

Chapter 3

Becoming an Open Parliament: Evolving Standards for Transparency and Accessibility

The availability of the record of a parliament's activities, along with the completeness, timeliness, and clarity of its documentation, provides the means for judging the level of openness a parliament has achieved. Transparency and accountability are the pillars on which openness rests, and the standards for these two goals have evolved significantly over the last decade as citizens have come to demand more from their governing institutions. This has occurred in part because technology makes it easier to be open, thereby raising public expectations, and in part because an increasing number of public bodies world-wide have already moved to new levels of transparency and accessibility, thereby raising the bar for others.

Box 3.1

Websites play an important role for parliaments in supporting their basic mandates, in particular the representative, legislative and oversight functions. Also, for effective transparency and accountability. A major challenge is how to develop websites that serve different purposes and the needs of all users. It is often difficult to ensure that the information on parliamentary website is clear and understandable to those inside and outside the decision making process and that includes members, staff as well as the public at large.

Ms. Matilda Katopola, Secretary General of the Parliament of Malawi
Statement at the World e-Parliament Conference 2009

Websites have become the primary means by which parliaments make their work and their documents known to civil society, to the media and, most importantly, directly to citizens. Parliamentary websites provide a variety of information sources, and while many of these are available independently, it is the ability with which they integrate a broad array of legislative and policy data and documents that gives them such high value. A parliament that is seeking to become more transparent will provide citizens with timely access to the most current information about proposed legislation, oversight activities, and the national budget through its website. It will also provide the means for understanding how the parliament works, who its members are, what they have done, and how to communicate with them. To respond to a diversity of learning styles, it will offer information in different formats, including text and video, using a variety of tools that enable citizens to find what they are looking for quickly and easily, and to understand it. And to be inclusive they will adopt standards that lower barriers to public records for all citizens.

Official parliamentary websites, however, are not the only source for citizens to obtain information about the legislature. Websites dealing with public policy and with legislative and oversight issues are maintained by civil society, lobbying groups, political parties, and commercial companies. Especially among higher income countries, there is a wide range of web-based sources that provide information similar to that offered on parliamentary sites, frequently with innovative features for search and display. They often have particular viewpoints and include commentary about the work of the parliament. These sites are likely to continue to grow on a world-wide basis as access to technology increases, economic and political issues become more globally intertwined, and more parliaments make their core documents available in a format that allows for easy re-use and integration with other online resources.

This increase in the number of sources that provide information and opinions about public policy issues makes it imperative that the official site of the legislature be authoritative and non-partisan. It must also be well managed and supported so that it can respond to the growing needs of both citizens and members, keep pace with advances in technology, and further the values of transparency and accessibility of the parliamentary institution.

During the past decade the goals of parliamentary websites have become more complex and more challenging. They began with the objective of providing basic information about the history, the functions, the leadership, and the membership of the legislature. They were soon tasked to provide copies of official texts of proposed legislation, then the verbatim accounts of debates and summaries of plenary actions, and copies of committee documents. When webcasting technologies became available, they were utilized to provide live coverage of plenary sessions and other official meetings. And as the interactive web has emerged some parliaments have added new tools on their sites that encourage two-way communication between members, committees and citizens, inviting them to share their views and engaging them in the policy process.

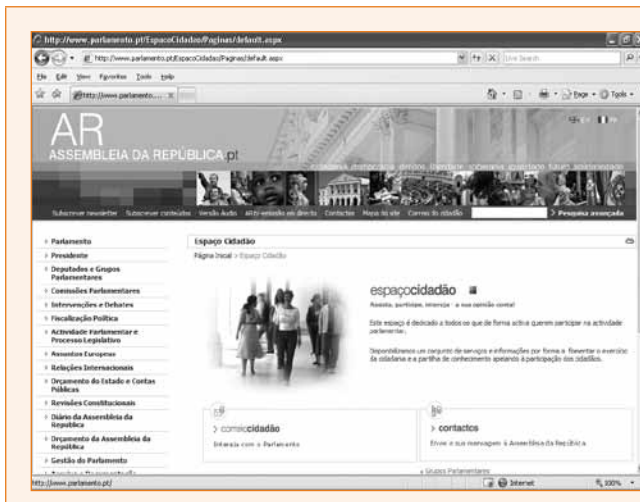
Websites also have had to improve methods of access to their content. In addition to obtaining copies of texts, many members and citizens now use search engines to find specific documents and speeches. Alerting services enable them to be notified of the introduction of, and changes in, proposed legislation, the filing of committee documents, and members' activities and speeches. Increasingly, they can learn about the parliament through a variety of media such as audio or video webcasting, live or through an on-demand archive.

Parliaments have been further challenged to improve the design and usability of their websites so that they are understandable and easy to navigate. They have also had to enhance accessibility, ensuring that they can be available to all, including persons with disabilities. And they have had to address a variety of related issues, such as the use of multiple official languages.

Beyond becoming critical resources for helping parliaments to achieve greater efficiency in their processes, the fundamental purpose of parliamentary websites is to support the goals of transparency and accessibility. Simply offering the major legislative documents or providing informative videos is not sufficient to achieve the goal of an open and transparent legislative body. These features must be designed to serve the larger objective of actively engaging citizens in the legislative process. This was one of the main reasons for the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) to undertake a revision of its *Guidelines for the Content and Structure of Parliamentary Websites*, published

in 2000¹. The revised *Guidelines for Parliamentary Websites*, published in March 2009,² update the previous recommendations in the areas of content, tools, design, and management. One of their most important strategic values is to serve as a set of recommendations and standards for helping parliaments assess their level of accountability, accessibility and transparency.

Box 3.2



The website of the Assembly of the Republic of Portugal provides an example of how parliaments are using websites to engage citizens. It contains a special section dedicated to citizens called "Citizen's space". The section provides services such as e-mail, e-petition and systems to contact parliamentary departments and political groups.

(Source: <http://www.parlamento.pt/Paginas/default.aspx>)

RESULTS AND FINDINGS FROM THE 2007 SURVEY

The findings from the 2007 survey, as reported in the *World e-Parliament Report 2008*,³ provided a baseline assessment of the state of parliamentary websites at that time. The survey documented that 95% of respondents had websites and the remaining 5% were planning to establish one. It also found that many committees and members maintained websites.

Other significant findings from 2007 are listed below by category.

Goals and management:

- The Secretary General and the Director of ICT play key roles in establishing the goals for websites;
- Over one third of respondents reported that the President or Speaker is also engaged in setting goals for the website.

Information and documents:

- Many websites met a number of the 2000 IPU *Guidelines* for information;
- However, many items recommended in the 2000 IPU *Guidelines* had not been incorporated in the websites. Most of these fell into two categories:
 - committee documents;
 - documents that provide some kind of explanatory information.

1 Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Guidelines for the Content and Structure of Parliamentary Web Sites*, [Geneva]: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2000 [<http://www.ipu.org/cntr-e/web.pdf>].

2 Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Guidelines for Parliamentary Websites*, [Geneva]: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2009 [http://www.ictparliament.org/resources/guidelines_en.pdf].

3 United Nations, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, *World e-Parliament Report 2008*, [New York]: United Nations, 2008, pp.109-110 [<http://www.ictparliament.org>].

Linking of documents:

- More work needed to be done to link legislation to other related documents that could assist the user in obtaining a more complete representation of the information relevant to specific bills under consideration;
- When links from proposed legislation to related documents were provided, they were most often to plenary debate on the bill, relevant laws and statutes, and committee reports about the legislation.

Interface design:

- A significant number of respondents reported consulting with users on the design of the website interface and using formal usability testing (or were planning to do so);
- However, only 30% had met mandated standards of accessibility in support of persons with disabilities, although 40% were planning or considering doing so;
- 20% were not planning on meeting such standards or reported that such standards were not applicable.

Use of audio and video technology:

- Many reported that they broadcast some or all plenary sessions by television;
- An increasing number were also making them accessible on the Internet via webcasting;
- Over half maintained archives of these recordings.

Notification systems and services:

- Less than 50% had websites offering users e-mail notification of proposed legislation, committee actions and plenary sessions.

Differences between websites for parliament and the public:

- Many of the respondents that maintained a separate website for the public reported that the public version of the website did not provide committee votes and minutes, impact assessments for bills, and explanations of legislative actions and bills, while the version used by parliament did. The public also was less likely to be consulted concerning website design.

