ASSEMBLÉE NATIONALE
DU QUÉBEC

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REPORT OF THE CITIZEN ROUND TABLE

OCTOBER 2021

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Table citoyenne

TABLE OF CONTENTS

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE REPORT 5

INTRODUCTION 9

THE CONSULTATION PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY 10

- The call for applications 11
- The selection process for participants 11
- The focus groups 12
- The content of the report 13

CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AT THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY 14

- The impact of citizen involvement and trust in Parliament 14
- Hearing, considering and representing citizens' voices 15
- Accessibility, inclusion and representativeness of the National Assembly 15
- Information and education on democratic and parliamentary life 16

PARLIAMENTARY INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND THE MNAS 18

- The dissemination of parliamentary information by the Assembly 18
- The Assembly's website and digital platforms 20
- The search for and use of parliamentary information by citizens 21
- Communication between the public and the MNAs 22
- Constituency offices 23
- Other considerations and proposals regarding information and communication 24

PETITIONS 25

- The sponsorship of petitions 25
- Technical and administrative procedures 26
- The dissemination and consultation of petitions in progress 27
- The examination and follow-up of petitions tabled 28
- Other considerations and proposals regarding petitions 29

PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS 31

- The types of consultation 31
- The selection of witnesses 32

The dissemination of information on the consultations 33
The preparation of written and oral interventions 34
Public hearings 35
Online comments 36
The follow-up to consultations 37
Other considerations and proposals regarding consultations 37

CONCLUSION 39

APPENDIX I – THE CALL FOR APPLICATIONS 41

APPENDIX II – THE PROFILE OF THE APPLICANTS
AND THE MEMBERS OF THE CITIZEN ROUND TABLE 51

APPENDIX III – THE INTERVIEW GRID 57

APPENDIX IV – THE PARTICIPATION CHARTER
AND THE CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT 63

APPENDIX V – THE COURSES OF ACTION OF THE CITIZEN ROUND TABLE 65

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE REPORT

The Citizen Round Table is a consultation on ways to facilitate the participation of the citizens of Québec in parliamentary proceedings and activities. It took the form of virtual focus groups held in June 2021.

A total of 44 citizens took part in the discussions with a view to contributing to the reflections of parliamentarians on the mechanisms of public participation at the National Assembly.

More specifically, the participants discussed the following themes:

- the dissemination of information and communication with MNAs;
- petitions;
- public consultations and online comments;
- other public participation initiatives and solutions.

Call for applications and selection of participants

The call for applications was conducted from April 19 to May 19, 2021, throughout the entire population of Québec. At the end of the process, the Assembly had received 347 applications, of which 330 met the eligibility criteria.

A random draw by stratified sampling was carried out among the eligible candidates, taking into account the sociodemographic and geographic representativeness of the Québec population. The following variables were used in the draw:

- gender identity (female, male, non-binary);
- different age groups;
- Indigenous identity;
- ethnocultural diversity;
- language diversity (French, English, other mother tongue);
- regional diversity (17 administrative regions of Québec).

Of the 56 persons initially selected, 44 participated in the focus groups, the others having withdrawn. The exchanges took place virtually on the Teams platform between June 14 and 17, 2021.

Perceptions with respect to public participation at the National Assembly

Citizens expressed their dissatisfactions and aspirations with respect to democratic life and public participation at the Assembly.

Overall, they expressed a sense of powerlessness, distrust and disillusionment towards Parliament. They feel that the interests and concerns of political parties, lobbies and

corporations take precedence over those of citizens. They feel that the mechanisms of participation are complex, bureaucratic and restricted to insiders. Finally, they point to the lack of interest, curiosity and knowledge of the Québec population regarding politics and Parliament.

The general solutions put forward by the participants include:

- ✓ visibility and valorization of citizen participation in the parliamentary framework;
- ✓ monitoring, accountability and transparency of consultative and decision-making processes;
- ✓ listening to, considering and representing the views of citizens in Parliament;
- ✓ accessibility and inclusion, notably the popularization of procedures and the accompaniment of citizens in the parliamentary processes;
- ✓ information and education on citizenship and democratic life.

The dissemination of parliamentary information and communications between the public and the MNAs

The members of the Citizen Round Table have identified a number of obstacles in the area of information dissemination and communication, particularly as regards the following elements:

- › the dissemination of parliamentary information by the Assembly;
- › the Assembly's website and digital platforms;
- › the search for and use of parliamentary information by citizens;
- › communications between the public and the MNAs;
- › constituency offices.

The solutions put forward by the participants include:

- ✓ better dissemination and simplification of parliamentary information;
- ✓ an overhaul of the Assembly's Web site, taking into account current standards and practices;
- ✓ the judicious use of digital tools;
- ✓ the development of mechanisms and tools for monitoring parliamentary proceedings;
- ✓ proximity and partisan neutrality in communications.

Petitions

Citizen Round Table members are divided on the use of petitions as a means of citizen participation. Some see value in it, while others consider the process obsolete. Their interventions concern the following subthemes:

- the sponsorship of petitions;
- technical and administrative procedures;
- the dissemination and consultation of ongoing petitions;
- the study and follow-up of petitions tabled.

The solutions put forward by the participants include:

- ✓ the elimination of the current system of sponsorship of petitions by MNAs;
- ✓ the simplification and better dissemination of the petitions process;
- ✓ better publicizing of ongoing petitions;
- ✓ greater transparency of the petitions process, including publication of the criteria that lead to the acceptance or rejection of a petition.

Public consultations

Citizen Round Table members questioned the usefulness of public consultations, as they felt that their voice did not have an impact on the legislative process. They discussed the following in more detail::

- the types of consultation;
- the selection of witnesses;
- the dissemination of information on the consultations;
- the preparation of written and oral interventions;
- public hearings;
- online comments;
- the follow-up to consultations.

The solutions put forward by participants include:

- ✓ increasing the number of consultations for individual citizens;
- ✓ transparency in the witness selection process and diversification of the profiles of the persons and groups heard;
- ✓ better dissemination of information about ongoing consultations and how to contribute to them;
- ✓ the establishment of a sufficient timeframe to prepare an intervention (brief or hearing);
- ✓ a follow-up to the contribution of citizen recommendations.

Content of the report and follow-up to the process

This document sets out the aspects that the citizens believe should be explored in a reflection on ways to improve public participation at the National Assembly. It reflects only the views of the participants of the Citizen Round Table.

The Citizen Round Table is an important step in the parliamentary reform process launched during the 42nd Legislature. The content of this report will provide relevant input for the MNAs' reflections and the Assembly's institutional actions in the area of public participation.

"To get results you've never had, you have to do things you've never done."
- A member of the Citizen Round Table

INTRODUCTION

This citizen consultation report is part of the parliamentary reform process launched during the 42nd Legislature. Its purpose is to provide input to MNAs on aspects of the reform that concern the National Assembly's public participation mechanisms.

The proposal tabled by the President of the National Assembly in the spring of 2020 included, among other things, the establishment of a Citizen Round Table to integrate the concerns of Quebecers into the parliamentary reform process. The MNAs unanimously supported this project. They targeted a consultation method and themes likely to stimulate the population's interest and encourage the contribution of all, including persons less familiar with politics and parliamentarism.

Citizens were thus invited to give their opinion on public participation at the Assembly, within the framework of focus groups. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the health measures in effect, these meetings were held in virtual mode in June 2021.

The Citizen Round Table focus groups were formed following a call for applications circulated to the entire population, after which 330 eligible applications were received. A random draw by stratified sampling was carried out among the pool of eligible candidates, taking into account the criteria of representativeness of the Québec population. In accordance with the wishes of parliamentarians, the profile of participants reflected the sociodemographic and geographic diversity of Québec. In addition, the persons heard displayed varying degrees of familiarity with parliamentary matters and demonstrated political neutrality during their interventions.

In total, 44 persons participated generously and enthusiastically in the Citizen Round Table. The discussions proved to be enriching and gave rise to a host of ideas. The citizens pointed out the difficulties hindering their involvement in parliamentary work and proposed concrete ways to remedy them. Although critical of their Parliament, they are no less concerned about the health of Québec's democracy. They want all Québec citizens to be able to participate fairly, to be heard and to contribute to the public debates that concern them.

This report presents a synthesis of the findings and proposals of the members of the Citizen Round Table. It sets forth their dissatisfactions as well as their suggestions and aspirations. Above all, it testifies to the interest that citizens have in democratic life as well as to the vitality of their civic and political commitment.

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THE CONSULTATION PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

The Citizen Round Table is a consultation on ways to facilitate the participation of Québec citizens in parliamentary proceedings and activities. It also helps to better determine how the public understands the workings of the Assembly. The Citizen Round Table took the form of virtual focus groups that were held between June 14 and 17, 2021.

A total of 44 citizens participated in the exchanges with a view to providing input to parliamentarians on the mechanisms for public participation at the Assembly.

The focus group format was identified as the most appropriate way to gather the various opinions and ideas of citizens. This method allows participants to express their own points of view within the framework of an open discussion, without seeking a consensus. The meetings, which take place in small groups to encourage exchanges, are moderated by a neutral person who presents the themes and ensures that everyone expresses themselves freely. Unlike a survey, the focus group method does not aim to achieve a statistically significant representation of public opinion, but allows for a more in-depth examination of ideas and the exploration of new avenues. The scope and content of the discussions therefore reflect the real and concrete concerns of the participants.

The Citizen Round Table has the following general objectives:

- to better understand and further examine the diversified views, perceptions and needs of citizens with respect to public participation at the National Assembly;
- to pinpoint the main obstacles to citizen participation in parliamentary proceedings and activities;
- to identify concrete ways to improve current mechanisms for public participation at the National Assembly and to implement new ones if necessary;
- to collect ideas and proposals to help MNAs in their reflection on parliamentary reform.

More specifically, participants exchanged views on the following themes:

- the dissemination of information and communication with MNAs;
- petitions;
- public consultations and online comments;
- other public participation initiatives and solutions.

The call for applications

The call for applications was conducted from April 19 to May 19, 2021, throughout the entire population of Québec. A special page was created to promote it on the Assembly's website (http://www.assnat.qc.ca/tablecitoyenne/en/). The content of the call for applications, including the eligibility criteria, is presented in Appendix I.

General and targeted advertisements were published in traditional, digital and social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). A promotional clip was broadcast online and on the Assembly Channel. The President of the National Assembly conducted interviews to promote the consultation, while parliamentarians were invited to disseminate the call for applications in their networks.

Finally, approximately one hundred groups representing different citizen profiles were approached to provide them with information about the Citizen Round Table (women, men, LGBTQ+ community, age groups, Indigenous, ethnocultural communities, persons with disabilities, administrative regions, etc.). Some groups relayed the call for applications to their members and on their broadcast platforms.

At the end of the process, the Assembly had received 347 applications, of which 330 met the eligibility criteria. Overall, these applications were representative of the diversity of Québec's population.

The selection process for participants

A random draw by stratified sampling was conducted among the 330 eligible applications received, in the presence of a neutral Assembly lawyer.

Initially, 56 people were selected, taking into account the sociodemographic and geographic representativeness of the Québec population. The following variables were used in the draw:

- gender identity (female, male, non-binary);
- different age groups;
- Indigenous identity;
- ethnocultural diversity;
- language diversity (French, English, other mother tongue);
- regional diversity (17 administrative regions of Québec).

Alternates were also selected to fill in for those who withdrew following the initial draw. These individuals were contacted up to one week prior to the scheduled focus groups.

However, twelve people cancelled their presence shortly before the event or did not show up at the time of the meeting and therefore could not be replaced. These cancellations had a slight effect on the sociodemographic representativeness of the pool of participants. Among

other things, the Citizen Round Table was unable to draw on the contribution of citizens of Indigenous origin.

The individuals selected had varying degrees of familiarity with politics and parliamentarism. They were required to commit to political and partisan neutrality in their interventions.

Appendix II provides detailed data on the profile of the applicants and participants.

The focus groups

The Citizen Round Table took place from June 14 to 17, 2021. The 44 participants were divided into seven groups. Three groups met in the morning, three in the afternoon and one in the evening to accommodate those who could not attend during the day. Each group met only once, for approximately two and a half hours.

Due to the pandemic and the health measures in force, it was not possible to welcome the citizens on site at the Assembly. The exchanges took place virtually on the Teams platform. The Assembly's administrative staff offered technical support and prior coaching to those who needed it, so that they could familiarize themselves with the technological tools used.

Some of the groups were made up of persons with specific profiles, including:

- a group of English-speaking persons;
- a group of persons with disabilities;
- a group of persons living in the regions of Québec.

Introductory video clips provided participants with the basic information to fuel their exchanges on the various themes. The interview grid can be consulted in Appendix III.

The moderating of the focus groups, technical support, transcription of the exchanges, analysis and drafting of the report were carried out by the neutral and qualified administrative staff of the National Assembly.

