

AUDIT OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN ALBANIA 2016

The Institute for Mediation and Democracy (IDM) has conducted an Audit of Political Engagement in Albania, an inaugural public opinion study that explores citizens' engagement in democratic processes as an indicator of the health of a society. The February 2016 study involved interviews across Albania with 1,538 participants over 18 years of age, as well as four focus groups¹. It examined a range of political engagement indicators grouped in three areas: **political knowledge and interest; political participation and action at local and national levels; and efficiency and satisfaction**. It also examined participants' perceptions on Parliament and their elected representatives, as a responsive and accountable Parliament is a foundational pillar of democratic governance.

The research findings serve as a platform for debate about how to enhance citizens' engagement in politics. Improving their engagement requires both a realistic baseline to understand how citizens are involved in politics, as well as an honest appraisal of what motivates citizens to become engaged and what prevents them from doing so.

Low Interest in Politics

The research shows that half of the survey participants express no interest in politics, which leaves space for politicians to make decisions as they wish. Every second participant believes that they do not have any power to influence decision-making at the local level, while two out of three participants believe the same for the national level. Part of the problem lies with the fact that respondents equate politics exclusively with 'political party politics' which are perceived poorly, and described as 'conflictual' and 'based on personal and not citizens' interests' during focus group discussions. And as only one in five participants believe that one can politically engage without being part of a political party (21.9%), this effectively sidelines citizens from participating in politics.

Informal Forms of Engagement Preferred

Those participants who are politically active, turn to more informal ways of political engagement, favoring mechanisms that do not directly involve parties or political institutions. The most common form of political engagement reported by participants was discussing politics with other people, with more than two-thirds of surveyed participants having done this in the past year. Contacting a local councilor or local municipal officer was the second most common action (35.7% of participants had done this) followed by volunteering in an activity in the local community

Political engagement involves diverse ways of citizen engagement directed to solving an issue and improving a situation for the better. It includes:

- *any type of volunteering;*
- *participating in local actions through different civil society initiatives or individually as active citizens;*
- *drawing media attention to a problem;*
- *contacting an MP/councilor;*
- *attending public hearings or meetings of local/national parliament;*
- *signing petitions; and*
- *donating to a charity, among others.*

¹ The findings in the study refer to the participants in the survey and cannot be extrapolated to the general population, but allow for speaking about trends. A quota sampling was used for the survey. Rural and urban areas and men/women were the two groups that had equal representation in the survey.

(32%). More formal, institutional mechanisms of engagement such as attending public hearings or local council meetings, seeking information from state organs, and engaging in civic campaigns remain underused.

The research shows that citizens have not lost faith in democracy, but their confidence in formal politics and politicians is in steady decline. The findings from three consecutive years of National Democratic Institute (NDI) focus group research were affirmed by IDM's study, which describes citizens' persisting alienation from formal politics. Those respondents who report never taking any political actions list chiefly among their reasons that "nobody listens to them" (39%) and "politicians are just out there for themselves" (38.7%). Meanwhile, citizens' satisfaction with the way how Parliament and government work stands at 22% and 25.4%, respectively, while only 14% report satisfaction with the work of the opposition.

These findings speak to an urgent need to examine how politics is practiced, so it is seen as a means through which citizens may influence decision-making to improve the current situation and as a venue for rebuilding trust between citizens and decisionmakers.

How can political leaders change this trend and bridge the gap between citizens and their decisionmakers? IDM's research offers a good source for exploring different ways to understand citizens' disillusionment with politics and how best to respond to it.

['All Politics is Local'](#)

Participants in the study show more interest in local self-government than national governance, and more readiness to get involved at the local level. However, focus group discussions revealed that some citizens perceive the new territorial administrative division as having brought more distance between local decisionmakers and citizens, particularly those in rural areas. **This should serve as a strong message to newly elected local councilors and mayors to be more proactive in reaching out to their constituents – for example, by establishing regular, weekly meetings with constituents and/or local parliament 'Open Days' – to listen to their needs and offer meaningful solutions to community concerns.**

[Need to Promote Diverse Mechanisms of Engagement among Citizens](#)

When asked which activities they believe would contribute to changing a situation they are not satisfied with at a local or national level, one in two citizens chose voting² in an election, which shows that, in comparison to other forms of engagement, half of respondents view voting as a sufficient activity for political engagement. **This speaks to a strong need to educate and promote among citizens more diverse and frequent mechanisms for engagement to influence political processes and orient decisionmaking to public interest.**

² Voter turnout in the last local elections was 47.86% and 53% in the 2013 parliamentary elections. Though the figures might appear low, actual turnout among the voting population is estimated to be higher, as more than 1.5 million citizens live outside Albania.

