a petition and its respective response to the petitioner.

Indeed, emerging studies indicate that parliamentary officials may play a more substantive role in public engagement than is often assumed. Beyond maintaining websites, managing information flows, or handling the data generated by these activities, some evidence suggests they are involved in identifying "possible routes and practices" for engagement, navigating "contested points," and setting internal priorities that can shape the overall direction of public engagement (Serra-Silva, 2023, p. 12). In this view, officials are not merely passive administrators, but may act as *influential architects* of engagement practices, configuring how public engagement is conceived, operationalised, and sustained. Thus, potentially determining how parliaments approach public engagement and build their relationship with the public.

These responsibilities build, partly, on the established role of officials as "information brokers," whose tasks involve filtering, summarising, and synthesising information for use by elected members (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024). In other domains, such as European Union affairs, officials have been shown to function as part of an "information network" aimed at enhancing institutional knowledge through the collection, interpretation, and exchange of data across national parliaments (Neuhold & Högenauer, 2016). Further contributions have hinted at their involvement in monitoring public engagement initiatives in other legislatures, analysing external practices, and exchanging information and best practices with peers (Serra-Silva, 2023).

Nevertheless, this literature leaves significant blind spots. First, there is little systematic empirical research on how officials shape and support parliamentary public engagement, how this role is enacted in practice, and with what consequences. Second, existing studies are largely limited to Anglo-Saxon parliaments, with little comparative work. Finally, no typology has yet captured the multiple roles officials perform in this domain. This article addresses these gaps by drawing on original interview data across three contrasting parliamentary settings. To fully understand how parliaments connect with citizens, we expand the analytical focus by examining in detail the often-invisible roles administrative actors play behind the scenes, and by challenging the assumption of bureaucratic neutrality to critically assess how these actors shape public engagement—sometimes reflecting, sometimes transcending political intentions. As stated in the introduction, we focus on institutional staff working for the parliament, not those working for MPs and/or party groups. Drawing inspiration from Brandsma and Otjes' (2024) categorisation of roles played by parliamentary staff, we develop our own typology to capture the specific roles officials play in public engagement. Thus, by centering on administrative actors, this research broadens legislative studies, highlighting how non-elected staff mediate between legislatures and the public, translating abstract engagement norms into concrete organizational practices.

3. Research Design, Methods, and Data

To analyze the role and contributions of parliamentary staff in shaping public engagement, this study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach based on semi-structured elite interviews in three national parliaments (UK, Portugal, and Austria) at *critical junctures of institutional change* in each parliament's approach to public engagement.

In the UK, interviews were conducted in late 2010, early in Speaker Bercow's tenure, which was pivotal to the introduction of significant reforms to enhance public engagement. This period encompasses key milestones in the development of greater accessibility and engagement at the UK Parliament (Leston-Bandeira et al., 2025), constituting therefore a critical moment to examine parliamentary staff's contributions to public engagement. In Austria, interviews were conducted in late 2018, a pivotal moment when the Austrian Parliament was implementing its Media Center, culminating in the launch of the *Mediathek* the subsequent year. This platform introduced a video-on-demand system, providing access to plenary debates, a podcast series, and explanatory videos about parliamentary processes and events. Portugal's interviews took place in 2019, following the work of the Digital Parliament working group, which brought together parliamentary officials and MPs, representing the most significant institutional reform so far on engagement. Thus, these distinct yet significant moments of *institutional change* allow us to capture parliamentary staff's evolving responsibilities and strategic contributions in shaping public engagement.

Furthermore, these cases also reflect variation in how parliaments are structured and operate, including differences in administrative capacity, staff size, and internal organisational arrangements. While the analysis does not aim to provide a systematic comparison across cases, this institutional diversity enhances the study's analytical depth by situating the role of officials within diverse democratic settings. By examining the role of staff across distinct parliamentary contexts—from the larger and more centralised administration of the UK, to the comparatively small-scale structure of the Portuguese parliament, where parliamentary groups rather than MPs are the central unit of organisation—we are able to observe staff involvement in public engagement across different institutional logics and constraints. Such variation allows us to explore how the same role is enacted across contrasting democratic settings and how officials' agency is shaped, thus offering insights that extend beyond a single institutional setting.

We interviewed key actors involved in parliamentary public engagement, using purposive and snowball sampling strategies (Mosley, 2013). This included parliamentary officials working in communication, education, and outreach roles, politicians involved in public engagement reforms or who held official positions within the administrative body, as well as external experts specializing in parliamentary affairs, and staff from inter-parliamentary institutions (IPI) such as the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD), which actively contribute to agenda-setting, benchmarking, and professionalisation in the field of public engagement (Serra-Silva, 2023). Including these perspectives enabled a more comprehensive mapping of the evolving role of officials in the broader institutional ecosystems in which engagement practices are embedded. This selection led to 37 semi-structured interviews across the three parliaments (21 officials, 9 MPs, 5 experts, and 2 IPI's representatives), ensuring a balanced examination of both administrative and political dimensions. This approach avoids a one-sided perspective and enables a deeper contextual understanding. Interviewees were asked about parliamentary public engagement processes, activities, and dynamics, with a particular focus on the role of both political

and non-political actors at different stages of policy development and implementation. The list of interviewees (anonymized) is available in Appendix 2 (in the Supplementary File).