In order to encourage the free expression of the participants, the Assembly made a commitment to preserve the anonymity of the members of the Citizen Round Table. Moreover, the citizens had to commit to respecting the Participation Charter and the Confidentiality Agreement to ensure the smooth running of the consultation. These documents are available in Appendix IV.

The content of the report

This document summarizes all of the comments made in the focus groups. It is intended to be as accurate a record of the exchanges as possible.

The opinions and ideas put forward by the citizens have been classified by theme and sometimes reworded to ensure that they are presented in a clear and concise manner. Where appropriate, the analysis shows the predominance of certain themes and concerns. The suggestions for courses of action are presented primarily in thematic and logical order, not in hierarchical order. The few instances where opposing views were expressed are noted in the text. Some suggestions that do not fall under the jurisdiction of the National Assembly were recorded when citizens felt they were likely to influence their involvement.

This report sets out the elements that the Citizen Round Table members believe should be explored in a reflection on ways to improve public participation at the National Assembly. It reflects the views of the participants only.

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CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AT THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

This section provides a portrait of the general perceptions of the Citizen Round Table members regarding public participation at the National Assembly. It highlights the main criticisms, concerns and general courses of action mentioned during the exchanges.

The following sections address certain themes in detail, namely parliamentary information and communication between the public and elected officials, petitions and public consultations.

Citizens were invited to express their dissatisfactions and aspirations with respect to democratic life and public participation at the Assembly. They pointed out in no uncertain terms the main obstacles to their involvement. Although their comments were critical, they proposed several constructive solutions to remedy them.

The comments gathered reflect the participants' diverse experiences, observations and knowledge of citizen participation and the workings of Parliament.

The impact of citizen involvement and trust in Parliament

In general, the members of the Citizen Round Table are very critical and disillusioned about the place reserved for citizen participation at the National Assembly. Many feel powerless to act and to be heard by MNAs. According to their experience or perception, citizen involvement has little or no impact on political decisions.

Some participants feel that citizens are largely absent from Parliament or that they are used for partisan and strategic purposes. They criticize the lack of transparency in the consultative and decision-making processes, as well as the lack of accountability and follow-up to citizen input. The result is a loss of confidence in the Assembly and parliamentarians, which increases disillusionment and leads to disengagement.

The solutions put forward by the participants include valuing citizen participation, rendering the consultative and decision-making processes more transparent, and making parliamentarians more accountable.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

1. promote citizen participation at the National Assembly:
   - 1.1. show that citizen participation is possible and within everyone's reach;
   - 1.2. showcase the political commitment of citizens, their inspiring stories and their successes;
2. follow up on citizens' interventions or requests and highlight their contribution;

3. increase the transparency of the consultative and decision-making processes (e.g., greater dissemination of information, data and documents);
   3.1. make this Citizen Round Table consultation report public;
4. increase the accountability and responsibility of MNAs regarding their commitments and actions.

Hearing, considering and representing citizens' voices

Members of the Citizen Round Table feel that parliamentarians are not sufficiently responsive to and representative of the population. They believe that the interests and concerns of political parties, lobbies, businesses and organized groups take precedence over those of citizens. Some argue that party discipline inhibits the free expression of MNAs and prevents them from fully assuming their role as representatives of the public interest.

According to participants, there is little space for citizens' voices to be expressed in Parliament and thus be heard. People with disabilities feel particularly marginalized and ignored in the public debate. Some deplore the lack of interest of MNAs in issues that are not at the heart of current affairs. Others criticize the lack of attention paid to issues that concern a large part of Québec society. In all cases, the perception of a lack of attention and consideration for citizens' concerns generates frustration and a feeling of exclusion.

The solutions put forward by the participants involve reducing partisanship and party discipline, listening to citizens more attentively and including them more widely in public and parliamentary debates.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

5. limit the influence of political parties, lobbies and corporations on public debate:
   5.1. reduce the weight of party discipline and encourage freedom of expression for MNAs (e.g., allow more free votes);
6. give more space, room for expression and consideration to citizens and their concerns;
7. build on collaboration with citizens by giving them greater roles and powers in the parliamentary process, particularly in consultative and decision-making matters.

Accessibility, inclusion and representativeness of the National Assembly

Some members of the Citizen Round Table believe that citizen participation is possible, but that it is not necessarily accessible to the majority of the population. In their view, the National Assembly is an intimidating, distant and nebulous institution. The mechanisms of participation seem complex, bureaucratic and reserved for insiders and professionals, even a certain elite.

Some individuals explain that they are reluctant to participate because they do not recognize themselves in the profile of parliamentarians. They note a lack of diversity and sociodemographic representation at the Assembly and in the Cabinet. They would like to see more women, young people, Indigenous people, ethnocultural minorities and persons with disabilities among the MNAs.

The solutions put forward by the participants involve accessibility and inclusion of all citizens in parliamentary work as well as greater proximity and representativeness of the institution.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

8. promote access and inclusion of all Quebecers in democratic and parliamentary life:

- 8.1. focus on the popularization of procedures, the support and the accompaniment of citizens;
- 8.2. deploy measures aimed at the inclusion and equity of different population profiles in the participation processes (e.g., in terms of language, disability, etc.);

9. bring the institution closer to the citizens, to where they are (and not the other way around):

- 9.1. promote the presence of the Assembly and MNAs in the field, in Québec's regions, local communities, living environments, places of socialization, community groups, etc. ;
- 9.2. make judicious use of information and communications technologies to broaden access to public participation (e.g., videoconferencing, development of applications, etc.), without accentuating the digital divide;

10. deploy measures to encourage the sociodemographic diversity of the elected representatives (e.g., develop adapted resources for potential candidates and elected representatives with disabilities).

Information and education on democratic and parliamentary life

Many members of the Citizen Round Table point out the lack of interest, curiosity and knowledge of the Québec population regarding political and democratic life. They observe that citizens are not sufficiently trained and informed on the roles of MNAs, the workings of Parliament and how to contribute to public debates.

The solutions put forward by the participants involve information and education on citizenship and democratic life. They stress the importance of providing tools and resources to introduce youth and adults to parliamentary history, the political process and the importance of citizen involvement. Several participants stress the quality and relevance of the educational activities and resources developed by the Assembly. In their opinion, they should be better disseminated and targeted at a wider audience.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

11. increase the visibility of the Assembly's educational activities and resources;

11.1. increase the resources dedicated to the dissemination and publicizing of educational projects;

11.2. broaden the target audience and develop new initiatives intended for adults;

12. inform and educate citizens on the workings of Parliament, the roles of MNAs, the importance of political involvement and the Assembly's citizen participation mechanisms (e.g., training, workshops, open houses, etc.);

13. increase the Assembly's visibility, improve the dissemination of information and publicizing of the resources available to citizens;

14. develop citizenship education programs in schools and among ethnocultural and immigrant communities.

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PARLIAMENTARY INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND THE MNAS

In this part of the meeting, participants were asked about their habits in terms of searching for and accessing parliamentary information, the barriers they face when trying to make their voices heard by MNAs, and what could be done to improve the communication between the public and the Assembly.

The Citizen Round Table members identified several obstacles to participation in terms of information dissemination and communication. They noted problems with the flow of information that lead to a lack of visibility of the Assembly in their daily lives, particularly through information and communications technologies.

The issue of the digital divide was the subject of many interventions in all the focus groups. Many fear that the increasing use of online platforms will be at the expense of traditional means of communication. They point out that a significant portion of the population of Québec does not have access to an efficient Internet network, adequate computer tools or is simply not comfortable with advanced technologies. With the digital shift, these persons should not be forgotten or excluded from democratic life (seniors, disadvantaged persons, remote regions, etc.).

The subthemes addressed by the Citizen Round Table concern:

- the dissemination of parliamentary information by the Assembly;
- the Assembly's website and digital platforms;
- the search for and use of parliamentary information by citizens;
- communication between the public and the MNAs;
- constituency offices;
- other considerations and proposals regarding information and communication.

The dissemination of parliamentary information by the Assembly

Many members of the Citizen Round Table feel that the information disseminated by the Assembly is not easily understood by the average citizen. The specialized language, the density of information and the complexity of the rules and procedures give an impression of impenetrability and opacity. Some people mention that it is sometimes difficult to discern the nature and origin of the various information disseminated on the Assembly's platforms (partisan source, institutional, academic, scientific, etc.), which can generate confusion. In addition, the means of contributing to parliamentary work are not always clearly explained.

Participants call for greater accessibility of political and parliamentary information for persons with disabilities. Portions of the website and documents published by the Assembly are not available in a format adapted to their condition.

Others underscore the fact that language is a barrier to citizen participation for Quebecers who do not understand French well, particularly Indigenous, immigrant and ethnocultural communities. They point to the importance of democratic inclusion of citizens who speak English or another mother tongue. While some communities translate documents themselves or use online translation systems to compensate for the lack of information available to them, these methods do not replace the original documents.

Finally, several persons point out the need for the Assembly to vary its means of communication and to adopt tools and dissemination strategies that correspond to current realities (advanced technologies and habits of the population).

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

15. demystify the National Assembly by facilitating access to parliamentary information and its understanding by the general public;

- 15.1. popularize information and use more accessible and everyday language;
- 15.2. provide simplified summaries of information and of parliamentary and legal documents;
- 15.3. clarify the nature and source of the information posted on the Assembly's platforms;
- 15.4. highlight ways to contribute to parliamentary work;

16. ensure the accessibility and dissemination of parliamentary information to all segments of the Québec population:

- 16.1. publish all written and audiovisual documents in formats accessible to people with disabilities (accessible PDF, subtitling of videos, audio description, Braille, sign language, etc.);
- 16.2. translate documents relevant to the Québec population (English, Indigenous languages, other languages spoken in Québec);
- 16.3. use both traditional (print, newspapers, radio, TV, etc.) and digital (web, social networks, etc.) means of communication to mitigate the effects of the digital divide;
- 16.4. disseminate parliamentary information in community media and ethnocultural community media (forward information to them or develop partnerships);
- 16.5. use local intermediaries with whom citizens already have a relationship of trust to provide mediation (e.g., community groups);

17. develop new communications tools and means to inform the public about current and upcoming parliamentary work and how to contribute to it:

- 17.1. customizable smartphone application with the possibility of responding to the information transmitted;
- 17.2. customizable alert, newsletter and news feed systems;
- 17.3. podcasts and video clips on the highlights of current work;
- 17.4. parliamentary columns in the media;

17.5. weekly recap program on the Assembly Channel (summary of new mandates, bills and petitions in progress, etc.);

17.6. a program featuring political exchanges and debates on the Assembly Channel with parliamentarians, specialists, citizens, etc.

The Assembly's website and digital platforms

The Assembly website was widely commented on in all the focus groups. Some people like the fact that there is an abundance of relevant information on the website. They feel that it is relatively easy to navigate the website once they get used to the structure and search engine. However, the vast majority of participants feel that navigating the site is very laborious, which hinders citizen participation.

Many state that the website is not user-friendly for the general public, especially for those who are less digitally literate or less familiar with parliamentarism. In their view, making information available is not enough to ensure transparency: it must also be easily accessible and understandable.

In the experience of Citizen Round Table members, it is very difficult to find the information they are looking for. The website is considered too dense, cluttered and complex. Navigating requires time, patience and perseverance. Content is not presented in a clear and inviting way. Moreover, one person notes that the connection to the website is not secure, which may discourage some visitors who are concerned about computer security.

In contrast to the website, comments about the Assembly's mobile site are positive. It is considered user-friendly and easy to use. The information available is relevant and the visual presentation is clearer.

Finally, some participants point out that social networks have become an essential means of reaching certain segments of the population, particularly young people. They invite the Assembly to make better use of them.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

18. provide a search wizard on the website (e.g., «How can I help you?» pop-up window, chat, drop-down menu, list of frequently asked questions, etc.);

19. redesign the Assembly's website according to current standards:

19.1. consult with specialists and users of adapted technologies to ensure the accessibility of the website for people with disabilities (fonts, contrast, colours, audio descriptions, etc.);

19.2. conduct tests with the general public to ensure smooth and instinctive navigation;

20. develop a communications strategy to increase traffic to the Assembly website;

21. improve the use of social networks and produce communicational material adapted to these distribution platforms (e.g., short videos, attractive visuals, flash polls that would lead to additional information, etc.).

The search for and use of parliamentary information by citizens

The search methods used by citizens to obtain information on Québec parliamentary life are very diverse. Content published by traditional media, digital media or circulating on social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) is often a first source of information. The views shared by interest groups, specialists active in their field or in online focus groups help to clarify elements. General web searches (e.g., Google) and searches of the Assembly or department and public body websites can provide more specific information. Finally, individuals sometimes contact their MNA, political staff or specialized organizations directly to obtain the information they require.