The responsibility to promote these mechanisms lies with civil society organizations (CSOs), media, state institutions, and politicians, as they make decisions. However, citizens share responsibility, and should consider their own obligations to be active in their democracy, ensuring that their voices are regularly heard by politicians and not just once every election cycle. A functional democracy demands active citizens; open, transparent and accountable institutions; and free media.

CSOs as a Bridge between Citizens and Decisionmakers

This study confirms NDI's 2015 focus group research finding, whereby citizens asked for an intermediary to help them engage with and keep politicians accountable. IDM's study shows some indication that civil society is filling this role, as half of the participants consider taking part in citizens' issue-based activities, mainly organized by civil society groups, as a way to change a situation they do not like. While this perception is **an opportunity for civil society to strengthen its role as a bridge between citizens and decision-makers, the study also shows that civil society is expected to be more active in reaching out to citizens.** As participants were more ready and willing to take actions, using more formal and institutional engagement mechanisms, if they felt strongly about an issue, **civil society organizations may be able to better engage citizens if they first work to better understand citizens' needs and then offer concrete platforms for engagement around them.**

Parliament and Members of Parliament (MPs) Need to be Closer to Citizens

Though a majority of participants believe that Parliament is essential for democracy, more than half of participants report to know only 'a little' or 'nothing at all' about it. Participants do not believe that Parliament serves its core functions of holding government accountable (42%), legislating on issues that are important to citizens (47%), and representing citizens effectively (60%). **Parliament should play a stronger role in raising citizens' awareness about its basic functions, promoting the role of Parliament and MPs, and of publicizing its initiatives.** NDI encourages the Parliament to actively promote civic education, particularly among youth and citizens outside Tirana. This can be achieved through developing programs that enable citizens' meaningful interactions with the institution, **such as through Parliamentary Open Days, and/or Democracy Workshops³ with primary and high school students and others.**

Despite Parliament's recent improvements in the area of transparency and openness⁴, citizens' perception about the institution have not changed, as more than half (56%) think that it is not transparent in the way it is organized and works. **Parliament should ensure that information is broadly accessible to all citizens on a non-discriminatory basis. To the extent possible, access to Parliamentary information should not be restricted by geographic barriers.** Although the use of Parliamentary websites facilitates access to parliamentary information without geographic restriction, the study shows that there is still a strong need for developing direct channels of communication to build citizens'

³ Democracy workshops are educational workshops on the role of parliament and its functions tailored for primary and high school students.

⁴ For example, Parliament adopted a manual on cooperation with civil society organizations (CSOs); introduced a program on transparency; and developed an online form where citizens and CSOs could apply to gain access to parliamentary committee meetings and parliamentary sessions. It also published contact information of parliamentary staff in charge of communicating with citizens and CSOs.

knowledge about the Parliament and its roles. Therefore, Parliament should seek other means of ensuring public access to parliamentary information across the country, such as through establishing communication centers; using MPs' offices more effectively; organizing committee hearings in the field; disseminating information through education institutions; and developing partnerships with civil society and media and others.

While two-thirds of respondents reported to know 'a little' or 'nothing at all' about the role of MPs, they clearly expect that **MPs be honest and responsible, qualified, and in touch with citizens' concerns**. Just as NDI's 2015 focus group found, **participants in this study emphasize the lack of debate culture and ethics among Members of Parliament across the political spectrum**. Participants want MPs to focus on addressing citizens' concerns and offering solutions to their problems rather than focusing on personal traits of their opponents.

Citizens unanimously asked for the adoption of a code of ethics, an effort the Parliament has undertaken but not yet adopted⁵, and believe that it would contribute to a more democratic culture of debate in the Parliament.

Participants in the study express the need for more direct contact with both local and national elected representatives as a way of keeping them accountable; only one-third of participants claim that MPs address their or their families' interests. Despite the fact that the Parliament has recently opened eight MPs' offices⁶ across Albania, participants have not shown awareness with these offices and continue to ask for regular contact with MPs at the local level. Better advertisement of these offices, including when they are open to citizens, may address this need.

When asked about mechanisms that could increase accountability of elected officials, participants prefer 'providing conditions at local level for direct contact with MPs/councilors on certain days in the week' and 'obliging MPs to answer citizens' questions in a reasonable time' over 'communicating with citizens via Facebook'. While social media can be an important communication tool, particularly among youth, this finding shows that communicating with citizens via social media should only go hand in hand with traditional means of communication.

The IDM's research, available at www.idmalbania.org, is modeled on the United Kingdom's Hansard Society series of political engagement audits conducted for 12 consecutive years. The research was supported by the National Democratic Institute with funding through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

⁵ A draft Code of Ethics was prepared with the assistance of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and is pending adoption for more than a year.

⁶ In November 2014, Parliament adopted a *Decision on Opening Constituent Offices in 12 Qarks*. Out of 24 planned offices, eight have been opened.