At the beginning of each interview, we assured participants that their anonymity would be preserved. To ensure a natural flow of conversation, the order of topics was adjusted, and follow-up questions were used to obtain deeper insights and clarify meanings (Legard et al., 2003). Interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were audio-recorded, and followed an informed consent procedure.

All interviews were fully transcribed either manually or using Sonix software and analyzed using MAXQDA software. We conducted an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), beginning with a careful reading of the transcripts to identify initial themes (or codes) and develop a preliminary coding scheme, allowing for the systematic identification of recurring themes and patterns. A theme, in this context, represents a meaningful segment of text, ranging from a single sentence to a group of sentences. As we progressed, themes were compared, refined, and organized into a hierarchical coding structure, where lower-level themes remained closer to the interviewees' statements (semantic level), while higher-level themes reflected more abstract, conceptual interpretations (latent level; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Findings

The interviews reveal six interrelated roles through which parliamentary officials contribute to public engagement. Inductively identified through qualitative content analysis, these roles reflect the varied ways officials support, design, and implement engagement across settings. They are not mutually exclusive: officials may adopt multiple roles concurrently or shift between them depending on institutional context and the phase of an initiative. Each role, however, captures a distinct facet of administrative practice and is analysed in relation to the structural and institutional conditions that shape how officials perform that role. While parliaments differ in their administrative configurations, we observe no major variation in the types of roles identified. This does not rule out differences in degree, but such variations are not present systematically across contexts. Table 1 summarises the roles in the typical sequence of engagement

Table 1. Summary of key roles of officials in parliamentary public engagement.

Role	Description	Presence
Institutional innovator	Identifies and promotes new tools and strategies for engagement, driving modernization	Less prevalent
Knowledge facilitator	Gathers, synthesizes, and disseminates information, best practices, and research insights	Prevalent
Strategic decision facilitator	Shapes engagement agendas, mediates between actors, and acts as co-producer	Prevalent
Guarantor of institutional legitimacy	Prevents unworkable or harmful reforms, ensuring feasibility and compliance with democratic principles	Less prevalent
Coordinator & operational manager	Delivers public engagement initiatives and ensures efficient management on a daily basis	Prevalent
Evaluator & monitor	Assesses the effectiveness of engagement strategies, tracks impact, and provides recommendations	Prevalent

practices—from ideation to implementation and evaluation—and highlights their relative prevalence in the data, illustrated below (in the text) with representative quotes. The coding scheme used is provided in Appendix 2 (in the Supplementary File).

4.1. Institutional Innovators

The first role identified in the typology is that of *institutional innovator*. Although this role appears less frequently across interviews, it is analytically significant. In this capacity, parliamentary officials act as innovators bringing forward new ideas, advocating for reform, and driving experimentation in public engagement. While not as prevalent as other roles, when present, it plays a critical role in steering parliaments toward more adaptive, modern, and open institutions.

Innovation in parliamentary settings—understood as a deliberate departure from the *status quo*—manifests most visibly through strategic planning, digital transformation, and institutional modernization. Officials have played a central role in steering technological shifts and shaping long-term visions for engagement infrastructure. As one official described: "We're currently launching a completely new five-year strategy, which includes shifting as much as possible to cloud-based and shared services to reduce costs wherever feasible." (official, interview 35). These kinds of forward-looking strategies reflect an ambition not only to modernize internal systems, but to enhance the flexibility and accessibility of public-facing services.

In the field of digital communication, officials have often been at the forefront of efforts to transform parliamentary data into open, user-friendly formats. Recalling the UK Parliament's digital overhaul in 2010, one official emphasized this shift: "Our entire goal now is to produce all content of public interest in XML format, so that anyone can re-analyse it, reuse it, integrate it into other systems, or simply consume it in new ways" (official, interview 35). This statement captures a broader orientation toward transparency and interoperability—core values in the digital governance agenda.

In some cases, administrative proposals for reform even preceded political mandates. In Portugal, for example, officials recall initiating change before the creation of formal working groups. As one noted: "Before the Digital [Parliament] working group was created, our services had already proposed a reform of the website. It might not have been as deep, but it started from within the services" (official, interview 2). A similar pattern can be found in Austria, where officials were instrumental in advocating for the mobile optimisation of the parliamentary website. Yet institutional change was not immediate. As one official recounted: "It took a long time to convince management that we needed mobile optimisation. We started talking about it five or six years ago" (official, interview 9). The delayed uptake notwithstanding, such testimony reflects the persistent efforts of administrative actors to modernize parliamentary infrastructure—often through long-term advocacy and persuasion.

In certain contexts, innovation emerges not from political leadership but from within the administrative teams of parliament. A good example comes from Portugal's Youth Parliament, where the idea to create an Instagram account originated not from elected officials but from staff. As one MP recalled: "It was the administration that proposed the idea of using Instagram for the Youth Parliament" (MP, interview 15). This instance illustrates how administrative actors can act as crucial agents of change, shaping the environment in which innovation becomes possible.

Thus officials themselves initiate change and advocate for novel approaches to public engagement—challenging the notion that parliamentary administrations are merely reactive, peripheral, or even politically neutral actors in democratic practice (Baxter, 1991; P. M. Christiansen et al., 2016). When officials propose new strategies to reach the public or take the lead in advancing engagement initiatives, they do more than demonstrate a proactive approach—they reveal underlying normative understandings of how democratic institutions should relate to citizens. These actions often reflect a commitment to values such as openness, accessibility, responsiveness, and participation. In this sense, officials are not only exercising discretion within existing frameworks, but also articulating a vision of what parliaments ought to be in a democratic society.