The members of the Citizen Round Table listed the reasons why they consult the Assembly's digital platforms. These include the nature and progress of bills, the parliamentary calendar, public consultations, the consideration of the estimates of expenditure, the Journal des débats, video excerpts, contact information and the achievements of MNAs. One participant notes the lack of links between the Québec government and National Assembly websites, which makes some searches more challenging.

Participants also mentioned types of information that they would like to obtain but cannot easily find on the website and the other dissemination platforms of the Assembly, MNAs or the government. For example:

- the reasons, motivations and arguments justifying the bills;
- the legislative or regulatory amendments envisaged, the concrete changes they would bring about and the adjustments required of the public;
- the methods of participation open to the public (details on the types of interventions expected for the study of a mandate, on the consultation and comment periods, etc.);
- the identity of groups, experts and others involved in the consideration of mandates and bills;
- links to petitions and comments from the public regarding mandates and bills under consideration;
- the history of the adoption and implementation of certain laws (regulations and associated decrees, government achievements in relation to bills, concordance between bill numbers and laws, etc.);
- the content of the deliberative meetings of committees (verbatim, minutes, decisions, etc.);
- links to other information that falls outside the purview of the Assembly, including recent Cabinet decisions, government investments (by area, constituency, etc.) and programs that support community organizations.

Generally speaking, citizens who are interested in a parliamentary mandate wish to follow it through to its conclusion. Some mandates end very quickly, others extend over months and still others die on the Order Paper. The lack of an effective and personalized mechanism for tracking parliamentary business is a significant challenge for the public.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

22. be transparent and make public all relevant information to understand the ins and outs of a parliamentary mandate as well as its progress and associated decisions;

23. develop customizable tools and mechanisms for monitoring parliamentary work for the general public (e.g., alerts, application or online platform that can be customized as needed).

Communication between the public and the MNAs

Most Citizen Round Table members feel that communication between the MNAs and the public is too unidirectional. They want their representatives to be more responsive to the needs and concerns of the public.

The experiences of the persons heard vary in terms of their interactions with MNAs. While some praise their speed and efficiency in responding to citizens' interventions, others deplore the fact that they are difficult to reach, that they lack availability or that they entrust citizens' files to their political staff. They also mention the lack of a personalized response, long delays, and the lack of follow-up and accountability regarding their requests.

According to some participants, the public has little knowledge of the real role and powers of elected officials and the division of responsibilities between levels of government. A better understanding of their scope of intervention would help adjust expectations of what MNAs can and cannot do and better target the responses required.

The degree of proximity appears to vary by constituency type. The persons who were heard said that it is much easier to reach the MNAs from remote areas. Elected officials in urban or semi-urban areas, as well as those who hold time-consuming positions (minister, parliamentary office) seem less accessible.

Moreover, Citizen Round Table members observe that elected officials are not very visible between election campaigns. When they are, their advertising and communications are considered too partisan and focused on party positions, advocacy activities and the quest for re-election. They would like more substantive information about their individual political accomplishments, current and upcoming issues, and ways to get involved in the public debate.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

24. enhance proximity communication in local communities and living environments;

25. deploy communication strategies and means that go from the population to their MNA, «from the bottom to the top», and that favour bidirectional exchanges:

- 25.1. disseminate parliamentary information and invite citizens to become proactively involved in the life of the constituency and in ongoing debates;
- 25.2. use state-of-the-art technologies to broaden participation (e.g., videoconferencing, social networks);

26. better inform the public about the roles, responsibilities and areas of action of the MNAs in their constituency or region, in comparison to municipal and federal elected officials;

27. develop a follow-up mechanism for citizens' requests:

- 27.1. develop a guide or policy to govern the follow-up of requests (e.g., maximum response time, procedures, etc.);
- 27.2. report and disseminate data on the quality of MNAs' communication (e.g., response rate to requests, results and assessment by an independent committee);

28. ensure that someone takes over in the event of an MNA's absence (e.g., an alternate MNA).

Constituency offices

Constituency offices are considered a very important gateway to communicate with elected officials. Persons with disabilities call for mandatory accessibility to the premises for persons with reduced mobility.

However, some Citizen Round Table members point to the partisan affiliation of constituency offices as one of the main barriers to good communication with their MNA. Some are less likely to contact them, knowing that the ideological positions of their representative and political staff do not align with their values or the nature of their request. For example, one person feels labelled because of their activism and feels this has a negative effect on the flow of communication. These citizens then turn to elected officials in neighbouring ridings.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

29. render mandatory full accessibility of constituency offices for persons with disabilities;

30. provide a neutral and inclusive space for communication within the constituencies:

- 30.1. equitably welcome all citizens, including those who do not share the same ideological positions;
- 30.2. eliminate the partisan nature of constituency offices and establish politically neutral service offices (e.g., staff not affiliated with any political party, similar to the public service).

Other considerations and proposals regarding information and communication

The members of the Citizen Round Table propose new ideas to improve interactions between the public and the elected officials of the National Assembly.

Several people insist on the need to offer personalized support and guidance to citizens who wish to contribute to the work of the National Assembly, whether before, during or after their participation. With this in mind, one focus group suggests setting up a service or body that would be a gateway for everything related to citizen participation at the Assembly. For example:

31. create a politically neutral «citizen's office» that would, among other things:

- 31.1. inform the public about the mechanisms and procedures for citizen participation;
- 31.2. receive documents and citizen interventions and validate their admissibility if necessary (petitions, letters, comments, briefs, etc.);
- 31.3. forward them to the persons or authorities concerned (elected officials, parliamentary committees, departments, etc.);
- 31.4. provide an acknowledgement of receipt indicating where and when the document was forwarded.

Some propose that public activities be conducted regularly in local communities, at the constituency, municipal or administrative region level. For example:

32. organize focus groups that would allow interested persons to express their concerns about issues in the riding or debated in Parliament, while educating people about democratic life and citizen participation;

33. organize non-partisan public meetings to discuss local, regional or national issues with the relevant elected officials (all parties included).

Others propose the creation of new communication structures that would include citizens directly:

34. establish citizen committees that would act as intermediaries and would be responsible for bringing the concerns of the public to MNAs (in each constituency and at the National Assembly level).

Finally, some persons mentioned measures that are not directly under the responsibility of the National Assembly, but that they consider relevant to improving the dissemination of information and political communications:

35. disseminate the contact information of the departmental officials in the regions;

36. align the boundaries of constituencies and administrative regions to facilitate the work of MNAs and avoid areas being left behind.

PETITIONS

In this part of the meeting, participants were asked about their personal experience with petitions at the Assembly, the problematic elements of the current petitions process and the measures that could be deployed to improve this form of participation.

Citizen Round Table members are divided regarding the use of petitions as a means of citizen participation. Some believe that it is a good democratic tool that can both raise public awareness and educate parliamentarians on little-known issues. Others feel that petitions are useless, that they have no concrete impact and that they are not an effective means of pressure to influence public debate. Some go so far as to say that it is an obsolete participation mechanism, at least in its current form.

In any case, the persons heard are disappointed and indignant that only two petitions have been examined by committees in the last five years. This fact is demotivating and accentuates their feeling that the opinion of the population is not taken into consideration. Some people deplore the fact that lobbies or a poll can have more impact than a petition signed by thousands of citizens.

Petitioners attach importance to the act of petitioning. While they do not believe that their actions will necessarily have an impact, they see it as a legitimate way to contribute to democratic life and to intervene as individuals in order to draw the attention of parliamentarians to collective issues. The act of signing a petition and providing personal information is a commitment that is not made lightly. Citizens support causes that are close to their hearts and that reflect their values, concerns and beliefs.

The subthemes addressed by the Citizen Round Table concern:

- the sponsorship of petitions;
- the technical and administrative procedures;
- the dissemination and consultation of petitions in progress;
- the examination and follow-up of petitions tabled;
- other considerations and proposals regarding petitions.

The sponsorship of petitions

The vast majority of Citizen Round Table members consider that the sponsorship of petitions is a major obstacle to this mode of participation. The very principle of having to find a Member to sponsor and table a petition in the House is considered a democratic hitch, since a citizen could be deprived of his or her right to present a petition if it is not accepted by one of the 125 Members of the National Assembly.

Although sponsorship is more of a formality since it is provided for in the Standing Orders, many associate it with a partisan gesture. Some participants note that petitions are often presented by opposition MNAs and used for strategic purposes against the government.

From this perspective, the search for a sponsor MNA becomes more complicated, as elected officials from the governing party may tend to reject petitions that are critical of their party, even if the originator of the petition is a citizen of their riding.

Persons working with non-partisan groups and organizations also raise the problematic nature of sponsorship. They find it unthinkable to start a petition at the Assembly if its association with an elected official who is a member of a party gives the impression of being politically tainted. Therefore, they cannot use this method of participation for fear of being criticized by their members, partners and donors.

Finally, some persons associate sponsorship with the MNA's personal endorsement of the content of the petition. In this light, they suggest that the petition commitments of elected officials be highlighted.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

37. discontinue the sponsorship of petitions by MNAs and authorize the tabling in the House of all petitions from citizens, subject to established rules;

38. publicize the petitions received among parliamentarians and invite those who feel concerned to advocate on their behalf (the same petition could then be championed by several elected officials);

38.1. establish a system to publicly identify MNAs who have acknowledged the petitions tabled and those who have agreed to endorse them;

38.2. entrust the MNAs who support petitions with the role of informing and promoting them to other elected officials and to the public;

39. highlight the petitions sponsored by MNAs by adding a «petitions» tab to their biographical data.

Technical and administrative procedures

In addition to sponsorship, technical and administrative procedures were mentioned by the participants as obstacles to the use of petitions.

Several persons learned during the exchanges that petitions started on digital platforms external to the Assembly cannot be tabled in the House (e.g., Change.org, Avaaz.org, etc.). Considering the large number of petitions circulating on these platforms, they conclude that the majority of citizens and groups who start or sign a petition are unaware of this constraint.

Some participants suggest that more support and guidance be provided on the procedures and the drafting of petitions. The Assembly or constituency offices could make resources and tools available to the public in a non-partisan way.

For some, the simplicity of use and the growing popularity of electronic petitions should not overshadow the issues related to the digital divide. They recall that certain segments of the

population would no longer be able to resort to this form of participation if paper petitions were to disappear. Access to printable documents may also be a barrier for less digitally literate people if they are not sufficiently visible on the website.

Participants also point out the technical procedures for signing. The email confirmation step can easily be forgotten, especially by individuals who do not use this method of communication very often. They feel that imposing too many steps could be a deterrent.

Similarly, the use of a CAPTCHA test, which is required to complete the petition signing process, is detrimental to persons with visual or hearing disabilities. It is impossible for them to read or hear the code and therefore they cannot sign.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

40. accompany citizens to start and sign petitions correctly:

- 40.1. better inform the public of the constraints and procedures related to petitions;
- 40.2. popularize the procedure for petitions and their content;
- 40.3. design a petition form or template in multiple languages;
- 40.4. provide the Assembly and constituency offices with tools and resources to support petition originators and petitioners in a non-partisan manner;

41. ensure the accessibility of petitions and the signing process:

- 41.1. preserve petitions in paper and digital formats;
- 41.2. simplify the signature process (e.g., reduce the steps required);
- 41.3. remove the CAPTCHA test and ensure that the entire petitions process is accessible to people with disabilities.

The dissemination and consultation of petitions in progress

The members of the Citizen Round Table explained how they become aware of a petition. These means are very diverse: social networks, newsletters, solicitation of groups or friends, websites of elected officials, traditional media, etc. In small communities, the invitation circulates by word of mouth and hard copies are sometimes left in local businesses. A few individuals have discovered some on the Assembly website after visiting it to sign another petition.

Some participants feel that petitions are not adequately publicized in the media and by MNAs. They regret discovering petitions once the deadline for signing them has passed. They also note that the Assembly website does not have a ranking system, which makes it difficult to find petitions that interest them.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

42. improve the publicizing and visibility of ongoing petitions:

42.1. on the Assembly's website and social networks (with visuals encouraging sharing);

42.2. on the National Assembly Channel;

43. deploy customizable communications tools to inform the public about new ongoing petitions:

43.1. mobile app with notifications;

43.2. newsletter with direct links to the web pages of the petitions in progress;

44. accompany petitions with a simple description of their objectives and potential impact (e.g., explanatory video prepared by citizens that can be shared on social networks);

45. direct citizens to petitions that may be of interest to them when they sign another petition on the Assembly website (e.g., link to petitions on related topics);

46. improve the visual presentation and classification of ongoing petitions, and develop a more efficient and relevant search tool (filters by themes, signature deadline, etc.);

47. illustrate the progress of each petition with a simple visual display (steps completed and to come, important dates, etc.).

The examination and follow-up of petitions tabled

The citizens heard expressed a great deal of dissatisfaction with the follow-up given to the petitions tabled. The low number of petitions examined by the committees, the lack of transparency on the reasons for accepting or rejecting petitions and the lack of follow-up on the requests made are the main sources of irritation. These shortcomings contribute in large part to the feeling of futility regarding the petitions process.