Availability of legislative documents in downloadable formats:

- Of those who addressed this issue, the majority made their files available for downloading and 21% were planning or considering doing so.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS FROM THE 2009 SURVEY

The website section of the 2009 Global Survey of ICT in Parliaments was substantially modified from the 2007 version to reflect the changes introduced in the new IPU *Guidelines for Parliamentary Websites*, published in March 2009. One of the objectives was to learn how well parliaments were able to meet the standards proposed by the new guidelines and what areas posed the greatest challenges to them.⁴

The survey section focused on the following four categories, which are used in this Chapter to present the findings:

- General information about the parliament;
- Specific information regarding legislative, oversight, and budget documents;

⁴ Because the 2009 survey was based on the updated guidelines, the language of many of the questions is different from that used in the 2007 survey. However, comparisons will be made in those cases in which the wording is the same or similar enough to draw valid conclusions. As noted in the Introduction to this report, such comparisons will be based only on those parliaments that responded to both the 2007 and the 2009 survey, thereby ensuring that the comparison is based on the same group of respondents.

- Tools available to users for finding and viewing information;
- Usability and accessibility of the site.

In 2009, 97% of parliaments reported that they have a website and 3% were planning one. These figures, which are similar to those from 2007, reflect the central role that websites have come to play for parliaments, regardless of income level or geographic region.

Taken together, the findings from the survey offer an assessment of the completeness, timeliness, and accessibility of a website and therefore provide important measures of the openness of the parliament itself. In broad terms, the first two categories – *General information about the parliament* and *Specific information regarding legislation, budget and oversight* – relate primarily to the willingness of the parliament to make its work known to citizens. The categories of *Tools available to users* and *Usability and accessibility*⁵ relate to the willingness of the institution to use ICT to ensure that the greatest number of citizens have the means to easily learn about the activities of the parliament.

General information

One of the first goals of a parliamentary website is to provide citizens with a basic understanding of their legislature. This includes practical information such as how to visit the parliament, how to obtain its documents online or in printed form, and what information services it provides. The website needs to give an overview of a parliament’s history, activities, and organization, including its various committees and commissions and its leadership. Of special importance is information about members, past and present, and their representational duties and activities. This relates directly to accountability. Also in this category is an explanation of how parliament works. Although much of this information is static, it is essential for communicating to the public the role of the legislature and its place in society.

The 2009 survey assessed the following areas, with the numbers in parentheses indicating the number of items listed under each:

- Access to the parliament (4)
- History and role (3)
- Functions, compositions, and activities (7)
- Elected leaders (3)
- Committees, commissions, and other non-plenary bodies (7)
- Members of parliament (11)
- Political parties in parliament (2)
- Elections and the electoral process (5)
- Administration of parliament (2)
- Publications, documents, and information services (3)
- General links to websites (7)

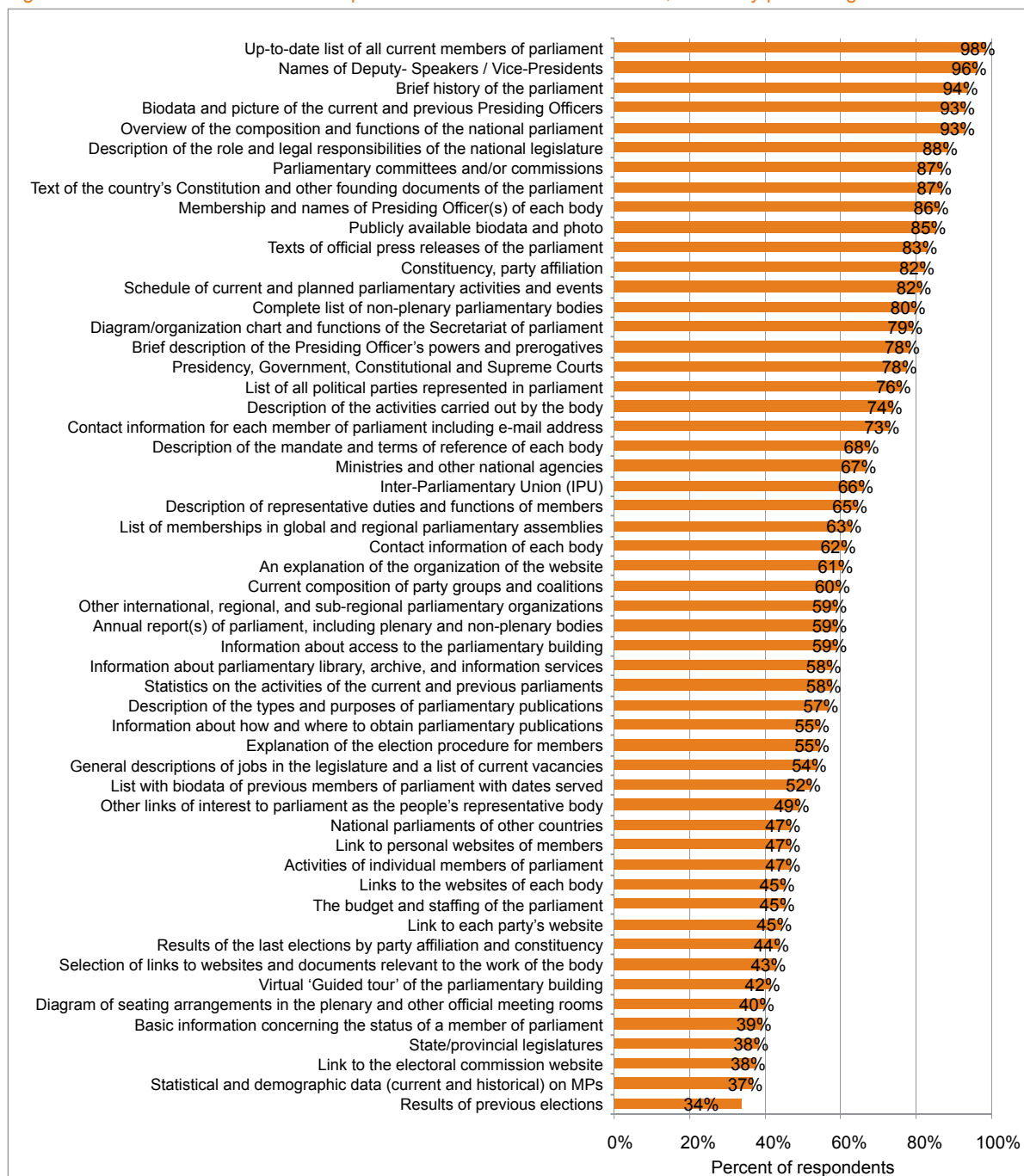
These 11 areas included a total of 54 individual items. 70% of these items were reported by over half of the parliaments to be on their websites; over three quarters of parliaments indicated that they have at least a third of these items. The average percentage of parliaments across all 54 items was 64%. Figure 3.1 shows all items ranked by the percentage of parliaments that have each item on their websites.

5 The term “accessibility” used in the context of the survey refers to accessibility for persons with disabilities.

It is also useful to note the individual items found on the websites of the largest and smallest percentages of parliaments. The top five listed below were reported to be present on the websites of over 90% of all parliaments:

1. Up-to-date list of all current members of parliament (98%);
2. Names of Deputy Speakers/Vice Presidents (96%);
3. Brief history of the parliament (94%);
4. Biodata and current picture of the current and previous Presiding Officers (93%);
5. Overview of the composition and functions of the national parliament (93%).

Figure 3.1: General information about parliament included on the website, sorted by percentage



(Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 4; 130 respondents – 97% responding “yes” to Question 1)

The bottom five were reported to be present by fewer than 40% of parliaments:

1. Basic information concerning the status of a member of parliament, such as immunity, salaries and allowances, codes of conduct and ethics, etc (39%);
2. Links to websites of state/provincial legislatures (38%);
3. Link to the electoral commission website (38%);
4. Statistical and demographic data (current and historical) on members of parliament (37%);
5. Results of previous elections (34%).