However, innovative ideas alone are rarely sufficient to shift institutional practices. Officials are often acutely aware of the limitations they face. As one put it: "We face certain restrictions when trying to implement new things within the architecture of the parliamentary website" (official, interview 6). In such instances, officials often find themselves needing to "make the case" to persuade political actors. As another official put it:

> We need to look closely, listen carefully, and understand the context of the politicians we work with. Sometimes, we know our ideas won't be implemented in full—but what we can do as an administration is explain them, make the case. (official, interview 9)

In doing so, officials do more than propose ideas—they actively and strategically advance the public engagement agenda and shape its direction.

This tension between administrative initiative and political authority is echoed in other settings. In the UK, one senior official explained: "Among certain officials here, there's a lot of frustration. We needed something like the Modernisation Committee to give authority to the principles and the idea" (official, interview 27). The same dynamic is acknowledged in Portugal, where one official noted: "The services can proactively make proposals, but they obviously require political validation and involvement" (official, interview 2). As another put it, "Political will is a very important factor. It's the click—the moment someone presses the button and things move forward" (official, interview 1). This view is not limited to officials. Some MPs recognize the limits of administrative initiative: "We can't expect the official to simply hand me the political and technological solution to a problem that, in the first instance, is political" (MP, interview 5). Ultimately, these accounts reaffirm a key insight from the literature: civil servants operate within politicised institutional environments where their autonomy is shaped—and often constrained—by the need for political buy-in, strategic alignment, and resource availability (Öhberg et al., 2017). Innovation from below may plant the seed, but it is political will that determines whether it takes root.

4.2. Knowledge Facilitators

The longstanding role of parliamentary officials in gathering, synthesizing, and delivering information to MPs is well documented. Traditionally, officials have provided legislators with policy analysis, legal interpretation, and comparative insights. In the realm of public engagement, this role is very prevalent and crucial, having expanded. Officials act as *knowledge facilitators* by identifying best practices, evaluating emerging tools and trends, and advising on the implementation of new strategies. As one official explained, their responsibility includes "providing information on how other parliaments approach these matters" (official, interview 18).

A key aspect of their role involves proactive inquiry: "We sent questions to all parliaments asking how they engage with citizens" (official, interview 2). Parliamentary officials routinely turn to inter-parliamentary networks such as the ECPRD and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) to stay informed and navigate institutional change (Serra-Silva, 2023). This is particularly relevant in the realm of public engagement, which remains a relatively new area for many parliaments (Leston-Bandeira & Siefken, 2023). For instance, they draw extensively on international guidelines to inform their work and ensure alignment with broader democratic norms, as noted by officials: "We rely on the recommendations of the IPU," or "There is also a guide on parliaments and social media that we consulted during the website renewal" (official, interview 2). The platforms offered by these institutions, for example through seminars, support the exchange of experiences and enable officials to "understand the potential of these new tools … and how to translate that understanding into the organization of parliamentary processes" (official, interview 2). This includes technical assistance and advice on the delivery of essential administrative services such as "restructuring the parliamentary website" or "managing social networks" (officials, interviews 18 and 22). Such exchanges also take place through visits to peer institutions: "I went over and met the Swedish team just before the summer" (official, interview 33). Altogether, through these networks and exchanges, officials become equipped with the necessary knowledge and expertise to "build strategies of public engagement" (official, interview 2).

While MPs rely on staff for independent information (Otjes, 2022), parliamentary officials draw on transnational networks to access context-sensitive knowledge about public engagement. These exchanges help them identify and adapt engagement practices, digital tools, and outreach strategies to their own institutional environments—offering, as one put it, "a better picture of what is possible and works" (official, interview 2). Officials act thus as internal knowledge brokers (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024), ensuring that insights from abroad inform domestic engagement efforts, even when outcomes fall short. As a senior Austrian official recalled, staff provided examples from other countries during a 2014 inquiry committee on democratic reform, "but in the end, the essential reform steps…were not translated into legislation" (official, interview 6). Acting as knowledge facilitators involves identifying feasible modes of citizen interaction, anticipating institutional and political constraints, and helping to define priorities for public engagement, even if ultimately the political will does not take these forward.

Moreover, officials actively contribute to the broader ecosystem of democratic innovation within parliaments by cultivating sustained relationships with academic institutions, think tanks, and civil society organizations. In doing so, they function as key nodes within institutional knowledge networks (Neuhold & Högenauer, 2016). These collaborations enrich the knowledge available to parliaments, potentially enhancing the value of public engagement initiatives, particularly during periods of institutional experimentation: "when something is still being created, many contributions come from society" (official, interview 21). Officials also recognize the need for deeper partnerships to better understand public needs: "We need to understand—together with civil society—what people actually need, and what we are doing wrong" (official, interview 36). Drawing on external expertise to support institutional learning, officials increasingly act as knowledge facilitators, integrating evidence and societal input into public engagement strategies and initiatives.

