

The Role of Parliamentary Monitoring Organizations in Monitoring the Democratic Performance of Parliaments

By K. Scott Hubli

Over the past five years, a consensus has begun to emerge within the parliamentary community around a set of criteria for assessing the democratic performance of parliaments (see previous newsletter or [click here](#) to visit AGORA). Over the same period, civil society organizations around the world have become more actively engaged in monitoring parliamentary performance. A recent study, conducted jointly by the World Bank Institute (WBI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), identified approximately 190 active parliamentary monitoring organizations (PMOs) in some 80 countries. These two developments, however, have proceeded largely independently. Much of the dialogue regarding benchmarks for democratic parliaments has occurred among parliamentarians themselves, with very limited participation from civil society organizations.

The potential for PMOs to play a greater role in monitoring parliamentary performance against international democratic benchmarks seems clear. Civil society organizations have played a similar role in other areas of democratic development—

particularly elections. Over the years, the international community has built a broad consensus around the minimum characteristics for democratic elections. Citizen election monitoring organizations have played a vital role in assessing whether or not a country's elections processes meet international democratic norms. PMOs are beginning to play a similar role in supporting parliamentary development—as the articulation of international norms for democratic parliaments has reached a critical mass over last five years and as the number and experience level of PMOs has also increased significantly during this time.

While continued research is needed, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that parliamentary monitoring can have strongly positive effects on parliamentary performance. In examining parliamentary scorecards — a technique used by many PMOs, one recent academic study has found “some evidence that politicians alter their behavior in light of exposure to scorecard information ... and strong evidence that voters, rather than being beholden to ethnic ties or patronage politics, are willing to condition support on quality of engagement in national politics.” (see Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy Weinstein. March 15, 2010. *Policing Citizens: Citizen Empowerment and Political Accountability in Uganda*. Colombia University). Other PMOs have shown strong potential for strengthening dialogue between citizens



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Policing Politicians: Citizen Empowerment and Political Accountability in Uganda

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Abstract

Does greater transparency improve political accountability? In this paper, we use a simple model of political accountability to derive a set of hypotheses linking information to political behavior; we introduce a multilevel field experiment designed to test those hypotheses in the context of MP behavior in Uganda, and we provide first findings from a survey experiment designed to assess the responsiveness of voters to information on MP behavior and from a pre-intervention experiment designed to search for early evidence on the effects of information on parliamentary activity. We find very strong evidence that Ugandan voters are responsive to information on politician behavior but only weak evidence that politicians are responsive to these concerns.

*Note: The research described in this document makes use of the Uganda Parliamentary Scorecard: 2006-7 and 2007-8 editions are available at: http://www.columbia.edu/~m22548/scorecard/2007_scorecard.pdf and http://www.columbia.edu/~m22548/scorecard/2008_scorecard.pdf

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and parliamentarians, facilitating public access to information about parliaments and their work, and working collaboratively with parliaments to further parliamentary reform.



The international community can help to strengthen the potential impact of PMOs in a number of ways. First, it can help to engage PMOs more directly in dialogue with the broader parliamentary community on the issue of norms and standards for democratic parliaments. The joint WBI-NDI study found that few of the PMOs surveyed were aware of the parliamentary community's work on benchmarks and standards. Engaging PMOs in discussions by parliamentary associations about benchmarks and standards for democratic legislatures can be beneficial for both the PMO and parliamentary communities. For its part, the PMO community can learn more both about how parliamentarians view their roles and about the constraints that they face in performing them. PMOs can also obtain feedback from MPs in order to refine and improve their monitoring methodologies and develop MP buy-in with respect to monitoring activities. Parliamentarians clearly benefit from this increased understanding by PMOs; however, they can also learn from this dialogue to better understand civil society's expectations of their parliament.

The lack of dialogue between PMOs and parliamentary associations on legislative benchmarks points to a larger issue that must also be addressed – namely that the relationship between parliaments and PMOs in a country is often unnecessarily adversarial. As noted in joint WBI-NDI study, some PMOs initially tend to see poor parliamentary performance primarily as a failure of leadership by individual parliamentarians; the focus is on “naming and shaming” individual MPs that don’t meet specific PMO criteria. However, as PMOs gain experience working with parliament, many have developed a more sophisticated understanding of the constraints that individual parliamentarians face, as well as a more nuanced view of how to encourage parliamentary reform. As a result, many PMOs are adopting approaches that are somewhat less adversarial and seek to proactively engage parliamentarians in the development of their assessment methodologies. Many also work with parliament to support parliamentary strengthening and reform efforts.

Several PMOs have demonstrated that it is possible to successfully combine both monitoring (which can be perceived as only criticizing parliament) with activities to build public support for parliament, and for parliamentary reform. As one representative of an established PMO noted, “parliaments are not exactly popular... If the discourse of the [PMO] is similar to what the feeling of the people is – and doesn’t question the negative image that people have about the congress – then we are not doing much... If citizens don’t realize that Congress is a very important branch for a political system to work, then we’re not going to be a democracy.”¹ As but one example, Directorio Legislativo in Argentina makes awards to recognize members of Congress who have contributed to democratic innovation in the institution. Other PMOs, such as PRS in India, seek to play a role akin to a parliamentary research service, providing parliamentarians

¹ Pachón, Mónica. Congreso Visible. Telephone interview, January 28, 2010



and citizens alike with summaries and comparative information about pieces of legislation.

Although the situation varies widely from country to country, many PMOs struggle with limited access to meaningful information about the parliaments they seek to monitor. In some countries, parliaments rarely use roll call voting, so that it can be difficult to for PMOs and citizens to know how individual MPs vote on particular measures or issues. In others contexts, such information may not easily accessible or may be posted on the parliamentary website, if at all, only after a significant amount of time has elapsed. In other cases access to committee proceedings is very limited. In these circumstances, PMOs will often focus on the data that is available, rather than the data that is most meaningful. To take one example, many PMOs monitor the attendance of members in the plenary. While this information may be important, attendance data needs to be contextualized (e.g., by taking into account official travel or time in the district) and may say little about the quality of an individual parliamentarian's contributions to legislative work. To overcome this challenge, PMOs are beginning to more actively focus their efforts on improving parliamentary transparency. Some have suggested the need to further develop minimum standards relating to parliamentary transparency to ensure that citizens and civil society

organizations have access to basic data (in open data formats) about parliamentary operations. This is also a topic which could be further developed in the context of benchmarks for democratic parliaments.

Finally, the international community can help to support increased networking of PMOs, both regionally and internationally. Emerging regional networks of PMOs in Latin America and the Middle East and North Africa have shown the potential benefits of sharing information and good practice. However, additional sharing of expertise and good practice on a global level would also be useful. AGORA can make an important contribution in this regard; it is currently reaching out to the PMOs identified in the joint WBI-NDI study. AGORA's discussion group features in its "trusted area" provide an opportunity for PMOs from around the world to exchange experiences and share good practice on parliamentary monitoring. The AGORA community also provides opportunities to promote dialogue and sharing of information between PMOs and parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and the broader international parliamentary development community. At the same time, PMOs, as routine observers of parliamentary affairs, can also be an important resource for the AGORA community on issues related to parliamentary development.