Figure 3.2: General information about parliament included on the website, sorted by areas

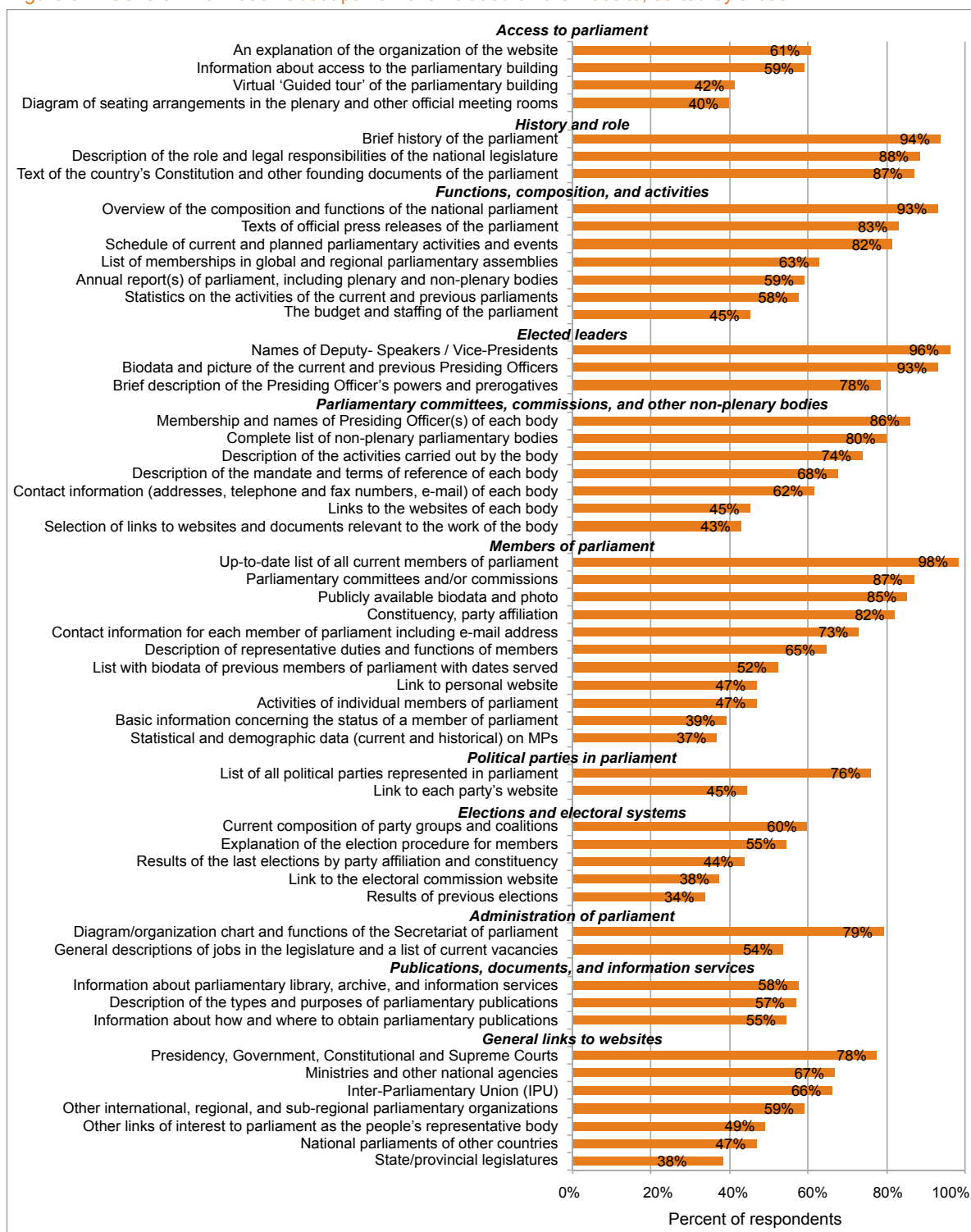


Figure 3.2 shows all items organized by areas. The average percentage of the items checked by parliaments within each area was calculated to facilitate comparisons among them. The area *History and role of parliament* had the highest average percentage of items (90%); the area *Elections and electoral systems* had the lowest (46%). Other than *Elections and electoral systems*, all areas had an average percentage of 50% or more of all parliaments. These scores are, of course, affected by the number of items within each area and by the fact that not all items are applicable to all parliaments. An example of the latter is that not all parliaments have assigned seats in plenary, therefore placing a limit on the number of parliaments which will have this item on their websites.

Given the finding noted above that over half of the parliaments have 70% of the information items, one may conclude that legislative bodies are being relatively successful in their efforts to provide citizens with *general information* about the parliament. However, it is important to recall that this is the most basic and static information about the legislature. It is the minimal starting point for transparency and accountability. Viewed from this perspective it is a concern that a much higher percentage of parliaments does not have an even larger percentage of these general information items on their website.

Legislation, budget and oversight (scrutiny)

Legislative, oversight and budget responsibilities are the core of the work of most parliaments. A legislature becomes increasingly transparent to citizens as its documents and related information sources in these critical domains are made available on the website. Because the nature and extent of these responsibilities vary among legislatures, however, the survey included questions about all three but with the understanding that they may not be equally applicable to all parliaments. In addition, because policy work takes place in their plenary sessions in nearly all parliaments and in their committees/commissions in many parliaments, the survey included questions about the documents and information available from these bodies. In this way, the survey was able to examine the transparency of the work of the parliament from the point of view both of its functions (legislative, oversight, etc.) and its organizational bodies (plenary, committees, etc.). Finally, the survey asked a number of questions that pertained to introductory and background information covering such things as *Today's business schedule* and a *Glossary of parliamentary terms and procedures*.

The six areas under this category (legislation, oversight, budget, committees, plenary, and introductory material) included a total of 34 individual items. As shown in Figure 3.3, over half of the parliaments reported having 38% or more of these items on their websites. This figure is in contrast to the 70% of *General information* items cited in the preceding discussion. Furthermore, the average percentage of parliaments having any of the items under *General information* is 64%; the average percentage of parliaments having any of the items under *Legislation, Budget, and Oversight* is 46%.

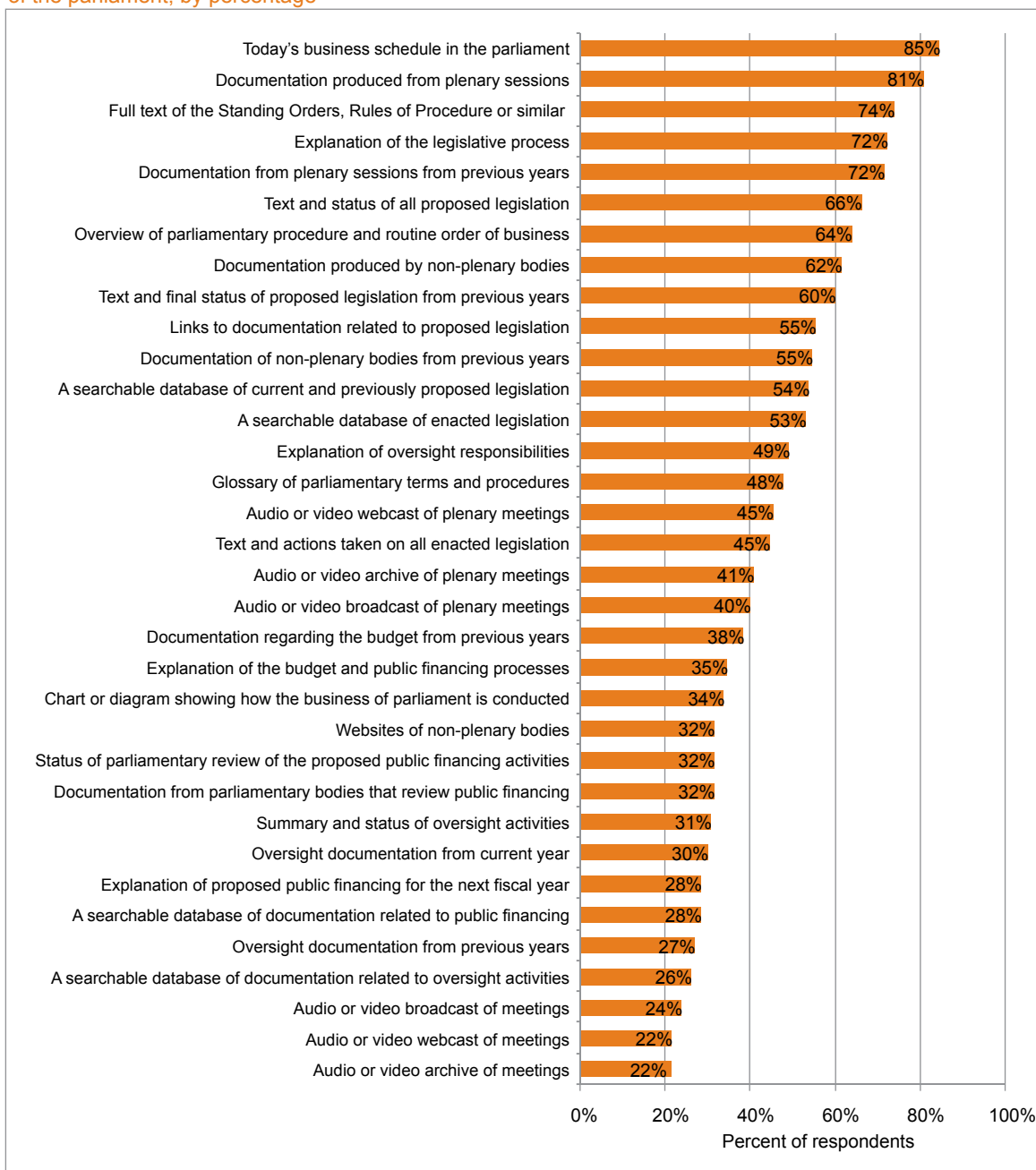
It is informative to note the individual items that were checked by the highest and lowest percentages of parliaments. The top five were reported to be present on the websites of over 70% of all parliaments:

1. Today's business schedule of the parliament (85%);
2. Documentation produced from plenary sessions (81%);
3. Full text of the Standing Orders, Rules of Procedure, etc (74%);
4. Explanation of the legislative process (72%);
5. Documentation from plenary sessions from previous years (72%).