4.3. Strategic Decision Facilitator

In some contexts, officials also contribute meaningfully through their strategic involvement as decision influencers and facilitators. When given a seat at the table—whether formally, through participation in working groups or committees, or informally, through access to senior decision-making spaces—officials act as *strategic decision facilitators*, helping to shape institutional priorities, align administrative actions with political goals, and translate abstract objectives into operational plans.

A notable example is the inclusion of staff as full members of a public engagement working group in Portugal (2016–2018), where heads of parliamentary services participated alongside MPs in strategy development and decision-making. Their involvement, described as "fundamental," "fruitful," and "extremely important" (MPs, interviews 4, 8, 14), was seen as critical to successful implementation: "If only one of the two dimensions, representative or administrative, had been involved, decisions would likely have failed, as has happened before" (MP, interview 4). Similar patterns are evident in the UK parliament, where officials are increasingly recognised as strategic actors: "I've been invited for the first time to a senior management event…so it signals they're starting to realise how essential it is to seek out our contribution" (official, interview 33). These examples illustrate how officials, when engaged as active stakeholders, contribute not only to implementation but also to the early development and strategic direction of parliamentary initiatives.

Such examples reflect the value of integrating the institutional memory, logistical expertise, and practical insights that officials bring into strategic conversations about public engagement. Officials ensure that engagement planning is grounded in operational reality and not confined to purely theoretical or abstract discussions. As one parliamentary official noted: "Bringing both politicians and officials into the same forum diversified and enriched the discussion" (official, interview 2). Similarly, an MP highlighted the pragmatic benefits of this inclusion: "Many times, MPs engage in conversations on these matters that remain purely theoretical. The presence of representatives from all services in every meeting—actively participating and co-developing solutions—allowed us to identify real-life bottlenecks and challenges" (MP, Interview 14). Engaging officials as critical stakeholders also fosters a more collaborative institutional environment. By involving officials from the outset, MPs strengthen their working relationships with staff, improving overall institutional cohesion. As one MP observed: "If staff were not motivated and did not feel part of the solution, they would hardly contribute. This approach fostered an unprecedented relationship between staff—who represent nearly 400 people in this institution—and MPs" (MP, interview 14).

In several cases, regardless of whether officials hold a formal seat at the decision-making table, they lead critical aspects of institutional strategy by defining and coordinating the strategic direction of public engagement. As one senior official explained, "We've been developing a website strategy and an intranet strategy" (official, interview 33), with another reflecting on their involvement in shaping long-term priorities: "I was involved in thinking about web strategy and the origin of the recent push" (official, interview 35).

Once again, when officials exercise discretion in shaping engagement priorities and defining institutional goals, they are actively operationalizing their *own normative understandings of what parliaments ought to do*. This challenges the conventional image of parliamentary administrators as neutral or impartial executors of political decisions (T. Christiansen et al., 2021; Kaufman, 1956), revealing them instead as actors who exercise agency, apply discretion, and exert strategic influence within the institutional sphere. Their ability to do so is rooted

in the longevity and continuity of their roles, which affords them institutional memory and a platform to shape long-term agendas. As one expert put it, "MPs come and go, but officials remain—they are part of the House" (expert, interview 10). A similar view was echoed by a MP, who stressed the importance of having "a technical team that guarantees continuity, regardless of political cycles" (MP, interview 14). Yet officials also acknowledge the limits of their influence, noting that sometimes they feel like they are "following things rather than leading them" and "a bit more remote from the big strategic decisions" (official, interview 36). These dynamics illustrate that access to strategic influence does not always equate to strategic authority.

4.4. Guarantor of Institutional Legitimacy

Beyond initiating or coordinating public engagement strategies, officials also play a quieter but equally essential role: that of guarantor of institutional legitimacy. In this capacity, officials often act as custodians of core democratic principles and institutional values. Drawing on their procedural knowledge and long-term perspective, they work to ensure that engagement practices are legally sound, democratically meaningful, and consistent with the symbolic identity of parliament. They intervene when proposals—even when well-intentioned—risk undermining the legitimacy, accessibility, or neutrality of parliamentary institutions.

This role was made particularly explicit in a case recounted by one Austrian official who intervened when an MP proposed abolishing the right to petition, claiming that citizen initiatives had rendered petitions redundant. The official pushed back, framing petitions as foundational democratic tools: "I had to engage in extensive discussions with many politicians on the committee to explain—both as an official and as a citizen—why petitions are crucial" (official, interview 12). This episode illustrates how, sometimes, officials act as *guarantors of institutional legitimacy*, stepping in to prevent regressions in democratic practice.

Acting as a guarantor also requires navigating subtle institutional risks. Internal debates over the public use of parliamentary video content illustrate this tension: "We've had a big debate about whether MPs or others can embed chamber footage … to maintain the integrity of the House and avoid ridicule or satire" (official, interview 33). Though technical on the surface, such debates reveal how officials balance openness against reputational risk, managing public access while protecting the institution's image in a rapidly evolving media environment. Officials also recognize their communicative role: "To say things that are both interesting but also neutral—that is hard, but … we know how to do that" (official, interview 33). Here, neutrality is not passive—it is strategic, enacted through communicative practices designed to engage the public in a non-partisan manner while preserving and projecting the institution's official identity: "Neutrality is fundamental to ensure that parliament is perceived as legitimate and impartial, especially in the context of social media and digital communication," as noted by a Portuguese oficial (interview 23).