The persons heard are surprised and very disappointed by the low number of petitions examined in recent years. They question the process and wonder about the criteria used by MNAs to decide whether or not to follow up on a petition. They believe that the dissemination of these criteria is essential to ensure the credibility and transparency of the process. In this regard, some persons warn against relying solely on the number of signatures to decide whether to follow up on petitions. They point out that issues can be a priority for a small community and yet not attract the attention of a large part of the population.

In general, citizens call for greater accountability. They feel that petitioners should be informed of the reasons why the petition has not been selected for consideration. They are also critical of the government's responses, when they merely state the measures already in place and fail to take into account the reasons and arguments put forward in the petitions.

Finally, some people argue that MNA sponsors should have an obligation of result with respect to the petitions they present in the House.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

48. be transparent about the petitions process:

48.1. establish clear and objective criteria for considering or rejecting petitions and make them public (e.g., number of signatures);

48.2. make public the identity of the persons who sit on the committee or panel responsible for selecting petitions;

49. have petition originators appear at hearings;

50. establish individual and collective follow-up mechanisms with the petition originator, the petitioners and the general public:

50.1. issue a press release to inform the general public of the decisions of the committee or the petition selection committee (consideration or rejection of petitions tabled);

50.2. send the government's response to all petitioners;

50.3. inform petitioners of the follow-up to the petition and ensuing developments (e.g., steps taken and to be taken, how the requests or ideas are integrated into departmental actions, etc.);

51. encourage MNA sponsors to champion petitions under their responsibility by instituting an obligation of result (legal commitment).

Other considerations and proposals regarding petitions

The Citizen Round Table members shared new ideas for improving the petitions process.

Some individuals feel that the term «petition» and the sentiment it evokes are pejorative. In their eyes, a petition is a reaction to dissatisfaction and is associated with the idea of a complaint or a fight. They would like a more positive or constructive approach. For example:

52. set up a «suggestion box» system to allow citizens to share their ideas with MNAs, while establishing certain criteria to frame the process;

53. submit and prioritize specific questions or requests to elected officials.

Some persons would like citizens to be able to intervene more actively in the petitioning process. For example:

54. entrust the selection of petitions to be examined by parliamentarians to an independent committee made up of citizens (e.g., standing or ad hoc committee, citizens' office, citizens' department);

55. enhance the petitions process with a debate or exchange on the problems and issues raised by the petitions, which would include an interactive component between elected officials and citizens.

Finally, some citizens propose having recourse to petitions or a signature register to initiate certain parliamentary and political procedures. For example:

56. establish legislative priorities (bills to be studied as a priority);

57. launch a people's referendum;

58. censure an MNA on the basis of facts (concern for accountability, reminder of unfulfilled commitments, etc.);

59. remove an MNA from office.

PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS

In this part of the meeting, the participants were asked about their personal experience with parliamentary consultations, the various methods of intervention (briefs, hearings, comments, etc.) and the measures that could be put in place to facilitate citizen participation from the perspective of inclusion and representativeness of the population.

Most members of the Citizen Round Table question the usefulness of the public consultations held at the National Assembly. They wonder if the opinions received have an impact on the bills or mandates under consideration, if the decisions are already made upstream and if the consultations only serve to make a good impression.

As a result, the citizens question the usefulness of their input. They wonder about the value of the time and effort spent writing briefs, preparing for and travelling to hearings when they are not convinced that they will be read or truly heard. They feel that their voice has no impact on the legislative process.

The subthemes addressed by the Citizen Round Table concern:

- the types of consultation;
- the selection of witnesses;
- the dissemination of information on the consultations;
- the preparation of written and oral interventions;
- the public hearings;
- the online comments;
- the follow-up to consultations;
- other considerations and proposals regarding consultations.

The types of consultation

Some participants feel that individual citizens do not have enough of a voice in the Assembly's public consultations. Consultations seem to be reserved for interest groups, lobbyists, experts and public figures. Some note that general consultations are very rare compared to special consultations, which limits the opportunity to hear the views of "ordinary citizens".

There is unanimous support for the use of videoconferencing. This tool is seen as a significant improvement that must remain in place after the pandemic. It facilitates the participation of citizens from the various regions of Québec. However, videoconferencing should not replace the hearings held at the Assembly, as these offer greater fluidity in the exchanges with elected officials. Several people point out the drawbacks related to the digital divide, which could exclude a portion of the population. Similarly, the choice of digital platform used by the Assembly can be a barrier to participation. In this respect, Teams presents irritants for persons with disabilities, whereas Zoom is easier to use.

Thus, the use of state-of-the-art technologies cannot entirely replace traditional consultations. Proximity remains an important aspect of a consultation process. Some members of the Citizen Round Table encourage parliamentarians to travel to the regions of Québec, especially when they are consulting on mandates that relate to the territory.

Finally, some individuals question the timing of consultations in the legislative process. In their opinion, it would be more beneficial to consult groups and citizens before a bill is fully drafted.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

60. encourage individual participation in public consultations;

61. hold more general consultations to give citizens the opportunity to express themselves;

62. hold different types of consultations to encourage accessibility and participation of all citizen profiles (in person, virtual, mobile, etc.) as well as politically neutral surveys;

63. promote a user-friendly digital platform for persons with disabilities (e.g., Zoom rather than Teams);

64. promote citizen consultations prior to a bill (e.g., consultation on a draft bill).

The selection of witnesses

The process of selecting persons invited to the special consultations of parliamentary committees has attracted the attention of several focus groups. The members of the Citizen Round Table are irritated by the lack of transparency of the procedure.

The fact of making a selection for the hearings is not contested, notably to avoid certain excesses (racist or xenophobic comments, etc.). However, the participants note that it is often the same organizations and individuals who are heard. They are of the opinion that the invitations are issued in a closed circuit, mainly to the networks of elected officials. Some deplore the fact that lobbyists and interest groups have a better audience than community organizations, which are numerous in carrying the voice of citizens.

Many believe that the MNAs who sit on committees only invite the groups and experts they wish to hear and that they avoid those who hold positions that are contrary to their ideas or that are controversial. Some people also point to party lines as a factor guiding the choice of witnesses and likely to distort citizen representativeness during consultations.

The inadequacy of certain choices was also raised. For example, one person described how his organization was invited to a consultation that did not concern it. Another explained how her group had to strongly press a parliamentary committee in order to be heard in public hearings.

Several members of the Citizen Round Table argue that the individuals and groups invited to the consultations should reflect the full range of realities and diversity in Québec (gender identity, age, Indigenous or ethnocultural origin, etc.). Persons with disabilities, among others, want to be better represented during the consultations.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

65. be transparent about the choice of consultation procedures and the selection of individuals and groups invited to hearings;

66. go beyond the immediate network of elected officials, cross party lines and broaden the range of invitations:

66.1. set up a registry where interested groups and individuals could register to participate in a consultation that concerns them (e.g., a «citizen registry» similar to the lobbyists registry);

67. 67. ensure that a range of groups and individuals representing a diversity of citizen profiles and ideological positions are heard:

67.1. implement measures for equity of representation;

67.2. invite representatives of persons with disabilities and community organizations who reflect citizen realities;

68. disseminate statistical data on the profile of the participants heard.

The dissemination of information on the consultations

All of the focus groups identified shortcomings in the dissemination of information about public consultations. The citizens state that it is difficult to find out when a consultation is taking place and how to contribute. Some were unaware that it is possible for an individual to participate in a consultation.

Some people noted that the language used is complex and confusing. For example, it can be difficult to distinguish between the various consultation mechanisms (general, special or online consultations, online comments, hearings, etc.).

Finally, persons with disabilities deplore the fact that consultation documents are not always in a format that is accessible to all (e.g., visual impairment).

Education in democratic life, awareness, dissemination, discoverability and accessibility of information are at the heart of the solutions put forward by the members of the Citizen Round Table.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

69. organize educational activities on the concepts and mechanisms of public consultations at the Assembly (e.g., invite young people to attend committee proceedings);

70. clarify the vocabulary used and popularize the information so that it is understandable for everyone (e.g., use simpler language, revise the way the information is transmitted to ensure that the entire population is aware of it);

71. provide tools to educate people about public consultations (e.g., popularization videos, «Did you know?» capsules, webinars, etc.);

72. use dynamic visual cues to direct the public to current consultations on web pages, bills and parliamentary mandates (e.g., prominent «Get Involved» link or button, better visibility of the calendar and dates to remember, etc.);

73. disseminate information regarding public consultations on all available platforms, in several languages and in all regions of Québec (traditional media, digital media and social networks);

74. systematically provide information and discussion papers in a format that is accessible to persons with disabilities;

75. deploy customizable communications tools to inform the public about new parliamentary mandates, current consultations and ways to participate:

75.1. mobile app with notifications;

75.2. newsletter with direct links to the web pages of parliamentary mandates;

76. rely on local intermediaries to transmit information on the consultations underway and reach a greater number of citizens, notably:

76.1. MNAs in their ridings;

76.2. community organizations and interest groups with their members and partner networks;

76.3. municipalities, in their territory.

The preparation of written and oral interventions

The preparation required for a public consultation is a concern for most participants. Whether as individuals or as representatives of a group, Citizen Round Table members want to submit a coherent brief and be well prepared for the hearings.

Some citizens are confronted with the fact that the deadlines given by parliamentary committees to prepare written or oral testimony are often too short. Some representatives of organizations have received an invitation to appear with just a few days' notice. These short deadlines do not allow participants to be adequately informed about the subjects under examination, to consult members and partners or to produce quality work. They also hinder individual participation, as citizens must finalize their intervention while pursuing their professional, family and personal commitments. This practice, which is considered frequent, is seen as a lack of consideration for citizen participation and an infringement of the democratic process.

The choice of dates for holding a consultation can also be an obstacle, especially if it occurs at the height of vacations or during a particularly busy period of the year for an organization.

Some citizens call upon parliamentary committees to show understanding and flexibility regarding the date set for the tabling of briefs.

In addition, several participants feel that writing a brief is a challenge for most people. This process can be tedious and complex for both individuals and groups that do not have the resources or personnel required. The few guidelines provided by the Assembly, which are essentially technical, are not sufficient to steer people through the drafting process. Some citizens want to know more about the process and the best ways to present their arguments, both in terms of form and content.

Participating in the hearings is a source of concern for some people. They find the exercise intimidating and fear being ridiculed or criticized in the public arena. These persons mention the need to develop a sense of confidence and competence in defending their opinion before parliamentarians and the general public.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

77. allow sufficient time for the preparation of written or oral testimony, namely the time required to learn about the issues, consult with members and the network of partners, take a position, draft a brief and prepare for a hearing (the ideal timeframe cited by participants is two to three months);

78. avoid holding consultations during vacation periods and allow for flexibility regarding the date set for submitting briefs;

79. provide a clear and concise summary of how a public consultation will be conducted (e.g., summary of steps, instructional video, plain language explanations, etc.);

80. provide support and accompaniment to individuals and groups within the framework of consultations (drafting briefs, preparing for hearings, etc.);

81. deploy complementary resources to help citizens better understand the problems and issues examined in preparation for their intervention (e.g., brief information notes, questions and answers on the bill or the parliamentary mandate).

Public hearings

Among those who have already participated in hearings, some enjoyed their experience and feel that the current consultation process is adequate. The opportunity to have a direct exchange with elected officials and to explore their ideas is appreciated. Those who had a positive experience mention the good attention of the MNAs, the respectful tone of the exchanges as well as the benefits of the exercise, which proved to be up to their expectations.

In contrast, others describe their experience as «traumatic». Appearing in front of parliamentarians at the National Assembly was an extremely stressful time for them. Some people found the process very uncomfortable, in part because of the insistence of some committee members on asking them about sections of a bill on which they had no expertise. One person spoke about the difficulty of defending issues or ideas when they are not shared by MNAs.

Citizens point to the costs associated with consultations held at the Parliament Building as a barrier to participation, particularly for low-income individuals and groups. The cost of travel, meals, accommodation in Québec City and the purchase of appropriate attire can be a deterrent. The time required for travel and the schedule of parliamentary proceedings can interfere with the possibility of attending hearings. Individuals and groups who are disadvantaged in this way are deprived of the opportunity to interact directly with MNAs, which in turn reduces the diversity of views heard.

Finally, persons with disabilities mentioned the inadequacies of parliamentary furniture in terms of accessibility. Desks and tables are not high enough to comfortably accommodate people in wheelchairs, both in the committee rooms and in the Le Parlementaire restaurant. In addition, no information is provided on the procedures to follow in case of an emergency when they come to the Assembly (e.g., fire, evacuation, etc.).

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

82. take into account the obstacles related to the costs and constraints of travelling to the Assembly to participate in hearings and propose solutions to disadvantaged individuals and groups so that they can be heard during consultations (e.g., use of videoconferencing, scheduling accommodations, etc.);

83. provide financial support to less affluent organizations to enable them to participate in hearings held at the Assembly;

84. designate a resource person to accompany individuals with disabilities who come to the hearings (getting around the Assembly, directions regarding emergency measures, etc.) and provide them with adapted furniture in committee rooms and service areas (washrooms, restaurants, etc.).