Because of the critical importance of legislation, it is worth noting that the *Text and status of all proposed legislation* ranked 6th on the list and was on the websites of 66% of parliaments. The complete list of the remaining top 10 is:

6. Text and status of all proposed legislation (66%);
7. Overview of parliamentary procedures and routine order of business (64%);
8. Documentation produced by non-plenary bodies (62%);
9. Text and final status of proposed legislation from previous years (60%);
10. Links to documentation related to proposed legislation (55%); and Documentation of non-plenary bodies from previous years (55%).

Figure 3.3: Information about legislation, budget and oversight activities included on the website of the parliament, by percentage



(Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 5; 130 respondents – 97% responding “yes” to Question 1)

At one level it is understandable that information about the actual work of parliament, which is more dynamic and more difficult to track on a timely basis, is present on fewer websites than general information about the parliament. On the other hand, these baseline data show the size of the challenge facing parliaments in their efforts to achieve a higher level of transparency.

There are also significant differences among the areas within this category. These can be seen in Figure 3.4 below, which shows the average percentage of parliaments having items in each of the areas.

Figure 3.4: Average percentage of parliaments having items in each area

Introductory material	61%
Legislation	58%
Plenary	56%
Committees	36%
Oversight (scrutiny)	33%
Budget	32%

Some of these differences might be attributed to variations in the role of committees/commissions in parliaments. Not all committees have significant legislative or oversight responsibilities, and the documents and other information about their activities may not be produced or may not be considered important. The same might be said regarding differences in the oversight and budget responsibilities among parliaments. However, the relatively low percentage of parliaments that provide documents and information in these areas means

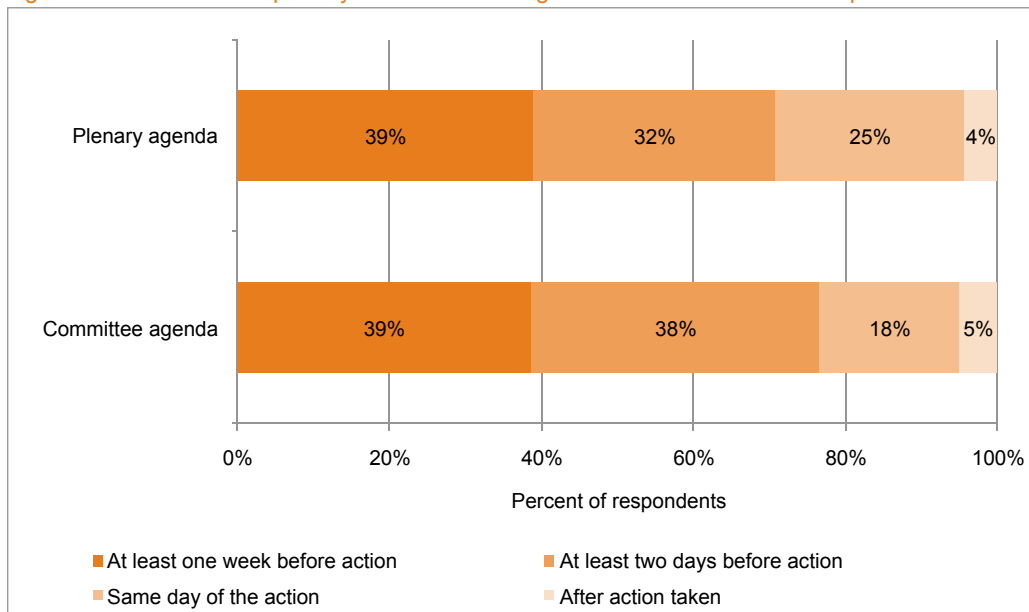
that it is difficult for the media, civil society organizations, and the public to follow these processes. Future surveys will attempt to link these findings more closely to the actual authority of committees/commissions and to the responsibilities of the parliament for oversight and for budget approval.

While the presence of legislative, oversight, and budget documents on websites is important, several of their characteristics also affect their value and are an additional indication of transparency. These include timeliness, completeness, and clarity.

Timeliness refers to how soon a document can be seen on the website. If a document is available to citizens relatively quickly, for example within 24 hours after its preparation, this is an indication of greater openness of the parliament; if they are available only after a considerable time has elapsed, especially if they are available to members well before the public, then openness declines.

The survey asked about the availability of four types of documents: plenary and committee agendas, proposed legislation, and records of plenary proceedings. As shown in Figure 3.5 over 70% of parliaments make plenary agendas available at least two days before action; 77% make committee agendas available in this same time period. While these percentages may be considered satisfactory by some, the fact is that agendas need to be available even sooner, especially if citizens, civil societies, and other interested and affected groups wish to follow the discussion and possibly contribute to it.

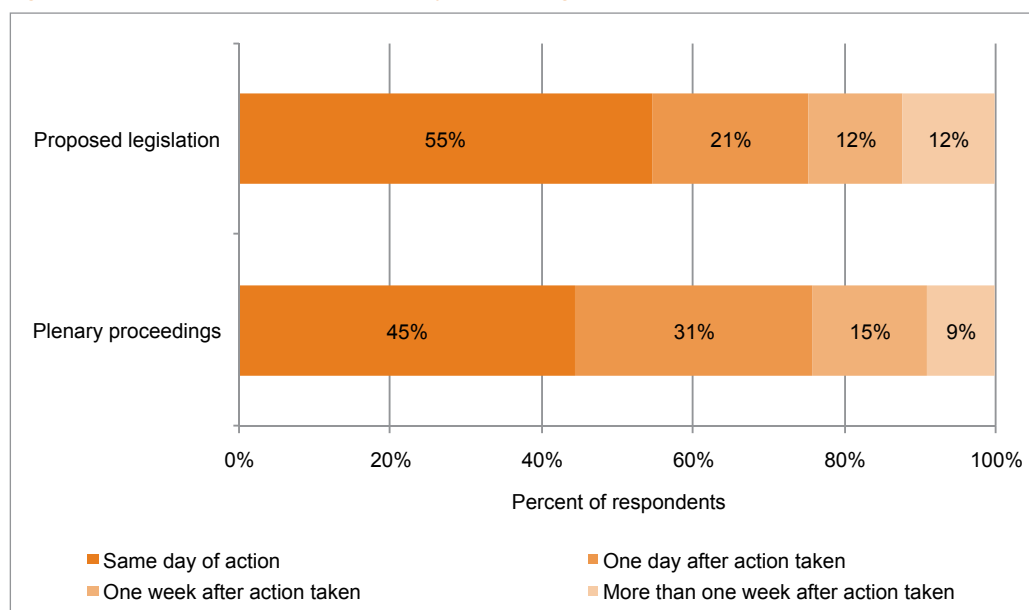
Figure 3.5: Timeliness of plenary and committee agendas on the website of the parliament



(Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 7; Plenary agenda= 120 respondents. Committee agenda= 103 respondents. These figures exclude respondents who checked “not applicable” in response to the questions)

In over 75% of parliaments proposed legislation is available within one day after action on the bill (for example, upon introduction, or amendments by a committee). Plenary proceedings are available on 76% of parliamentary websites within one day of the session (Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6: Timeliness of bills and plenary proceedings on the website of the parliament



(Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 7; Proposed legislation= 106 respondents. Plenary proceedings= 112 respondents. These figures exclude respondents who checked “not applicable” in response to the question)

Although the wording of the 2007 survey on timeliness was slightly different,⁶ it was similar enough to suggest that there has been a slight improvement in the availability of proposed legislation among the 2009:2007 Compare Group. In 2007, 68% of parliaments in the Compare Group reported that proposed legislation was available within one day of action; in 2009, 72% of parliaments made it available within one day.