This role involves designing institutional encounters that are open and meaningful. One official described efforts to rethink the visitor experience to avoid passive spectatorship: "Thinking about how the space is organised in a way that makes the public feel … much more like participants in the play rather than just onlookers" (official, interview 33). Acting as guarantors means ensuring engagement spaces are accessible and foster genuine interaction and belonging. In digital settings, similar concerns arise regarding balancing modern engagement with institutional control. As the official noted:

> The core question is how far we can realistically go to ensure we've got a website that is both out there with the world of the web, but also is portraying the institution in the way it wishes to be portrayed. (official, interview 33)

These reflections highlight officials' role in maintaining parliamentary integrity, neutrality, and credibility while adapting to public demands and technology, consequently acting as guarantor of institutional legitimacy.

4.5. Coordinator and Operational Manager

Among the roles identified in the interviews, the most visible and consistently referenced is what could be described as *coordinator and operational manager*. Officials orchestrate public engagement's delivery by ensuring that a wide range of engagement tools, platforms, and services are actively maintained, delivered, adapted, and aligned with institutional priorities. Their work anchors the daily functioning of engagement activities and gives institutional form to the strategic goals defined. This role spans content production to outreach logistics. Officials are frequently responsible for curating and disseminating the institution's public-facing messages. This work is embedded in routine processes, such as generating "news stories for the front page of the website" (official, interview 29) and managing the institutional presence across both physical and digital environments.

Officials are also heavily involved in the development and implementation of bespoke engagement tools and programs. For instance, in the case of the UK interactive online game "MP for a Week," an official recounted: "That took up two members of staff for a considerable amount of time—we did most of the writing and the direction of the content" (official, interview 36). Tool development typically involves procurement oversight as well, for which officials are responsible: "We put an idea out through five or six companies, they then come back with proposals to meet our requirements, and we choose what we think is the best one—they then go out and build it" (official, interview 36). This reflects a highly practical, project-managed mode of engagement delivery, in which officials exercise discretion over contracting and implementation.

As expected, these tasks are performed by staff who often operate with limited visibility, but whose work underpins the smooth functioning of engagement activities: "You need people in the civil service who just do. And if it doesn't interfere with politics—at least at the time—we can seize the moment" (official, interview 6). This understated pragmatism characterises much of the operational work that makes engagement possible. As one Portuguese MP succinctly put it, "The services ensure that [broadcasting and webcasting] function properly" (MP, interview 15). Officials bring ideas—whether initiated by MPs, staff, or citizens—into being. As both officials and MPs repeatedly noted in interviews, these actors are *active stewards* of the everyday mechanisms through which parliaments seek to remain accessible, visible, and responsive to the public. Through daily implementation and ongoing responsiveness, officials act as institutional translators of democratic commitments.

Beyond day-to-day tasks, officials coordinate efforts across services involved in public communication and engagement, reinforcing institutional standards and fostering cross-departmental collaboration. As one official noted, "It's constantly a job to go back and say, "these are the key rules, this is why you need to use this particular language, why introductions are important, why headings are important" (official, interview 30). Coordination also involves building bridges between teams to promote a more integrated

institutional approach. In the UK parliament, for example, outreach staff worked with senior clerks to create secondment opportunities, enabling officials to gain hands-on experience in public-facing roles. As one interviewee recounted:

> From the outset, senior people in the clerks' department asked me to explore the possibility of a secondment, so they could gain experience in outreach and public engagement. It's worked really well—it's created strong links between the teams, and the role has evolved massively. (official, interview 29)

This role is especially visible among directors, who translate institutional priorities into operational plans. Here, the impact of administrative capacity and resources becomes particularly clear. Interviewees widely expressed concern over shortages of time, staff, and financial resources needed to deliver effective engagement: "In a lot of parliaments—especially those with smaller administrations—everybody is responsible for at least three things" (official, interview 6).

Others pointed to the growing gap between political ambition and administrative capacity: "The back office needs to have the capacity to respond to the challenges set by the political side" (official, interview 1). The pressure is palpable: "We are investigating [how to engage more effectively] in a very small amount of time" (official, interview 17). This institutional strain is recognised by everyone from MPs to officials to experts, as illustrated by the following quotes: "I think they're working at the very limit of their competencies and capacities. And beyond that, we need other kinds of resources that simply don't exist within Parliament" (MP, interview 14); "Resources are limited and scarce" (official, interview 2); "Parliaments have tightly allocated resources" (expert, interview 11). These observations resonate with long-standing insights from the literature: "Effective public engagement requires considerable resources and financial investment" (Leston-Bandeira, 2014, p. 432).

4.6. Evaluators and Monitors

Finally, the role of officials as *evaluators and monitors* emerges as a crucial dimension of how parliaments learn from and adjust their public engagement efforts. In this role, officials are tasked with assessing the effectiveness, usability, and public reach of engagement strategies. They attempt to generate feedback loops, identify barriers to access, and track whether institutional offerings meet citizens' needs.

This role was particularly developed in the UK parliament back in 2010, where systematic user tracking, surveys, and internal consultation processes were starting to become regularly integrated into engagement planning. One official described the use of light-touch but continuous tools: "At the moment we've been doing one survey a month, which is sort of a pop-up—it's only under ten questions" (official, interview 30). These monthly surveys were part of a wider evaluation infrastructure, where feedback was collected, reviewed, and acted upon: "They produced a six-month review of all those surveys, and the other information—that's been really useful" (official, interview 30).