Online comments

The vast majority of participants learned, during the focus groups, that it is possible to submit comments online on the Assembly's website. This means of communication was enthusiastically welcomed as an alternative to submitting a brief, more user-friendly and accessible to the public. Many noted the lack of publicizing regarding this method of participation.

However, there remain questions about the actual usefulness and scope of the comments. Some question the follow-up to messages received and the process of sorting and editing by staff. They wonder about the extent to which MNAs are aware of them. They are concerned that comments are simply archived and not acted upon.

Finally, some individuals find it regrettable that the comments submitted are not accessible to the general public. They see this as an opportunity to gauge the popularity of a public issue and to provide food for thought through the ideas presented.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

85. better publicize the possibility of making comments online as a means of citizen participation;

86. provide guidance or support to ensure that the content and format of comments are relevant, while avoiding to induce bias (e.g., provide a summary or highlights of the mandate under consideration, establish thematic sections to allow comment on different aspects or sections of a bill, provide the identity of one or more recipients);

87. make public on the mandate site the number and content of comments received, as well as the identity or status of the persons who commented (interest group, specialist, citizen, etc.) and establish a search engine by keyword or category;

88. establish some form of follow-up or accountability with regard to the comments received (e.g., provide a response within a specified time frame, follow up on suggestions).

The follow-up to consultations

Many of the citizens heard question the usefulness of public consultations at the Assembly. They have the impression that their interventions and recommendations are ignored by the MNAs, which leads to disenchantment, discouragement and disengagement. Consequently, they raise the importance of follow-up to consultations in order to highlight their contribution to the content of bills and parliamentary mandates.

For some, the absence of follow-up is seen as disrespect towards citizens who have invested time and effort in preparing and presenting testimony, particularly when there has been travel to the Assembly. Some point to the lack of accountability of MNAs with regard to their personal and partisan commitments. For instance, some individuals were annoyed that their recommendations went unheeded when they were told they would be integrated into the legislation.

The citizens suggest the following courses of action:

89. revise the process and communications following a consultation to introduce more transparency and better tracking of the changes made due to public consultations (input from consultations, decisions arising from them, etc.);

90. provide a personalized response to individuals and groups who participated in public hearings to inform them of the follow-up given to their recommendations.

Other considerations and proposals regarding consultations

The Citizen Round Table members propose new ideas to improve the consultation processes and increase citizen involvement in parliamentary debates.

Some individuals suggest increasing opportunities to consult with citizens. For example:

91. introduce a citizen consultation process on certain budgetary decisions.

The persons heard have very harsh words for the oral questions and answers period. They consider it to be a display of theatrics that fosters disillusionment with politics. For this reason, they do not show interest in contributing to it as citizens. Conversely, some people believe that it would be relevant for the public to be able to ask questions and get answers publicly in other contexts. For example:

92. allow citizens to forward questions or have an interactive exchange with MNAs at press conferences.

Very satisfied with their experience at the Citizen Round Table, some participants suggest using focus groups to fuel parliamentary debates. For example:

93. create panels of interested people, by theme (health, environment, immigration, etc.);

93.1. by random draw, form focus groups composed of citizens with diverse profiles to discuss aspects of a bill or parliamentary mandate related to their areas of interest;

93.2. forward the results of the exchanges to the MNAs.

Several participants call for greater use of advanced technologies to foster citizen participation at the Assembly, especially among youth. The development of civic tech and customizable platforms offers new possibilities. For example:

94. use civic platforms or technologies to facilitate the dissemination and search for parliamentary information, the follow-up of mandates, public consultation, exchanges between the public and MNAs, the formulation of questions or solutions by citizens, etc.

Finally, some participants would like to see the development of participation mechanisms that go beyond consultations and give more power to citizens. For example:

95. create a citizen's committee or department, exclusively composed of «ordinary citizens» (e.g., chosen by random draw) that would be empowered to contribute to parliamentary work and have decision-making powers;

96. reserve a certain number of parliamentary seats for «ordinary citizens» so that they can intervene and contribute to the proceedings (for each committee or at the Assembly level).

CONCLUSION

The National Assembly wishes to warmly thank the 44 citizens who contributed to the Citizen Round Table. It would also like to thank all the persons who submitted their applications and publicized the consultation in their networks.

This report, which is extremely rich in ideas and proposals, attests to the importance of citizen participation and its great potential for improving the Assembly's practices. The members of the Citizen Round Table have expressed their satisfaction with their experience. They invite the Assembly to hold similar consultations with the Québec population on a regular basis.

The participants were very generous with their time and their involvement in the focus groups. Through both their critical and constructive opinions, they have demonstrated their great concern for the vitality of Québec democracy and the evolution of their Parliament.

The Citizen Round Table is an important step in the parliamentary reform process, which aims to gather the views of Quebecers on public participation in Parliament. The content of this report will provide relevant input for the MNAs' reflections as well as for the institutional actions of the National Assembly.

ASSEMBLÉE NATIONALE
DU QUÉBEC

APPENDIX I

Table citoyenne

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

Table citoyenne

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS – CITIZEN ROUND TABLE

Deadline for applications: Wednesday, May 19, 2021, 11:59 p.m.

Citizen participation and democratic life are important to you? Do you have proposals for improving current public consultation mechanisms or new ideas for promoting citizen participation at the National Assembly?

We want to hear you!

What is the Citizen Round Table?

The Citizen Round Table is a consultation on how to facilitate the participation of Québec citizens in parliamentary work and activities.

Virtual focus groups will be held between June 14 and 17, 2021. Participants will have the opportunity to express themselves on the difficulties that hinder their participation at the National Assembly and propose concrete ways to improve existing consultation mechanisms or to implement new ones.

The Citizen Round Table is part of a parliamentary reform process. The report of the consultation will be submitted to the MNAs in order to fuel their reflection on the reform. The highlights will be made public in the autumn of 2021.

Would you like to participate? Submit your application!

A random draw will be made from among the eligible applications, taking into account demographic representation targets of the Québec population.

The persons selected will participate in a focus group lasting approximately two and a half hours between June 14 and 17, 2021. The National Assembly is committed to preserving the anonymity of the participants.

Taking part in the Citizen Round Table is a unique opportunity to contribute to the reflection on citizen participation at the heart of Québec's first democratic institution. Do not miss this chance and submit your application now!

Table citoyenne

Important dates

- April 19 to May 19, 2021: Call for applications
- **May 19, 2021, at 11:59 p.m.: Deadline for applications**
- May 25 to 28, 2021: Random draw and contact of the selected persons
- **June 14 to 17, 2021: Holding focus groups (allow about two and a half hours)**
- Autumn 2021: Presentation of results to the parliamentarians and publication of highlights

Consultation topics

The National Assembly wishes to better understand the needs of citizens and gather their suggestions for improving their participation in parliamentary proceedings. The participants of the Citizen Round Table will express their views on how to:

- launch, sign and consult petitions;
- participate in public consultations in parliamentary committees (tabling briefs and hearings);
- send comments to MNAs on a bill or other issue under consideration;
- obtain information on parliamentary proceedings and on how to participate in them;
- promote citizen participation at the National Assembly through new initiatives.

No prior knowledge or experience is required. The National Assembly wishes to bring together citizens with varying degrees of knowledge and experience in political and parliamentary matters.

Information on these different topics will be provided to participants prior to the focus groups. No preparation is necessary.

Want to know more about current public participation mechanisms? Visit the **Voice Your Opinion** section of the National Assembly website (www.assnat.qc.ca/en/exprimez-votre-opinion).

How to submit your application

Send your completed application form before May 19, 2021, 11:59 p.m.

Application form (online http://assnat.qc.ca/tablecitoyenne/en/)

Need help filling in the online form? Contact us.

table.citoyenne@assnat.qc.ca

To take part in the Citizen Round Table, you must:

- be available to join a focus group between June 14 and 17, 2021;
- be 18 years of age or older;
- have resided in Québec for at least six months;
- be able to express yourself in French OR English;
- have access to a computer, a video camera and an Internet network OR be able to travel by your own means and at your own expense to the National Assembly (Québec City);
- submit your online application form by May 19, 2021, 11:59 p.m.

The following persons are not eligible:

- elected officials (federal, provincial, municipal, school);
- paid staff of a political party or elected official (federal, provincial, municipal, school);
- the administrative staff of the National Assembly of Québec;
- the spouse, children and family members living in the same household as the ineligible persons mentioned above.

Interested parties must commit to participating in the discussions on an individual basis, to maintaining partisan neutrality and to respecting a participation charter for the proper conduct of the focus groups.

Table citoyenne

Stages of the consultation process

Stage 1

Submit your application by filling in the online form between April 19 and May 19, 2021, 11:59 p.m.

Stage 2

The Citizen Round Table will seek to reflect the diversity of Québec today. A random draw will be made from among the eligible applications received, taking into account sociodemographic representation targets of the Québec population. The selected persons will be contacted no later than May 28, 2021, to confirm their participation. The National Assembly will contact only those candidates selected.

Stage 3

Additional information will be sent to participants in early June. National Assembly staff will be available to provide support to those who wish to receive it. This will be an opportunity to answer your questions regarding the holding of the focus groups and to check that your computer resources are working properly.

Stage 4

The Citizen Round Table will take place from Monday, June 14 to Thursday, June 17, 2021. You will be invited to choose a time slot that suits you, either in the morning, afternoon or evening. The focus groups will take place virtually and will last approximately two and a half hours, including a short introductory presentation. One meeting will take place in English. A group could meet in person at the Parliament in Québec City, if the health context allows it.

Stage 5

The consultation report will be presented to the MNAs and the highlights will be published in the autumn of 2021. The information gathered will contribute to the Members' reflection during the parliamentary reform process.

More details on the approach and methodology

Random draw

A random draw by stratified sampling will be carried out. This selection method allows for the random selection of individuals, while aiming for a certain sociodemographic representation of the population. The following variables will be considered in the draw:

- Gender identity (female, male, non-binary)
- Age groups
- Indigenous identity
- Ethnocultural diversity
- Language diversity (French, English)
- Regional diversity (17 administrative regions of Québec)

Establishment of the focus groups

A minimum of 48 participants will be chosen by random draw. Alternates will be added to this number. The National Assembly reserves the right to increase the number of participants if it deems it appropriate.

The focus groups will be carried out online using the Teams platform. At least one group will be hosted in English. National Assembly staff will contact participants in advance to ensure that the computer resources are working properly.

Are you unable to attend a virtual meeting? A focus group could be held in person at the National Assembly, if the health context allows it (French group only). Costs and transportation arrangements are the responsibility of the participants.

Data processing and publication of results

The information gathered in the focus groups will be analyzed and compiled by the National Assembly's neutral and qualified administrative staff.

The National Assembly is committed to protecting personal information and preserving the anonymity of participants. The comments will be anonymized in the documents that will be presented to the parliamentarians and made public in the fall of 2021.

Frequently asked questions

What is a focus group?

- A focus group is a research method that consists of bringing together about ten people to discuss a chosen theme. The aim of the discussion is not to establish a consensus. Rather, it is an open discussion that allows participants to express their own opinions and points of view. The meeting is moderated by a facilitator.

How much time should I allow for participation in this consultation?

- Plan to spend about two and a half hours in the focus group, including a short introductory presentation. Indicate the time that suits you best by filling in the application form (morning, afternoon, evening).

  Depending on your needs, the National Assembly staff is available before the event to answer your questions and ensure that your computer resources are working properly.

I am not very familiar with politics or Parliament. Can I participate?

- Of course you can! No previous experience or knowledge is required. The National Assembly wants to bring together people with different profiles and different levels of knowledge about politics and parliamentarianism. Anyone can join the Citizen Round Table!

I live in a remote area. Can I participate?

- Yes, if you have access to a computer, a video camera and an adequate Internet connection. The majority of the focus groups will take place virtually. This means that you can participate from wherever you are.

I can express myself better in English. Can I participate?

- Yes. At least one focus group will be held in English. Choose this option in the application form.

I work during the day. Can I participate?

- Yes. Certain focus groups will be held in the evening to accommodate people in your situation. Choose the times that suit you best in the application form.

I do not have access to the necessary computer resources. Can I participate?

- Possibly. The National Assembly will hold an in-person focus group at the Parliament to accommodate those who are unable to participate virtually. This meeting will only take place if the health context allows it. If you choose this option, please note that you will be responsible for the costs and arrangements for transportation to the National Assembly (Québec City).

I am a member of a political party. Can I participate?

- Yes, but you will need to commit to being party neutral when participating in the focus group.

Will I receive any financial compensation for my participation?

- No, you will not. No financial compensation will be paid to participants. However, the Citizen Round Table offers you a unique opportunity to share your opinions and proposals on public participation at the National Assembly.