Finally, the 2009 survey asked whether parliamentary documentation⁷ was available to the public on the website as soon as it is available to members and official. 72% of parliaments said always or most of the time. Although this percentage is a positive sign, there is clearly room for improvement, as it was also found that 9% said rarely or never.

Completeness. Proposed legislation on a website cannot be considered to be complete based solely on the availability of its text. To understand the status and the meaning of a bill, members and citizens need the associated reports prepared by committees, subject experts, and others; descriptions of all the actions taken on the legislation; the amendments proposed and their status; links to parliamentary debate and votes on the bill, and other related material. Proposed legislation is the type of document that benefits most from the capacity of the web to link related documents

to each other on a timely basis. Achieving completeness requires understanding the scope and importance of this requirement and providing the means to address it. The absence of completeness in documentation translates into a lower level of transparency.

Figure 3.7: Percentage of chambers that have various items hyperlinked to proposed legislation on their website

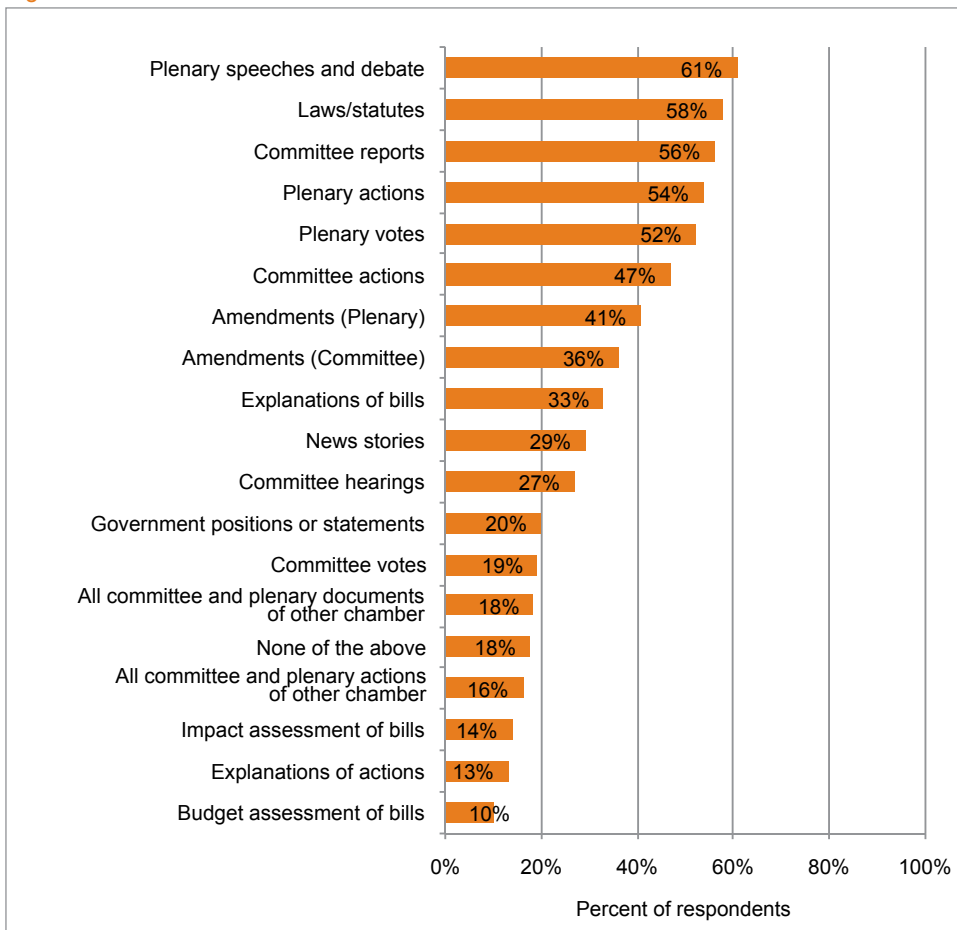


Figure 3.7 shows the percentage of parliaments that reported links between proposed legislation and 18 related documents and items of information. Five of these are linked to bills by at least 50% of parliaments:

1. Plenary speeches and debate (61%);
2. Laws and statutes (58%);
3. Committee reports (56%);
4. Plenary actions (54%);
5. Plenary votes (52%).

(Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 6; 130 respondents – 97% responding “yes” to Question 1)

6 Survey 2007, Section 7, Question 6 reads: “Please check all the types of documents and activities that are included or linked on the website for Parliament and the time when each is made available”. For each item, the time options were: “same day, next day; within a week; longer; not applicable”.

7 Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 16. No distinction was made by type of document.

All other items listed in Figure 3.7 are linked by less than 50% of parliaments. However, the percentage of parliaments linking various documents did rise slightly in 2009. Figure 3.8 shows the percentage of parliaments in the 2009:2007 Compare Group that linked to each of the items. There were increases for 10 items and decreases for 6. The average increase for the 19 items was 2.5%. The largest increases occurred for links to committee actions (+20%) and plenary actions (+10%). All other increases were less than 5%.

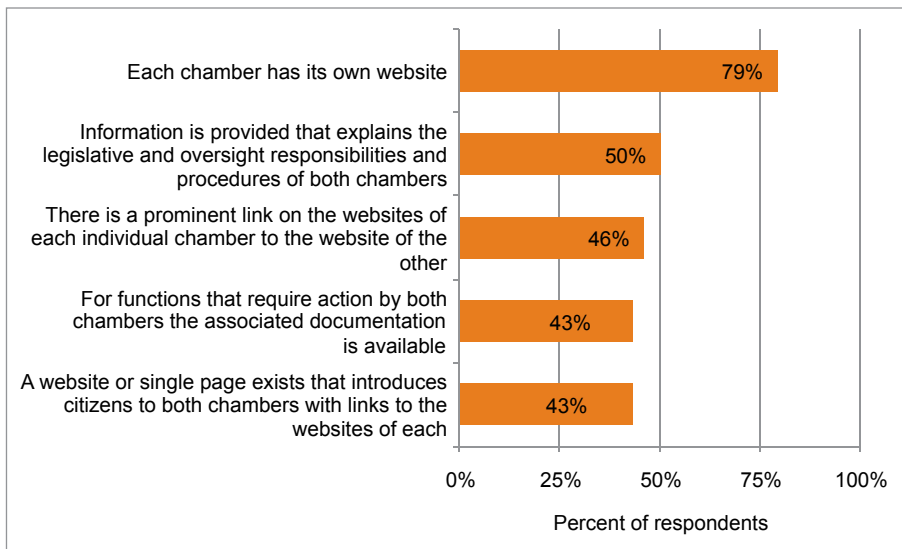
Figure 3.8: Percentage of chambers that have various items linked to proposed legislation on their website: 2007 and 2009

Items	2007 (83)	2009 (86)	Diff.
Plenary speeches and debate (<i>plenary debate</i> in 2007)	61%	64%	3%
Committee reports	54%	57%	3%
Plenary actions	46%	56%	10%
Laws/statutes	58%	56%	-2%
Plenary votes	49%	53%	4%
Committee actions	29%	49%	20%
Amendments (Plenary)	42%	45%	3%
Amendments (Committee)	39%	43%	4%
Explanations of bills	34%	33%	-1%
Committee hearings	30%	29%	-1%
News stories	30%	28%	-2%
None of the above (<i>no response</i> in 2007)	28%	21%	-7%
Committee votes	17%	20%	3%
Government positions or statements	20%	20%	0%
Impact assessment of bills	12%	17%	5%
All committee and plenary actions of other chamber*	16%	16%	0%
All committee and plenary documents of other chamber*	14%	16%	2%
Explanations of actions	17%	14%	-3%
Budget assessment of bills	13%	12%	-1%

* = if bicameral parliament

An additional criterion for completeness pertains to bicameral legislatures. 79% of assemblies in bicameral legislatures that responded to the survey reported that each chamber has its own website. The survey asked several questions about coordination and linkage between these websites. It is a concern that 50% or fewer responded affirmatively to each of the items (See Figure 3.9). Of particular note in this context is that even when action by both chambers is required, only 43% reported that their websites include the actions of the other chamber.