Not all parliaments have established streamlined processes for collecting and assessing public engagement data, even though such processes are essential for reflecting on practice and fostering institutional learning (Sheldon, 2023). In the Portuguese parliament, for instance, regular evaluation procedures had yet to be

formalised by 2019 when interviews were undertaken. As one official acknowledged: "We once had a survey, but we received very few responses" (official, interview 2). Nevertheless, the importance of monitoring and evaluation was widely recognized as part of staff's role. Reflecting on the mixed success of different engagement initiatives, one MP remarked: "Sometimes strange ideas work well, and good ideas don't. So in this case, the criterion has to be results—concrete functioning and implementation. If the services and their staff evaluate the experience positively, that should carry weight" (MP, interview 14). Also, a newly appointed director of a communications service expressed a clear commitment to building evaluative practices: "What I would like to do is, after a year of the website being live, to begin a re-evaluation process with both internal and external users" (official, interview 23). These examples suggest that even in the absence of formalised structures, a culture of evaluation was beginning to take shape—driven primarily by officials' pragmatic need to learn from experience and recalibrate engagement strategies accordingly.

Although formal evaluation frameworks are not consistently in place across the three parliaments studied, this does not mean that assessment is absent. Officials often engage in informal, experience-based evaluation, drawing on internal feedback to guide their work. As one official put it: "It's learning all the time and getting better and better" (official, interview 9). Others highlighted the importance of having administrative staff who can engage directly with citizens, noting that "we get a lot of emails…and having someone in the administration who can respond, encourage dialogue, and draw out new ideas is very important" (official, interview 6). In Portugal, a staff-led initiative illustrates this approach: "In 2016, new recruits and interns were asked for website suggestions—and we clearly took some into account" (official, interview 22). Informal feedback loops are not limited to parliaments without formal mechanisms; in the UK parliament, where structured monitoring already existed, officials still relied on day-to-day signals: "We get information from people ringing in…or someone will say, 'we've had loads of calls about this' " (official, interview 30). These everyday interactions help staff recalibrate communication priorities and adjust engagement efforts in real time.

However, it is worth mentioning that officials also voiced frustration about the limitations of evaluation when political or institutional follow-through is lacking. One summed up this disconnection bluntly: "That's our job—collecting the data, compiling the report, delivering it….What happens after? I don't know" (official, interview 18). While officials may act as evaluators and monitors, their ability to close the feedback loop (Leston-Bandeira, 2022; Sheldon, 2023), and to ensure that learning leads to change inside the institution, is often constrained by political will. As one senior official from the Austrian parliament clearly put it: "Political commitment cannot be substituted by civil servants." They went on to emphasise that "all participatory approaches, consultation practices, and activities involving citizens require a certain degree of political commitment behind them" (official, interview 9). This insight holds true across all phases of public engagement in parliamentary contexts—from the initial design and political endorsement of engagement strategies, to their implementation and subsequent evaluation.

5. Conclusion

As parliaments expand their public engagement function, they also require staff with new specialized skills in areas beyond traditional ones (e.g., clerking legislation), such as communication. In this article, we set out to understand the type of roles performed by staff involved in the development and implementation of public

engagement in parliaments. Previous literature has demonstrated the critical part played by staff in the delivery of public engagement in legislatures, but had not identified the different roles they play. Drawing from 37 semi-structured elite interviews across three parliaments (Austria, Portugal, and UK), we established a typology of six different but interrelated roles: institutional innovator, knowledge facilitator, strategic decision facilitator, guarantor of institutional legitimacy, coordinator and operational manager, and evaluator and monitor.

The six roles help to identify processes and actions that are often invisible to the outsider, but which are critical if parliaments are to develop meaningful public engagement. Crucially, our analysis challenges the traditional perspective of the civil servant as a neutral executor of political decisions (T. Christiansen et al., 2021; Kaufman, 1956), showing that staff not only have agency but also that this is often recognized and welcomed by MPs, who may not feel as confident in their expertise and skills within the area of engagement. Our typology also unveils the way officials navigate between the political and the operational realms, through suggesting new ideas, whilst acting as guarantors of the institution's reputation and evaluating ongoing practice, but never quite making the final decision on any of these, always dependent on the political will. This becomes particularly challenging within the roles of institutional innovator and evaluator and monitor, both key for public engagement, where staff may identify paths for development, which may not be taken forward by MPs. As we stated before, access to strategic influence does not always equate to strategic authority.

Although some of the roles identified in our analysis—most notably the knowledge facilitator—may also apply to other domains of parliamentary work, several others appear to be specific to the sphere of public engagement. For example, while innovation within the legislative process is typically top-down and driven by MPs or party leadership, in the realm of engagement, staff play a particularly significant role as *initiators of change*, occasionally leading transformative practices from within the institution. This happens in great part because public engagement practices are well established outside parliaments; they are not a traditional parliamentary function. Innovation, therefore, enters through multiple pathways, with specialized or motivated parliamentary staff playing a key role in facilitating the adoption of new ideas and tools. Moreover, public engagement roles require staff to mediate between the internal workings of parliament and the broader public sphere, thereby shaping how the institution is perceived by citizens. This outward-facing, reputational function contrasts with the more internally oriented nature of legislative support. In this context, parliamentary staff also take on a vital gatekeeping role—defining and enforcing the limits of institutional openness. This function, largely absent in their legislative duties, is particularly significant in an era marked by declining trust in political elites and the erosion of political parties.