Will the anonymity of participants be preserved?

- Yes. The information collected will be processed by a small team of neutral and qualified administrative staff of the National Assembly. The information will be anonymized before being presented to parliamentarians and published in the highlights of the consultation process. Participants will also be required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

Will parliamentarians be present at the focus group meetings?

- No. In addition to the citizens selected, only the administrative staff of the National Assembly will be present to facilitate the meetings and ensure that the focus groups run smoothly. Moreover, elected officials from the federal, provincial, municipal and school levels are not eligible to participate.

Will a document be made public?

- Yes. A report of the consultation will be provided to parliamentarians. Highlights will be made public in the autumn of 2021.

What is the link between the Citizen Round Table and the parliamentary reform process?

- Parliamentary reform is a long and complex process that aims to make changes to the functioning of the institution and the organization of parliamentary work (rules, parliamentary procedure, etc.). Several elements have to be considered and are discussed among MNAs.

  The information gathered in the Citizen Round Table focus groups will be used to help MNAs reflect on the changes that could be made to the National Assembly's public participation mechanisms.

Contact information

If you have any questions about this call for applications and the Citizen Round Table project, we invite you to contact the National Assembly team.

table.citoyenne@assnat.qc.ca

Visit the page: http://assnat.qc.ca/tablecitoyenne/en/

Table citoyenne

APPENDIX II – THE PROFILE OF THE APPLICANTS AND THE MEMBERS OF THE CITIZEN ROUND TABLE

A random draw by stratified sampling was carried out among the eligible applications, taking into account the sociodemographic and geographic representativeness of the Québec population. The following variables were used in the draw:

- gender identity;
- different age groups;
- Indigenous identity;
- ethnocultural diversity;
- language diversity;
- regional diversity.

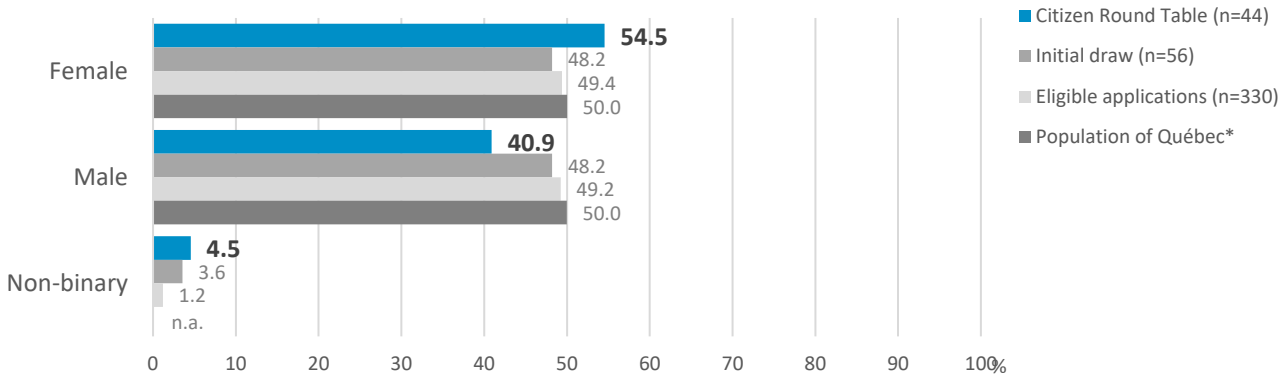
Eligible applications were anonymized, assigned a number, and drawn using a random number generator. An Assembly lawyer oversaw the neutrality of the process.

Representation targets were established for each relevant category based on the most recent sociodemographic statistics available. These targets included a minimum of two participants per category. When a target was reached, individuals matching that profile were excluded from the remainder of the draw (e.g., if the target for female representation was reached, the remainder of the draw was conducted only among males and non-binary individuals). Alternates were also selected to fill in for those who dropped out of the initial draw. They were contacted up to one week before the event.

Overall, the profile of the 56 persons selected in the initial draw was representative of the Québec population. However, twelve individuals cancelled their attendance just prior to the event or did not show up for the virtual meetings. These cancellations had a slight impact on the profile of participants. The main categories affected were people of Indigenous origin, men and the 30-39 age group. The Citizen Round Table brought together people from all administrative regions of Québec.

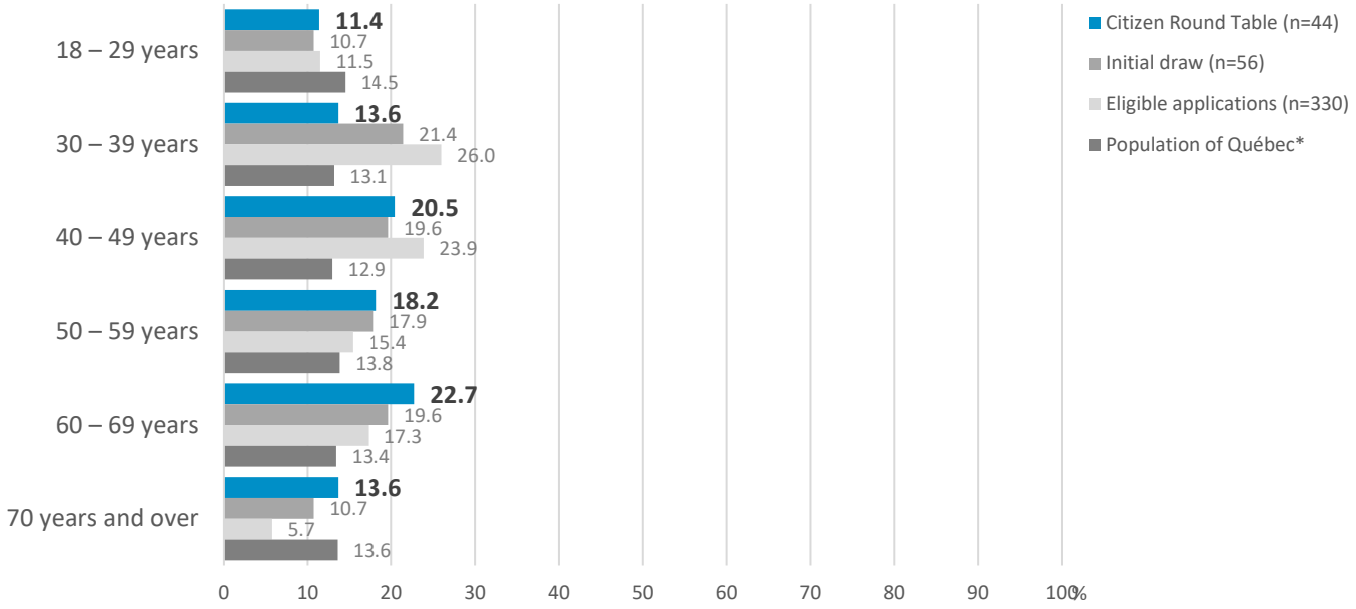
The following charts compare the profiles of the 44 Citizen Round Table members, the 56 individuals initially selected by random draw, the 330 eligible applicants and the Québec population.

Chart 1. Gender identity



* Reference for the population of Québec: Institut de la statistique du Québec. *Estimations de la population selon l'âge et le sexe, Québec, 1er juillet 1971 à 2020*, provisional data 2020, September 29, 2020, update. Page accessed on April 22, 2021.

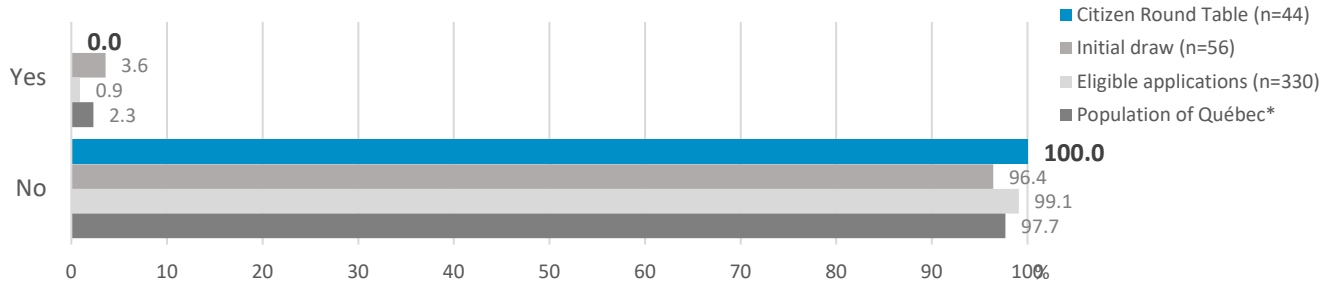
Chart 2. Age group



* Reference for the population of Québec: Institut de la statistique du Québec. *Estimations de la population selon l'âge et le sexe, Québec, 1er juillet 1971 à 2020*, provisional data 2020, September 29, 2020, update. Page accessed on April 22, 2021.

Chart 3. Indigenous identity

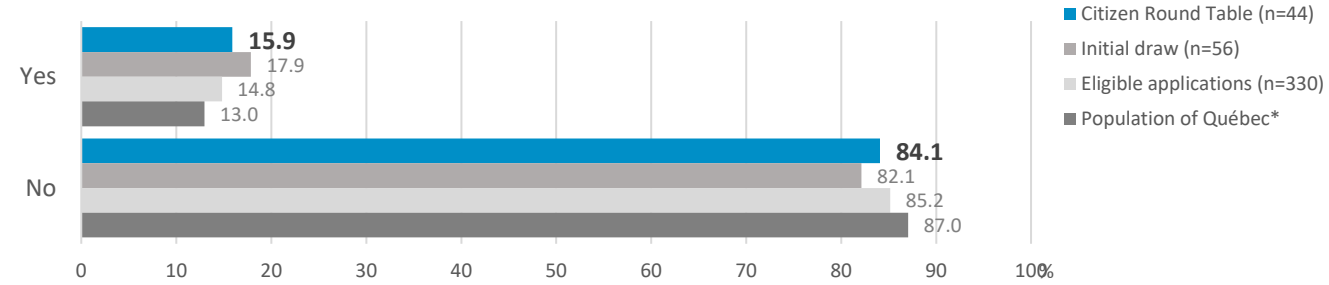
Q: «Do you consider yourself to be Indigenous (First Nations or Inuit)?»



* Reference for the population of Québec: Statistics Canada. *Total population by Aboriginal identity and Registered or Treaty Indian status, Québec, 2016*. Page accessed on April 22, 2021.

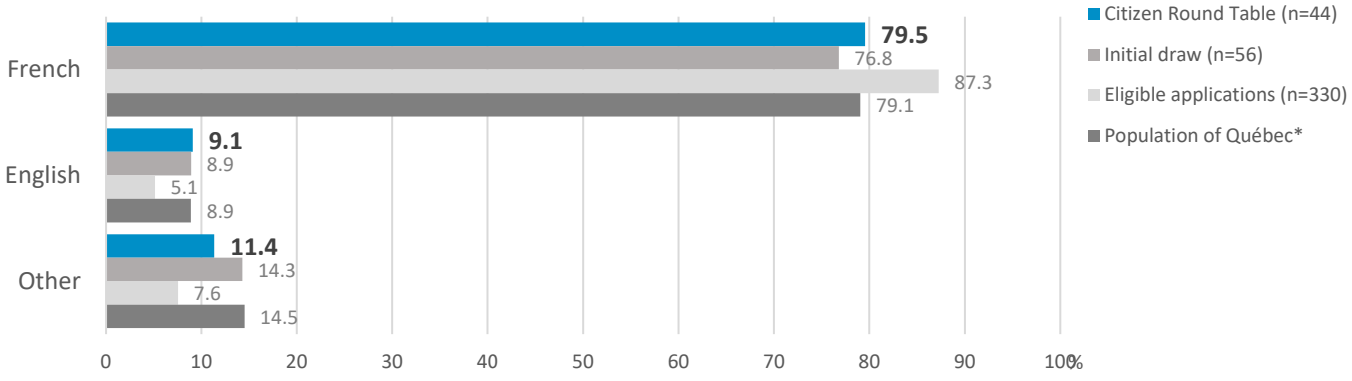
Chart 4. Ethnocultural diversity

Q: «Do you consider yourself to be part of an ethnocultural minority group in Québec?»