Figure 3.9: Website coordination and linkage between chambers of bicameral parliaments



(Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 19; 72 assemblies in bicameral parliaments)

Clarity and explanatory material. Since proposed legislation often deals with current statutes and, if passed, must be incorporated into the existing body of law, it is usually drafted in legal language that can be difficult to understand. A number of parliaments

have begun to recognize the importance of providing explanations of bills and legislative actions in language understandable to citizens. Even some members request this type of language as a supplement to the more formal legal style in which bills are normally drafted.

Related to the need for language that is more easily understood is the need to provide documents that explain the possible impact of proposed legislation. Predicting the effect of a bill can involve a great many uncertainties and preparing valid impact assessments can be very difficult. Nevertheless, such efforts can at least provide a description of some of the *possible* ways in which the proposed legislation may affect the country, and they can serve as a factual basis for judging some of the more extreme claims of a bill’s advocates and opponents. A number of parliaments have successfully used the work of experts to better understand and assess the impact of proposed budgetary measures.⁸

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In addition to the challenge of understanding legislative texts, there is the challenge of understanding legislative procedures. Standing orders and the rules of procedure can seem obscure and arcane to many citizens and in some cases even to new members joining the parliament. They have often evolved over a long time and their purposes can be difficult to grasp. Moreover, the complexity of legislative procedures can be an impediment to the transparency of parliaments.

Providing information to make legislation and legislative procedures more understandable is a need that many parliaments are just beginning to acknowledge. Also, some do not feel it is the responsibility of the parliament to provide anything more than the actual texts, leaving it to others, such as civil societies, to offer explanations and interpretations.

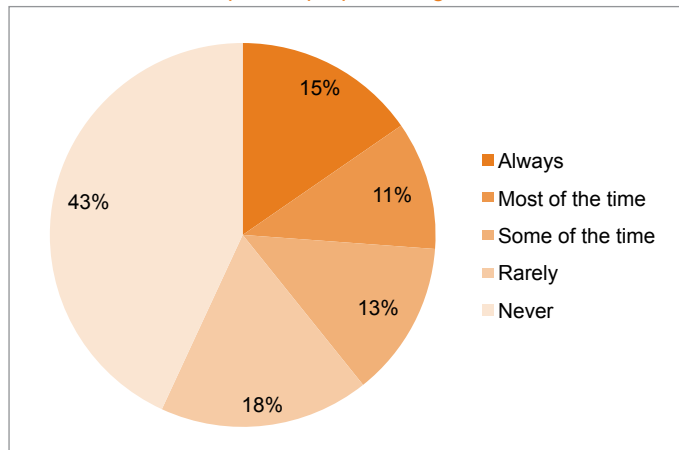
It may not be surprising, therefore, to find that many parliaments do not provide a great deal of this type of information. Only 36% said that they provide explanatory material always or most of the time and 48% said rarely or never.⁹ Impact assessments are even less common. They are provided always or most of the time by only 26% of parliaments; 61% said rarely or never

⁸ See, for example, the U.S. Congressional Budget Office (<http://www.cbo.gov>).

⁹ Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 17.

(see Figure 3.10). When asked about items that are linked to bills on the website (see Figure 3.7 discussed previously), 33% indicated that they link to explanations of bills. The other three items in this category – impact assessments of bills, explanations of actions, and budget assessments of bills – were at the bottom of the list, all linked by fewer than 15% of parliaments.

Figure 3.10: Availability on the website of material that explains the context and assesses the impact of proposed legislation



(Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 18; 130 respondents – 97% responding “yes” to Question 1)

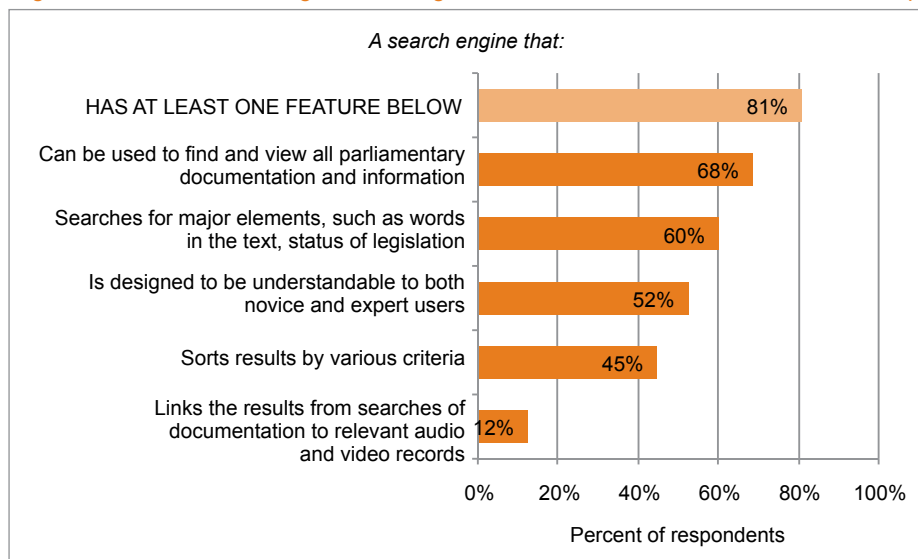
Tools available to users

As the documents and information available on parliamentary websites continue to grow in volume and complexity, it is increasingly important to offer software tools that enable both members and citizens to find and display that content easily. Providing different types of tools is also necessary because of the advances in technology that allow the use of a variety of devices to access websites from different locations. Search engines that can serve the needs of both members and citizens, at both the beginning and advanced levels, are also essential. Methods for providing audio and video webcasting, and the archives required for on-demand access are increasingly important. Alerting services and mobile access have also become valuable. Many of these new and highly useful means of access, however, require adequate security and means of authentication. And finally, the availability and the capabilities of these tools have a direct effect on the accessibility of the parliament to citizens.

Search engines

81% of parliaments reported that they have a search engine with at least one of the features listed in Figure 3.11. Because of differences in wording in the 2007 survey, it is difficult to determine whether this represents an improvement. The 2007 question that is most similar to the language shown in Figure 3.11 asked whether the parliament had *a search engine that allows users to search full text of proposed legislation, parliamentary documents, and actions*. In 2007, 68% of the Compare Group, said they did have such a search engine. In 2009, 66% of the Compare Group answered positively to the similar question in Figure 3.11 (*Can be used to find and view all parliamentary documentation and information*).

Figure 3.11: Tools for finding and viewing information available on the website of the parliament



(Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 8; 130 respondents – 97% responding “yes” to Question 1)

Webcasting and broadcasting

47% of parliaments indicated that they have the capacity to broadcast or webcast live meetings of any parliamentary body as well as parliamentary events and programmes. However, Figure 3.11 shows that only 12% of parliaments are able to link searches for documents to relevant audio and video records. Also, only 32% reported that they have an archive that permits on-demand viewing.¹⁰ As noted in Chapter 2, webcasting of both plenary and committee meetings are expected to grow in the next several years among parliaments, and therefore there are expectations that these modalities of searching will increase over time.

Alerting services

47% of parliaments reported that they have alerting services for at least one type of document or activity.¹¹ This finding appears to be somewhat inconsistent with the finding shown in Figure 2.5 which indicates that alerting services are in use in 21% of parliaments, and planned or being considered by 27%. The difference may be attributable to the fact that the percentages shown in Figure 2.5 were in response to a question about the use of alerting services to communicate with citizens. It is possible that while more than 47% of parliaments have an alerting service of some type available to members, many of them may not yet have extended this to citizens. Alternatively, it is arguable that the difference in the results of these questions is not significant since the combined percentage of parliaments that reported having one in place or are being planned (Figure 2.5) is equal to the percentage that reported that they have one on their website. Future surveys will seek to clarify this issue.

Mobile services

Only 19% of parliaments reported that they provide mobile services for members that enable them to access information and documentation as they are made available on the website. 12% provide such services for the public.¹² As the use of mobile phones continues to grow in all countries, and as more parliaments develop services designed to work with such devices, these percentages should grow. Because some mobile devices, such as so-called smart phones, have inherent limitations – for example, small screens – the information services available will have to be

¹⁰ Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 8b.

¹¹ Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 8c.

¹² Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 8d.

tailored to work within these constraints. However, the projected ubiquity of mobile telephony, especially in developing countries, and the release of new devices with enhanced functionality offers parliaments an excellent opportunity to improve their accessibility.