This study contributes thus to the expanding literature on citizen engagement and representative institutions, as well as to our broader understanding of how legislatures work by spotlighting the key role performed by staff in what is often seen as a critical activity to sustain the health of our modern democracies. It shows that in order to understand how representative institutions can strengthen the citizens' voice in the political process, one needs to adopt a more holistic approach that goes beyond the actions of individual politicians. Democratic renewal, in this view, rests not only on political will, but also on the often-invisible actions of those who make engagement possible from within—even as they navigate persistent constraints in the form of limited resources, insufficient training, time pressures, or lack of political will.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, our article has significant practical implications. As demands for transparency, accessibility, and meaningful participation in democratic decision-making continue to grow (Dryzek et al., 2019; Elstub & Escobar, 2019), so too does the need for parliaments to invest in the skills, capacities, and institutional infrastructures necessary to support robust engagement. Our findings underscore that public engagement depends on sustained investment in administrative capacity and institutional buy-in. Without adequate staffing, resources, and internal commitment, engagement initiatives risk becoming ad hoc, tokenistic, or unsustainable. This is especially urgent in an increasingly mediated political environment (Hendricks et al., 2020), where expectations regarding how parliaments communicate with and respond to citizens are higher than ever (Leston-Bandeira, 2016). Our evidence also illustrates the importance of embedding officials in the early stages of engagement planning—rather than limiting them to back-end implementation. Parliaments must learn to draw strength from their own: from those who remain through changing political tides, who carry institutional memory, and who quietly sustain the daily work of democracy. In this light, the typology we offer provides timely and actionable insights to inform institutional reform and support democratic renewal. These are not peripheral observations—they speak to the core of how parliaments can rebuild public trust from the inside out.

Finally, as with any study, certain limitations should be acknowledged. While the analysis spans three distinct parliamentary contexts, which makes it possible to examine how the roles of staff are practised and understood across different institutional settings, we may not fully capture variation across other institutional settings. Moreover, the typology developed here is most applicable to professionalised parliamentary administrations with a formal commitment to public engagement; its relevance may be more limited in legislatures with minimal administrative capacity, highly politicised bureaucracies, or weaker institutional frameworks. While we document the multiplicity of roles officials play, future research could explore how these roles interact, how staff navigate potential tensions between them, and how role performance varies across seniority levels and institutional cultures. Such questions are essential to furthering our understanding of how administrative actors shape democratic practices from within. Recognising their contribution is not simply a matter of academic interest—it is central to strengthening the democratic capacities of parliaments in an era of growing public scrutiny and institutional strain.

Acknowledgments

We are deeply grateful to all those who agreed to be interviewed for this research—in particular, the officials, members of parliament, and experts across all case studies, whose insights were invaluable.

Funding

Research for this article was funded by FCT—Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the Strategic Projects UIDB/50013/2020 and UIDP/50013/2020, as well as by Research Councils UK—Economic and Social Research Council Grant RES-000–22-4072.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

References

Barberis, P. (2011). The Weberian legacy. In A. Massey (Ed.), *International handbook on civil service systems* (pp. 13–30). Edward Elgar.

Baxter, K. P. (1991). Politicisation—Responsiveness. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, *50*(3), 279–283.

Bernardes, C. B., & Leston-Bandeira, C. (2016). Information vs engagement in parliamentary websites: A case study of Brazil and the UK. *Revista de Sociologia e Política*, *24*(59), 91–107.

Brandsma, G. J., & Otjes, S. (2024). Gauging the roles of parliamentary staff. *Parliamentary Affairs*, *77*(3), 537–557.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*, 77–101.

Christiansen, P. M., Niklasson, B., & Öhberg, P. (2016). Does politics crowd out professional competence? The organisation of ministerial advice in Denmark and Sweden. *West European Politics*, *39*(6), 1230–1250.

Christiansen, T., Griglio, E., & Lupo, N. (2021). Making representative democracy work: The role of parliamentary administrations in the European Union. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *27*(4), 477–493.

Christiansen, T., Griglio, E., & Lupo, N. (Eds.). (2023). *The Routledge handbook of parliamentary administrations* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Coleman, S. (2006). Parliamentary communication in an age of digital interactivity. *Aslib Proceedings*, *58*(5), 371–388.

Crewe, E. (2017). Ethnography of parliament: Finding culture and politics entangled in the Commons and the Lords. *Parliamentary Affairs*, *70*(1), 155–172.

Dai, X., & Norton, P. (2007). The internet and parliamentary democracy in Europe. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *13*(3), 342–353.

Dryzek, J. S., Bächtiger, A., Chambers, S., Cohen, J., Druckman, J. N., Felicetti, A., Fishkin, J. S., Farrell, D. M., Fung, A., Gutmann, A., Landemore, H., Mansbridge, J., Marien, S., Neblo, M. A., Niemeyer, S., Setälä, M., Slothuus, R., Suiter, J., Thompson, D., & Warren, M. E. (2019). The crisis of democracy and the science of deliberation. *Science*, *363*(6432), 1144–1146.