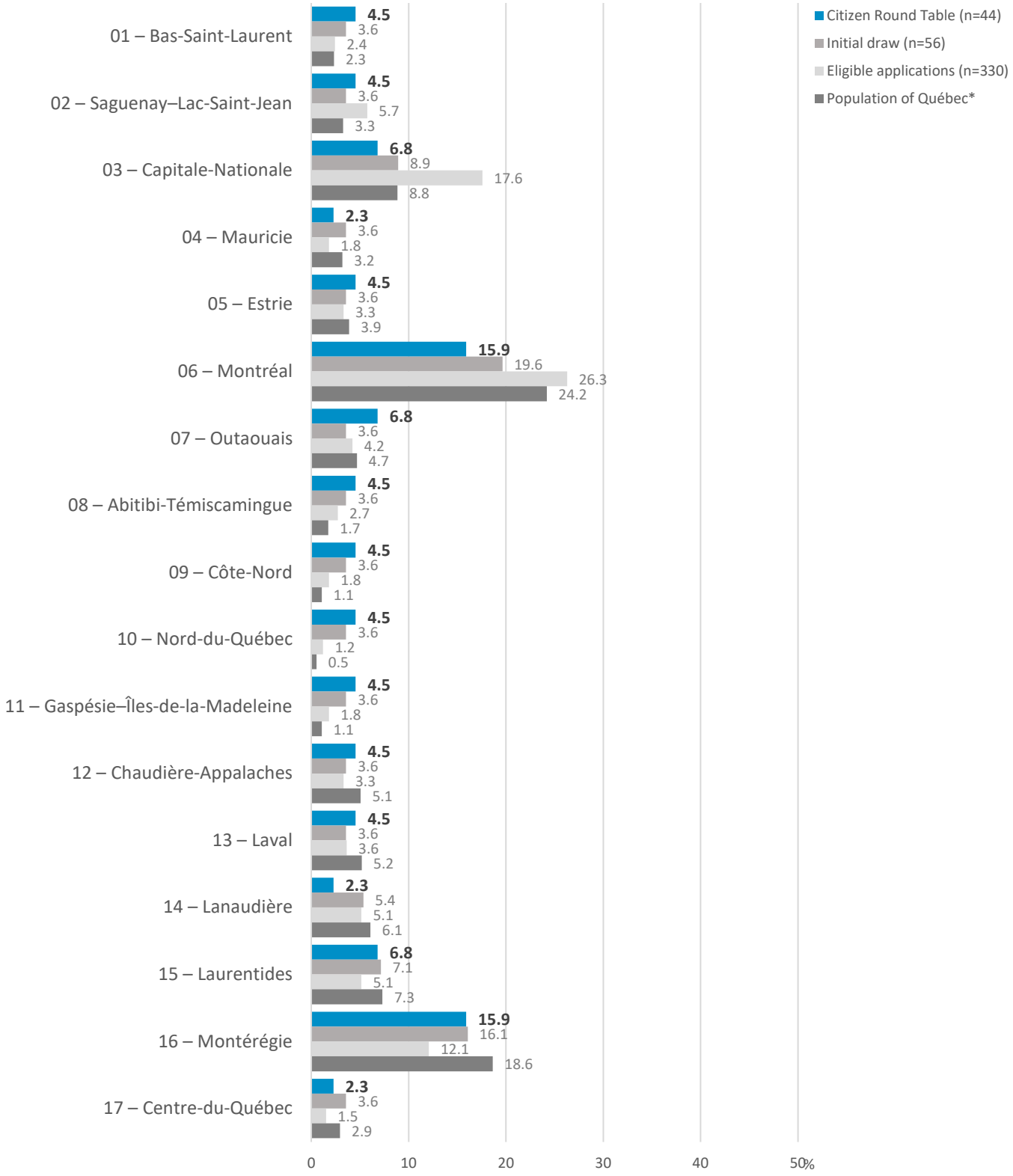
* Reference for the population of Québec: Statistics Canada. *Census Profile, 2016 Census, Québec. Visible minority population.* Page accessed on April 22, 2021.

Chart 5. Mother tongue



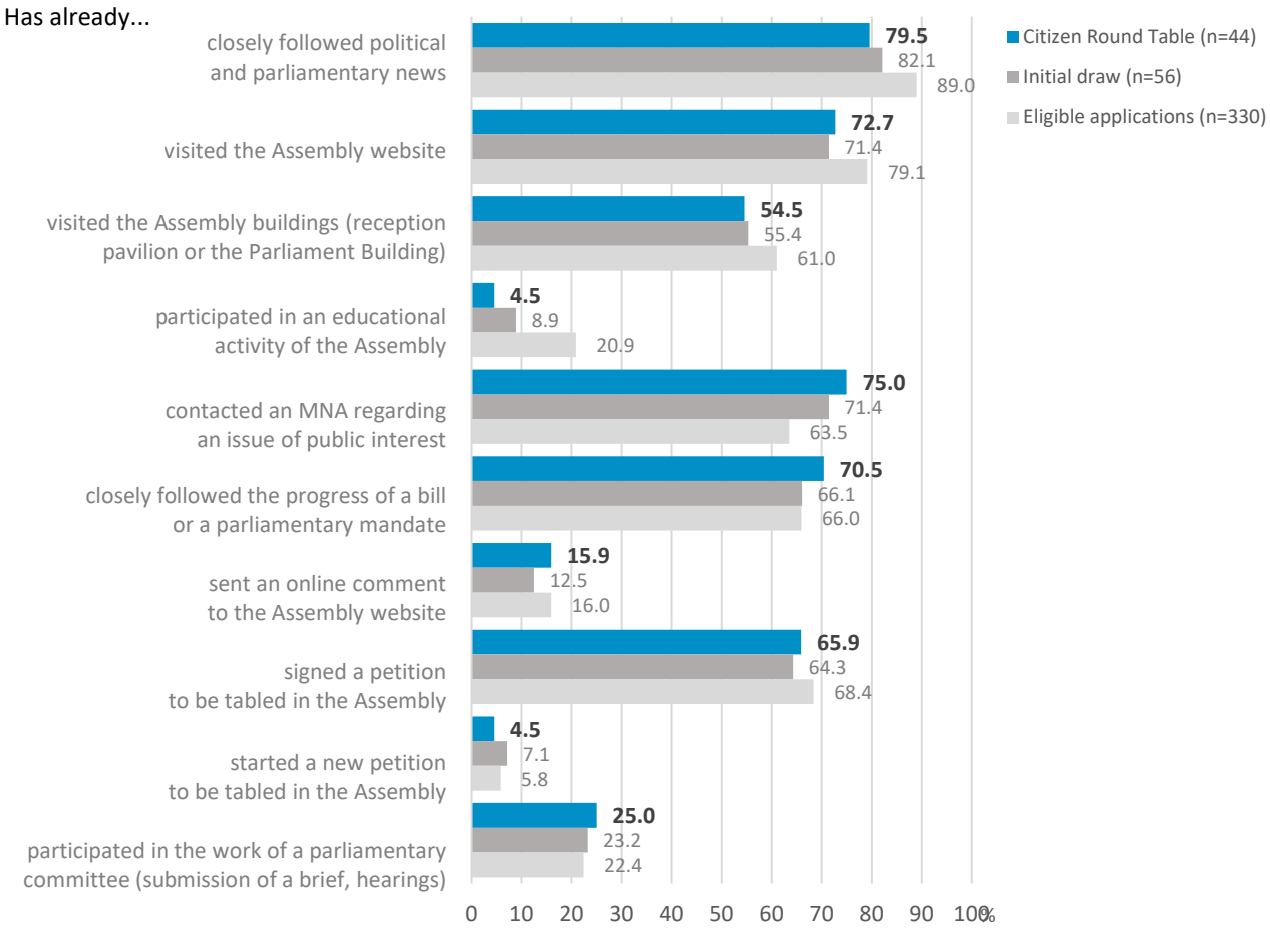
* Reference for the population of Québec: Statistics Canada. *Proportion of mother tongue responses for various regions in Canada, 2016 Census*. Page accessed on April 22, 2021.

Chart 6. Administrative region of residence



* Reference for the population of Québec: Institut de la statistique du Québec. *Panorama des régions du Québec, Édition 2020*, p. 19. Electronic document accessed on April 22, 2021.

Chart 7. Level of political experience and familiarity with the National Assembly



The data in Chart 7 were not used in the draw. However, they did allow for the creation of focus groups that were diverse in terms of political experience and familiarity with the Assembly.

APPENDIX III – THE INTERVIEW GRID

The following interview grid was used to facilitate all Citizen Round Table focus group discussions. Follow-up questions were used as needed to stimulate exchanges. Each meeting lasted two and a half hours.

Welcome

- Welcome and greeting
- Reminder of the objectives of the Citizen Round Table
- Compliance with the Participation Charter and the Confidentiality Agreement
- Reminder of the rules and presentation on the conduct of the focus groups

1. Introduction

To begin with, I invite you to introduce yourselves in turn by explaining your reasons for participating in the Citizen Round Table and, if applicable, the type of experience you have had so far with the National Assembly.

- [FOLLOW-UP] In what contexts are you interested in the work of the National Assembly? By obligation (professional context) or by personal interest? Regularly or rarely?
- [FOLLOW-UP] If you have already participated in the work of the National Assembly, in what context was it and how would you describe your experience? What did you find negative? Positive?
- [FOLLOW-UP] If you have never participated in the work of the Assembly, what are the reasons for this?

2. General perception of citizen participation at the Assembly

Generally speaking, can you summarize in two or three key words your perception of the place currently given to citizens in the work of the National Assembly?

COMPONENT 1 - PARLIAMENTARY INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

[Broadcast of a video information capsule on parliamentary information]

3. Research and dissemination of parliamentary information

To begin with, I would like to hear about your habits when it comes to finding parliamentary information.

- Raise your hand if you have ever been interested in a bill or a parliamentary mandate.
- Raise your hand if you have ever looked for information on a bill or other parliamentary mandate (examples: text of a bill, excerpt of a debate, schedule of proceedings, etc.).

If you raised your hand: What type of information were you looking for and what medium or platform did you use to find it? (Google search, media search, Assembly website, etc.)

- [FOLLOW-UP] Did you find what you were looking for easily? What obstacles or difficulties did you encounter?

Once you have found the basic information about a parliamentary mandate, what do you usually do to keep up to date, to follow its progress?

- [FOLLOW-UP] Examples: Through the media? Social networks? Do you subscribe to an RSS feed? A Google alert? Or just randomly from the information you receive?

4. Communications between the public and the Members of the National Assembly

I am now addressing everyone, whether you have been in contact with the Assembly or not. I would like to hear from you about communications between the public and the Members of the National Assembly.

From your point of view, what are the main obstacles encountered by citizens to make themselves heard by MNAs? And what could improve communications between the public and the Assembly?

- [FOLLOW-UP] Examples: One could think of the quantity, relevance, accessibility or clarity of the information available, the communication platforms used, the possibility of following the work that interests you, of communicating with MNAs, etc.

As regards information and communications, do you encounter particular barriers that you attribute to your own characteristics? For example: your age group, gender, geographical location, language, whether you are an Indigenous person, a member of an ethnocultural minority, etc. I am aware that this may be a sensitive question, so please feel free to answer or not. But remember that your answers are confidential and that this information will help us to reflect on ways to make parliamentary work more inclusive.

5. Summary and priorities regarding information and communications

To conclude this block, can you summarize in two or three words the principles or values that should guide the Assembly in improving communications between citizens and their parliament?

COMPONENT 2 - PETITIONS

[Broadcast of a video information capsule on petitions]

6. Experience regarding petitions

I would now like to know more about your personal experience with petitions and your perception of this form of citizen participation.

- Raise your hand if you have ever signed a petition, generally speaking, on any platform.
- Raise your hand if you have ever signed a petition to be tabled in the National Assembly, either on paper or electronically.

If you have already signed a petition to be tabled in the Assembly: I would like to know how you usually find out about a petition and what might encourage you to sign it.

- [FOLLOW-UP] Examples: From people you know? On social networks? By consulting the Assembly website?
- [FOLLOW-UP] Did you find the signing process sufficiently clear and accessible?

For persons who have never signed a petition on the Assembly website: Are there any particular reasons? What obstacles do you encounter?

7. Improvement of the petitioning process

If we focus on the elements that you find more problematic, how could the Assembly improve the petitioning process in concrete terms?

- [FOLLOW-UP] Examples: in terms of dissemination, clarity of process, number of petitions processed, follow-up to petitions, etc.

In your opinion, should new measures be put in place in relation to petitions? Or more broadly, in relation to the practice of obtaining citizens' support through signatures?

- [FOLLOW-UP] Should petitions be used for other purposes? Which ones?

8. Summary and priorities regarding petitions

We have heard several suggestions. Can you identify what should be the priority to improve or enhance the petitioning process at the Assembly?

COMPONENT 3 – PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS

[Broadcast of a video information capsule on public consultations]

9. Experience regarding public consultations

I would now like to hear about your personal experience regarding consultations within the framework of parliamentary mandates.

- Raise your hand if you have ever participated in a public consultation in a parliamentary committee, either by tabling a brief or by participating in hearings.

If you raised your hand: How did you enjoy your experience? What positive or negative things come to mind?

- [FOLLOW-UP] Did you experience any particular constraints or difficulties before, during or even after the consultation? If so, what were they?
- [FOLLOW-UP] Are you satisfied with the current public consultation process? If not, why? What good practices would you have appreciated?

Now, for those who have never participated in a public consultation: How do you perceive this process?