Security and authentication

These features will grow in importance as members increasingly use the website to work remotely. Authentication services, especially digital signatures will also be necessary for citizens, civil societies, and others who rely on parliamentary websites to obtain accurate copies of legislation and other documents. 25% of parliaments currently provide secure services for members and 9% provide authentication services such as digital signatures.¹³

Documents downloadable in bulk

An issue of continuing interest to many in civil society is whether parliaments make their documents available to the public not only on the web but also in downloadable formats that can be incorporated into systems developed by others. When this occurs, groups within civil society are able to create systems that offer views of parliamentary actions that are not normally available on the official websites of the legislative body. This practice of being able to download documents, often in open formats, is occurring increasingly as a part of e-government programs. In the 2009 survey 44% of parliaments reported that they were providing this service and 30% reported that they were planning or considering doing it.¹⁴

Usability and accessibility of the site

Just as with parliamentary documents, the tools for finding and viewing information on websites must be understandable to citizens. The ability to use these tools depends on a number of design techniques and standards. These include the methods that have been identified through various usability studies for making a website intuitively easier to navigate and accessibility standards that ensure persons with disabilities are able to use them. They also include recommendations contained in the IPU *Guidelines* for responding to the challenge of multiple languages within a country.

Usability tools and techniques

Usability depends first on knowing the needs of those who use a website, including both members and the public. 73% of parliaments reported that they base the content and the design of the site on an understanding of the needs of different groups of users.¹⁵ However, only 38% reported the employment of usability testing and other methods for ensuring that the design of the website is understandable by its intended audiences. As websites offer more content and more sophisticated means for finding and viewing information, the need to ensure usability increases. However, the cost of meeting this criterion also increases and it may be that it is currently beyond the reach of many legislatures. If so, this is an example in which the experiences of those parliaments that have employed such techniques can be valuable to others and worth sharing.

Design elements

General experience with both public and private sector websites has led to a relatively common set of design elements that help to make a website easier for users. The percentages of parliaments that include each of these elements in their websites are shown in Figure 3.12. While it is positive that 82% tell users whom to contact for questions about the operation of the website,

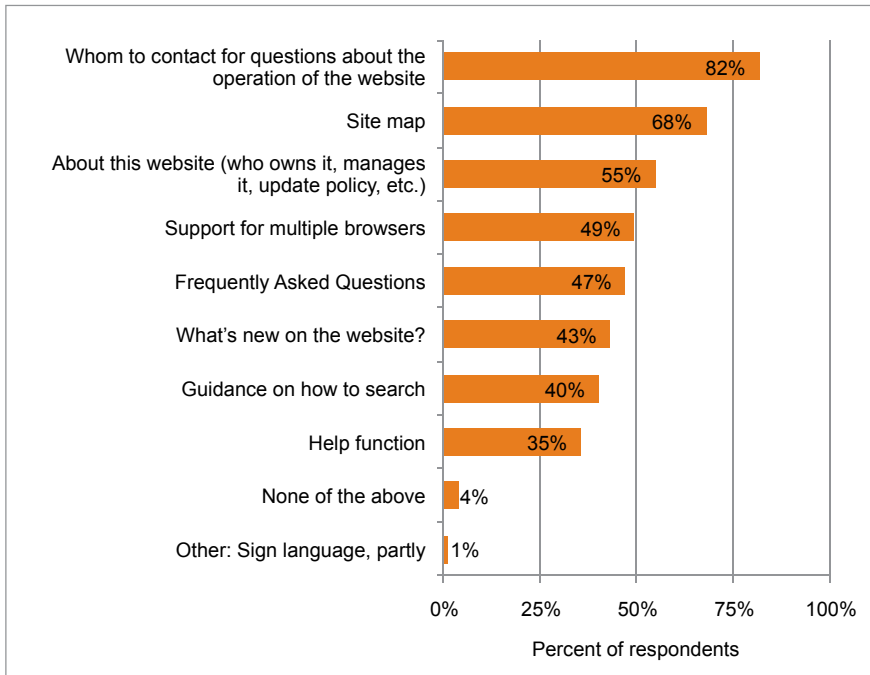
13 Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 8e.

14 Source: Survey 2009, Section 3, Question 8.

15 Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 9.

only three of the eight elements are found on over 50% of the sites. *Guidance on how to search* and a *Help function* are available on 40% or fewer. This finding is consistent with the relatively low percentages of parliaments that provide material that explains proposed legislation and the legislative process.

Figure 3.12: Design elements available to users on the website of the parliament



(Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 14; 130 respondents – 97% responding “yes” to Question 1)

Accessibility

The survey found that 45% of parliaments do follow accessibility standards to ensure that the website can be made available to persons with disabilities. Such standards are one of the most helpful ways to narrow a critical part of the digital divide; it is essential that more parliaments implement them as soon as possible. A related but differently worded question in the 2007 survey found an even lower percentage adhering to such standards. The 2009 finding, therefore, suggests there may be some improvement in this area.

Languages

Parliaments of countries with multiple official languages face one of the major hurdles of the digital divide. The baseline data provided by the 2009 survey gives an informative picture of the current state of efforts to address this challenge.¹⁶

Parliaments in countries with single/multiple languages:

- 59% have one official language;
- 22% have two official languages;
- 18% have three or more official languages.

Of those with two official languages (29 parliaments):

- 28% offer the website *completely* in both languages;

¹⁶ Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Questions 10-13.

- 10% offer the website *at least partially* in both languages;
- 62% offer the website *in only one language*.

Of those with three or more official languages (24 parliaments):

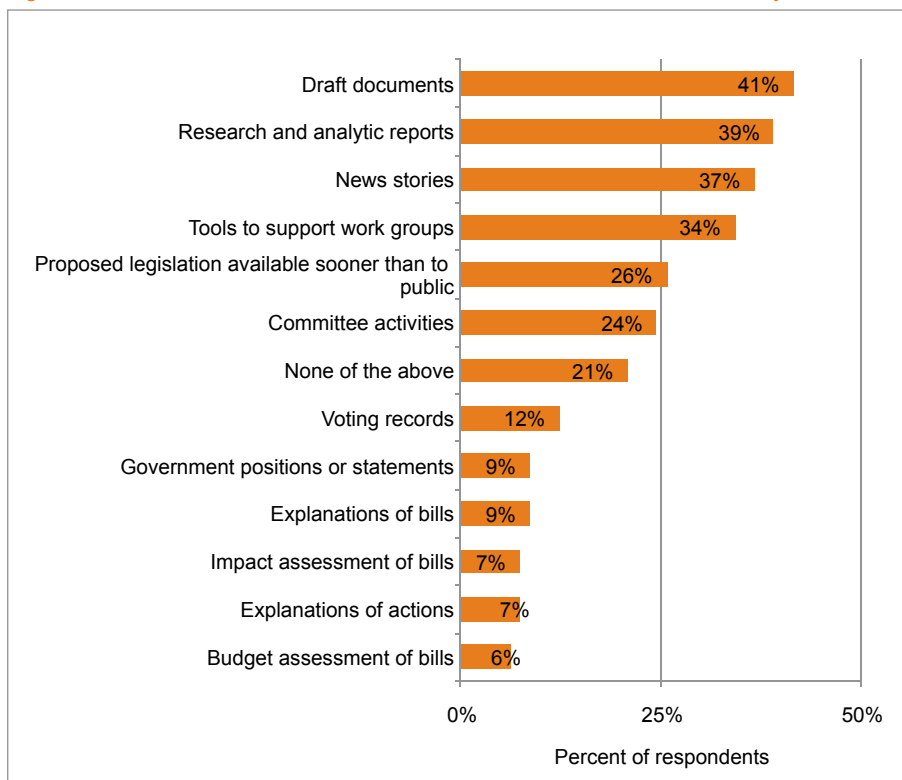
- 4% offer the website *completely* in all languages;
- 67% offer the website *at least partially* in several languages;
- 29% offer the website *in only one language*.

Intranets for members only

Parliamentary websites are also important tools for members, committees, and staff. They are often the fastest and most reliable vehicle for obtaining copies of draft bills, receiving agendas, getting summaries of committee actions and the text of committee documents, and learning what members have said and how they have voted. They have become essential for enabling the parliamentary leadership and members to carry out their legislative and oversight work.

Many parliaments now maintain websites on intranets for members-only (61%) or are planning/considering them (22%).¹⁷ While a strong case can be made for enabling members to work in a confidential environment, in the context of transparency the issue is whether the internal website provides documents or tools that should be available to the public as well.