Egeberg, M., Gornitzka, Å., Trondal, J., & Johannessen, M. (2015). The European Parliament administration: Organizational structure and behavioral implications. In M. W. Bauer & J. Trondal (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of the European administrative system* (pp. 227–245). Palgrave Macmillan.

Elstub, S., & Escobar, O. (Eds.). (2019). *Handbook of democratic innovation and governance*. Edward Elgar.

Feulner, F., & Guéguin, M. (2023). Building public engagement in small island nations. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *29*(3), 380–405.

Fox, H. W., & Hammond, S. W. (1978). *Congressional staffs: Invisible force in American law making*. Free Press.

Geddes, M., & Mulley, J. (2018). Supporting members and peers. In C. Leston-Bandeira & L. Thompson (Eds.), *Exploring parliament* (pp. 173–184). Oxford University Press.

Hendricks, C. M., Ercan, S. A., & Boswell, J. (2020). *Mending democracy: Democratic repair in disconnected times*. Oxford University Press.

Inter-Parliamentary Union & United Nations Development Programme. (2022). *Global parliamentary report—Public engagement in the work of parliament*. https://www.ipu.org/impact/democracy-and-strong-parliaments/global-parliamentary-report/global-parliamentary-report-2022-public-engagement-in-work-parliament

Judge, D., & Leston-Bandeira, C. (2018). The institutional representation of parliament. *Political Studies*, *66*(1), 154–172.

Kaufman, H. (1956). Emerging conflicts in the doctrines of public administration. *American Political Science Review*, *50*(4), 1057–1073.

Laube, S., Schank, J., & Scheffer, T. (2020). Constitutive invisibility: Exploring the work of staff advisers in political position-making. *Social Studies of Science*, *50*(2), 292–316.

Legard, R., Keegan, J., & Ward, K. (2003). In-depth interviews. In J. Ritchie & J. Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (pp. 138–169). Sage.

Leston-Bandeira, C. (2014). The pursuit of legitimacy as a key driver for public engagement: The European Parliament case. *Parliamentary Affairs*, *67*(2), 415–436.

Leston-Bandeira, C. (2016). Why symbolic representation frames parliamentary public engagement. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *18*(2), 498–516.

Leston-Bandeira, C. (2022). How public engagement has become a must for parliaments in today's democracies. *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, *37*(2), 8–16.

Leston-Bandeira, C., & Siefken, S. (2023). The development of public engagement as a core institutional role of parliaments. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *29*(3), 361–379.

Leston-Bandeira, C., McIntosh, E., & Pearson, B. (2025). Parliament and public engagement. In C. Leston-Bandeira, A. Meakin & L. Thompson, *Exploring parliament* (pp. 291–304). Oxford University Press.

Loewenberg, G. (2011). *On legislatures*. Paradigm.

Mosley, L. (2013). *Interview research in political science*. Cornell University Press.

Neuhold, C., & Högenauer, A.-L. (2016). An information network of officials? Dissecting the role and nature of the network of parliamentary representatives in the European Parliament. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *22*(2), 237–256.

Öhberg, P., Christiansen, P. M., & Niklasson, B. (2017). Administrative politicization or contestability? How political advisers affect neutral competence in policy processes. *Public Administration*, *95*, 269–285.

Odeyemi, T. I., Olorunshola, D. T., & Ajibola, B. S. (2023). Turning public engagement into standard practice: Institutionalisation in the work of the South African parliament. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *29*(3), 406–424.

Otjes, S. (2022). What explains the size of parliamentary staff? *West European Politics*, *46*(2), 374–400.

Pollak, J., & Slominski, P. (2014). The silence of the shepherds: How the Austrian parliament informs its citizens on European issues. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *20*(1), 109–124.

Prior, A., & Stirbu, D. (2023). Public engagement in the Welsh parliament: Shifting the dial from public-facing to public-engaging. *International Journal of Parliamentary Studies*, *3*(1), 63–93.

Romzek, B. S., & Utter, J. A. (1997). Congressional legislative staff: Political professionals or clerks? *American Journal of Political Science*, *41*(4), 1251–1279.

Serra-Silva, S. (2022). How parliaments engage with citizens? Online public engagement: A comparative analysis of parliamentary websites. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *28*(4), 489–512.

Serra-Silva, S. (2023). Beyond national boundaries in the study of digital public engagement: Interparliamentary institutions and cooperation in the Austrian and Portuguese national parliaments. *Policy & Internet*, *15*(1), 36–54.

Sheldon, C. (2023). Closing the gap: Establishing a "feedback loop" for effective parliamentary public engagement. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *29*(3), 425–441.

Star, S. L., & Strauss, A. (1999). Layers of silence, arenas of voice: The ecology of visible and invisible work. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, *8*(1), 9–30.

Walker, A., Jurczak, N., Bochel, C., & Leston-Bandeira, C. (2019). How public engagement became a core part of the House of Commons select committees. *Parliamentary Affairs*, *72*(4), 965–986.

Yong, B., Davies, G., & Leston-Bandeira, C. (2019). Tacticians, stewards, and professionals: The politics of publishing select committee legal advice. *Journal of Law and Society*, *46*(3), 367–395.

About the Authors

Sofia Serra-Silva is a research fellow at Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal and a visiting researcher at Cevipol, Universitée Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium.

Cristina Leston-Bandeira is a professor of politics at the University of Leeds in the UK, as well as chair of the International Parliament Engagement Network.