Figure 3.13: Information and services available to members and staff only



(Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 22; 82 respondents – 61% responding “yes” to Question 21)

¹⁷ Source: Survey 2009, Section 5, Question 20.

As shown in Figure 3.13, the items provided by the most parliaments on these members-only intranets are:

- Draft documents - 41%;
- Research and analytic reports - 39%;
- News stories - 37%;
- Tools to support work groups - 34%.

It is reasonable that documents still in draft form should not be available on a public website until they are formally introduced, assuming that there are opportunities for citizens to view them once they have been released. And to be both efficient and effective, tools to support working groups should be limited to those who are actually members of the working group itself. Other means are available to encourage public input on the activities of such groups if they wish to have it. A case can also be made for restricting access to news stories if access for the parliament is through a paid subscription service that charges on the basis of the number of users.

Limiting access to research and analytic reports can be more controversial, and depends on a number of factors such as the reasons for the confidentiality and the potential impact on their value to members if they were written for a broader public audience. This is an issue that requires more understanding than the 2009 survey can provide regarding the purpose and use of such reports.

Other items in Figure 3.13 also require more analysis to assess their impact. For example, 26% make proposed legislation available to members sooner than to the public. This may not be a concern if the legislation is still in draft form, or if the delay is very brief, such as the time to prepare the bill in final format. Longer delays could be a problem. The restriction of voting records by 12% is a concern as well since it represents a key component of transparency and accountability, and should not be restricted to members only. Finally, in light of the previous discussion regarding the small percentages of parliaments who are able to provide explanatory material and impact assessments, the fact that 6% to 9% limit access to these kinds of documents bears further analysis.

Improvements planned

Over 80% of parliaments reported plans to improve their websites, again underscoring the importance of this instrument for achieving transparency and accessibility. The wide range of comments, grouped into general categories below, illustrates the scope of, and commitment to this effort by legislatures in both developed and developing countries:

- Conduct a general review of the website using the IPU *Guidelines for Parliamentary Websites*, including through the creation of a dedicated working group.
- Redesign the website, develop a new information architecture and undertake a general reorganization of the content, including by moving to a Content Management System (CMS);
- Make available online a searchable database of all parliamentary documents (laws, amendments etc.) accessible by all users;
- Make documentation available using XML standards;
- Develop tools to interact with citizens including those allowing them to discuss proposed legislation online;
- Enable members of parliament and citizens to access information and documentation available on the website through mobile devices;

- Make the website dynamic, develop alerting services and better search engines;
- Develop capacity to broadcast or webcast live meetings;
- Develop an archive of broadcast or webcast meetings;
- Increase usability and accessibility, and make the website conform to the W3C standards;
- Make the website available in more languages;
- Create a dedicated section for young people;
- Develop web pages of members and committees.

Box 3.3

A Parliamentary Information Management Committee represented by the Senate, the House and the Library of the Parliament will be developing a proposal for consideration by both houses to do a comprehensive overhaul of the Parliamentary Internet Site in order to meet the principles of Access, Engagement and Education.

Respondent to the 2009 Survey

SUMMARY

Websites have become the primary means by which parliaments make their work known to citizens and by which they can achieve a higher degree of transparency and accountability. Parliamentary websites provide a variety of information sources, and while many of these can be accessed independently, it is the ability of web technology to integrate a broad array of legislative and policy data and documents that makes them especially valuable.

A parliament that is seeking to become more open will provide citizens with timely access to the most current information about the whole spectrum of documentation related to law-making, oversight (including the national budget) and representation through its website. It will also provide the means for understanding what the parliament does, who its members are, what they have accomplished, and how to communicate with them. It will offer information in different formats, including text and video, using a variety of tools that enable citizens to find what they are looking for quickly and easily, and to understand it. The extent of documentation on a parliamentary website, along with its characteristics, such as completeness, timeliness, and clarity, offer one method for judging the level of transparency a parliament has achieved, or is striving to achieve. The tools on the website for finding, viewing, and explaining that documentation are an indication of its openness to all citizens.

The findings of the 2007 survey reported in the *World e-Parliament Report 2008* documented the widespread use of parliamentary websites. Most of these websites did an acceptable job of providing general information about the parliament, but many did not incorporate important information about legislative activities, especially committee documents and explanatory material. The 2008 Report also found that more work needed to be done in linking relevant information to proposed legislation to provide a more complete picture of the bill. A substantial number of parliaments employed formal usability testing (or were planning to) but far fewer were meeting accessibility standards for persons with disabilities. Many were broadcasting plenary sessions and a large number were planning to do so.

The website section of the 2009 Global Survey of ICT in Parliaments was based on the revised IPU *Guidelines for Parliamentary Websites*. They are organized into four categories: 1) General infor-

mation about the parliament; 2) Specific information regarding the legislative, oversight, and budget work of the parliament; 3) Tools for finding and viewing information; and, 4) Usability and accessibility of the site. Because this is the first effort to assess the state of parliamentary websites based on the new IPU *Guidelines*, the findings must be viewed primarily as baseline data although some comparisons are possible with the 2007 findings when similar questions were used.

General information

This category includes practical information such as how to visit the parliament, how to obtain its documents online or in printed form, and what information services it provides. It also covers a parliament's history, activities, organization, and basic responsibilities. Of special importance is information about members, past and present, and their representational duties and activities.

The survey found that over half of the parliaments have 70% or more of the items that provide general information. This represents the most basic and most static information about the legislature, and it is the minimal starting point for transparency. From this perspective, these figures are a concern, especially because many parliaments have had websites for a number of years. It can be argued that the percentage of parliaments and the percentage of items should each be much higher.

Legislation, oversight, budget

The core of the work of a parliament falls under its legislative, oversight, and budget responsibilities. This work takes place in nearly all parliaments in their plenary sessions and in many parliaments in committees.

The survey included a total of 34 individual items covering each of these areas of work, as well as the activities of plenaries and committees. Over half of the parliaments reported that they have 38% or more of these items on their website. Information was provided by more parliaments (over 50%) about legislation and plenary activities; significantly less than 50% provided information about committee activities and about oversight and budget review work. This latter finding may reflect differences in the role that committees play in some parliaments and differences among legislatures in their responsibilities for oversight and budget review.

The timeliness of the documentation provided is satisfactory overall, although agendas could be made available sooner in many parliaments. Completeness, however, as measured by the number of relevant items linked to proposed legislation, still needs to be improved in many parliaments. And efforts to achieve greater clarity by providing material that explains bills and offers an assessment of their impact occur in very few parliaments.

Tools

The tools available on websites help citizens find and view information in a variety of ways, and, if they are well designed, enable them to do this easily. 81% of parliaments reported that they have a *search engine* with at least one of five important features. Because of differences in wording in the 2007 survey, it is difficult to determine whether this represents an improvement in the following two years. 47% of parliaments indicated that they have the capacity to *broadcast or webcast live meetings* of any parliamentary body as well as parliamentary events and programmes. 47% of parliaments have *alerting services* for at least one type of document or activity. But only 19% of parliaments provide mobile services for members that enable them to access information and documentation as they are made available on the website. 12% provide such services for the pub-

lic. The growth of mobile phones in all countries should lead to some growth in these services. Only 25% of parliaments currently provide secure services for members and only 9% provide authentication services such as digital signatures.

Usability and accessibility tools and techniques

The standards and methods for ensuring the usability and accessibility of a website have become increasingly important. 73% of parliaments base the content and the design of their site on an understanding of the needs of different groups of users. However, only 38% employ usability testing and other methods for ensuring that the design of the website is understandable by its intended audiences. The survey found that 45% of parliaments do follow standards to ensure that the website can be accessed by persons with disabilities; this means that over half do not, a finding of some concern. Multiple languages remain a challenge for many parliaments trying to make their websites accessible to all citizens.

Many parliaments now maintain websites on intranets for members-only (61%) or are planning/considering them (22%). There are some issues concerning the information available on these websites and whether it should be made available to the public, especially with regard to research reports, voting records, and explanatory material.

While many parliaments state that they want to be open by being more transparent, accountable and accessible, the collective findings from the 2009 survey suggest that much still needs to be done by many parliaments to achieve these goals. Transparency requires that more documentation be made available. In some cases it needs to be more current; in many cases it needs to be more complete; and in nearly all cases, it needs to be more understandable. Openness to all requires that more parliaments implement capable search engines, extend webcasting, increase alerting services, greatly enhance mobile services, and add authentication functions. And it requires usability testing and the implementation of accessibility standards for persons with disabilities by well over half of all parliaments.