- [FOLLOW-UP] What are the main barriers to your input and what would make you more likely to participate?
- [FOLLOW-UP] Examples: Do you have enough information? Are you comfortable drafting a document or appearing before MNAs? Is it a question of distance and travel to the Assembly?

For most parliamentary mandates, the Assembly offers the possibility of sending comments to MNAs through its website. At present, this method of communication is rarely used by citizens.

- To what extent is this a form of participation that you consider relevant and promising? What would encourage you to send comments?

10. Improvement of the consultation process

In light of what has been discussed, what measures could the Assembly put in place to improve citizen participation during public consultations, with a view to inclusion and representativeness of the population?

- [FOLLOW-UP] Should the same measures apply to group representatives and to individuals (citizens)?
- [FOLLOW-UP] How could public consultations be more inclusive of different citizen profiles (age groups, regions, language, disability, etc.)?

11. Summary and priorities regarding public consultations

To conclude this block, can you summarize in two or three key words the principles or concrete elements that would make it easier for you or motivate you to participate in the National Assembly's public consultations?

COMPONENT 4 – OTHER INITIATIVES AND SOLUTIONS

We have discussed in detail current participation mechanisms, such as the dissemination of information, petitions and public consultations in parliamentary committee. In the final segment, I invite you to discuss other initiatives and solutions that could help improve citizen participation at the Assembly.

12. Other areas of participation

When you think of all the work and activities of the National Assembly, are there other facets of parliamentary activities that you think should include citizen participation? In what ways?

- [FOLLOW-UP] Should citizens have a place to participate, for example: In Question Period, in the legislative process, in the examination of the estimates of expenditure, etc.? If so, how?
- [FOLLOW-UP] And what about citizen participation in constituencies?

13. Other sources of inspiration

In general, do you know of other ways of encouraging citizen participation that you think would be promising for the National Assembly?

- [FOLLOW-UP] Have you experienced or heard of positive experiences of citizen participation in other contexts that could inspire the Assembly? For example, in your city, your municipality, on the international scene.
- [FOLLOW-UP] How could new technologies be put to use?

In concrete terms, what could increase your interest in the National Assembly and encourage you to follow and participate in parliamentary proceedings?

- [FOLLOW-UP] What would make a difference to you?

CONCLUSION

14. Summary and priorities regarding citizen participation

At the beginning of the discussion, I asked you to summarize in a few words your perception of citizen participation at the moment. You said: [Recall key words].

To conclude, can you summarize in a few words what you think the Assembly's priorities should be over the next few years to change your opinion, and even to make you proud of your Parliament in terms of citizen participation?

If you have anything else you would like to share before you leave, this is also the time to do so.

Acknowledgements and conclusion

CITIZEN ROUND TABLE PARTICIPATION CHARTER

As a participant in the Citizen Round Table, you agree to:

- participate in the focus groups on your own behalf (and not on behalf of a group or another person);
- demonstrate non-partisanship in your interventions;
- sign a confidentiality agreement in order to preserve the anonymity of the other participants and the confidentiality of the discussions.

Encouraged behaviour

By taking part in the Citizen Round Table, you commit to:

- participate actively in the discussions;
- be open to a diversity of opinions;
- discuss ideas, not people;
- keep your interventions brief and to the point;
- keep your attention on the person speaking;
- keep your camera open during the discussions if possible;
- be punctual.

Unacceptable behaviour

By taking part in the Citizen Round Table, you must refrain from:

- divulging personal information about another person, whether present or not;
- using hateful, vulgar or insulting language or engaging in violent, obscene or sexually explicit conduct;
- threatening or harassing another person;
- threatening or inciting to commit a criminal act;
- making the unsolicited and unauthorized commercial promotion of a product or service;
- using illegal material (for example, material that contravenes a court order).

The National Assembly reserves the right to exclude from the Citizen Round Table any participant who contravenes this participation charter.

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT AND CONSENT TO THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS

as a participant in the Citizen Round Table

ASSEMBLÉE NATIONALE DU QUÉBEC

I, the undersigned, _____, participant in one of the focus groups of the June 2021 Citizen Round Table of the National Assembly, formally declare the following:

I undertake to respect and ensure the confidentiality of all information and personal data to which I may have access in the context of the focus group in which I am participating.

More specifically, I undertake, without time limits:

- not to communicate or divulge the names of the other participants or any other information that would allow to identify them;
- not to record the exchanges or images of the meeting by any means whatsoever (audiovisual recording, photo, screenshot or other).

I understand that these rules apply not only during but also after my participation in the Citizen Round Table.

Furthermore, I consent to:

- the exchanges being recorded and transcribed by the National Assembly for analysis purposes;
- the transcripts of the exchanges being kept and archived permanently by the National Assembly;
- excerpts being reproduced in the consultation report and in the highlights of the process.

Finally, I understand that the participants' comments will be anonymized and that no information allowing them to be identified will be disclosed by the National Assembly.

In witness whereof, I have signed in _____, this _____

Signature : _____

APPENDIX V – THE COURSES OF ACTION OF THE CITIZEN ROUND TABLE

Public participation at the National Assembly

The impact of citizen involvement and trust in Parliament

1. Promote citizen participation at the National Assembly:

1.1. show that citizen participation is possible and within everyone's reach;

1.2. showcase the political commitment of citizens, their inspiring stories and their successes.

2. Follow up on citizens' interventions or requests and highlight their contribution.

3. Increase the transparency of the consultative and decision-making processes (e.g., greater dissemination of information, data and documents);

3.1. make this Citizen Round Table consultation report public.

4. Increase the accountability and responsibility of MNAs regarding their commitments and actions.

Hearing, considering and representing citizens' voices

5. Limit the influence of political parties, lobbies and corporations on public debate:

5.1. reduce the weight of party discipline and encourage freedom of expression for MNAs (e.g., allow more free votes).

6. Give more space, room for expression and consideration to citizens and their concerns.

7. Build on collaboration with citizens by giving them greater roles and powers in the parliamentary process, particularly in consultative and decision-making matters.

Accessibility, inclusion and representativeness of the National Assembly

8. Promote access and inclusion of all Quebecers in democratic and parliamentary life:

8.1. focus on the popularization of procedures, the support and the accompaniment of citizens;

8.2. deploy measures aimed at the inclusion and equity of different population profiles in the participation processes (e.g., in terms of language, disability, etc.).

9. Bring the institution closer to the citizens, to where they are (and not the other way around):

9.1. promote the presence of the Assembly and MNAs in the field, in Québec's regions, local communities, living environments, places of socialization, community groups, etc.;

9.2. make judicious use of information and communications technologies to broaden access to public participation (e.g., videoconferencing, development of applications, etc.), without accentuating the digital divide.

10. Deploy measures to encourage the sociodemographic diversity of the elected

representatives (e.g., develop adapted resources for potential candidates and elected representatives with disabilities).

Information and education on democratic and parliamentary life

11. Increase the visibility of the Assembly's educational activities and resources;

11.1. increase the resources dedicated to the dissemination and publicizing of educational projects;

11.2. broaden the target audience and develop new initiatives intended for adults.

12. Inform and educate citizens on the workings of Parliament, the roles of MNAs, the importance of political involvement and the Assembly's citizen participation mechanisms (e.g., training, workshops, open houses, etc.).

13. Increase the Assembly's visibility, improve the dissemination of information and publicizing of the resources available to citizens.

14. Develop citizenship education programs in schools and among ethnocultural and immigrant communities.

Parliamentary information and communication between the public and the MNAS

The dissemination of parliamentary information by the Assembly

15. Demystify the National Assembly by facilitating access to parliamentary information and its understanding by the general public;

15.1. popularize information and use more accessible and everyday language;

15.2. provide simplified summaries of information and of parliamentary and legal documents;

15.3. clarify the nature and source of the information posted on the Assembly's platforms;

15.4. highlight ways to contribute to parliamentary work.

16. Ensure the accessibility and dissemination of parliamentary information to all segments of the Québec population:

16.1. publish all written and audiovisual documents in formats accessible to people with disabilities (accessible PDF, subtitling of videos, audio description, Braille, sign language, etc.);

16.2. translate documents relevant to the Québec population (English, Indigenous languages, other languages spoken in Québec);

16.3. use both traditional (print, newspapers, radio, TV, etc.) and digital (web, social networks, etc.) means of communication to mitigate the effects of the digital divide;

16.4. disseminate parliamentary information in community media and ethnocultural community media (forward information to them or develop partnerships);

16.5. use local intermediaries with whom citizens already have a relationship of trust to provide mediation (e.g., community groups).

17. Develop new communications tools and means to inform the public about current and upcoming parliamentary work and how to contribute to it:

17.1. customizable smartphone application with the possibility of responding to the information transmitted;

17.2. customizable alert, newsletter and news feed systems;

17.3. podcasts and video clips on the highlights of current work;

17.4. parliamentary columns in the media;

17.5. weekly recap program on the Assembly Channel (summary of new mandates, bills and petitions in progress, etc.);

17.6. a program featuring political exchanges and debates on the Assembly Channel with parliamentarians, specialists, citizens, etc.

The Assembly's website and digital platforms

18. Provide a search wizard on the website (e.g., «How can I help you?» pop-up window, chat, drop-down menu, list of frequently asked questions, etc.).

19. Redesign the Assembly's website according to current standards:

19.1. consult with specialists and users of adapted technologies to ensure the accessibility of the website for people with disabilities (fonts, contrast, colours, audio descriptions, etc.);

19.2. conduct tests with the general public to ensure smooth and instinctive navigation.

20. Develop a communications strategy to increase traffic to the Assembly website.

21. Improve the use of social networks and produce communicational material adapted to these distribution platforms (e.g., short videos, attractive visuals, flash polls that would lead to additional information, etc.).

The search for and use of parliamentary information by citizens

22. Be transparent and make public all relevant information to understand the ins and outs of a parliamentary mandate as well as its progress and associated decisions.

23. Develop customizable tools and mechanisms for monitoring parliamentary work for the general public (e.g., alerts, application or online platform that can be customized as needed).

Communication between the public and the MNAs

24. Enhance proximity communication in local communities and living environments.

25. Deploy communication strategies and means that go from the population to their MNA, « from the bottom to the top », and that favour bidirectional exchanges:

25.1. disseminate parliamentary information and invite citizens to become proactively involved in the life of the constituency and in ongoing debates;

25.2. use state-of-the-art technologies to broaden participation (e.g., videoconferencing, social networks).

26. Better inform the public about the roles, responsibilities and areas of action of the MNAs in their constituency or region, in comparison to municipal and federal elected officials.

27. Develop a follow-up mechanism for citizens' requests:

27.1. develop a guide or policy to govern the follow-up of requests (e.g., maximum response time, procedures, etc.);

27.2. report and disseminate data on the quality of MNAs' communication (e.g., response rate to requests, results and assessment by an independent committee).

28. Ensure that someone takes over in the event of an MNA's absence (e.g., an alternate MNA).

Constituency offices

29. Render mandatory full accessibility of constituency offices for persons with disabilities.

30. Provide a neutral and inclusive space for communication within the constituencies:

30.1. equitably welcome all citizens, including those who do not share the same ideological positions;

30.2. eliminate the partisan nature of constituency offices and establish politically neutral service offices (e.g., staff not affiliated with any political party, similar to the public service).

Other considerations and proposals regarding information and communication

31. Create a politically neutral «citizen's office» that would, among other things:

31.1. inform the public about the mechanisms and procedures for citizen participation;

31.2. receive documents and citizen interventions and validate their admissibility if necessary (petitions, letters, comments, briefs, etc.);

31.3. forward them to the persons or authorities concerned (elected officials, parliamentary committees, departments, etc.);

31.4. provide an acknowledgement of receipt indicating where and when the document was forwarded.

32. Organize focus groups that would allow interested persons to express their concerns about issues in the riding or debated in Parliament, while educating people about democratic life and citizen participation.

33. Organize non-partisan public meetings to discuss local, regional or national issues with the relevant elected officials (all parties included).

34. Establish citizen committees that would act as intermediaries and would be responsible for bringing the concerns of the public to MNAs (in each constituency and at the National Assembly level).

35. Disseminate the contact information of the departmental officials in the regions.

36. Align the boundaries of constituencies and administrative regions to facilitate the work of MNAs and avoid areas being left behind.

Petitions

The sponsorship of petitions

37. Discontinue the sponsorship of petitions by MNAs and authorize the tabling in the House of all petitions from citizens, subject to established rules.

38. Publicize the petitions received among parliamentarians and invite those who feel concerned to advocate on their behalf (the same petition could then be championed by several elected officials);

38.1. establish a system to publicly identify MNAs who have acknowledged the petitions tabled and those who have agreed to endorse them;

38.2. entrust the MNAs who support petitions with the role of informing and promoting them to other elected officials and to the public.

39. Highlight the petitions sponsored by MNAs by adding a «petitions» tab to their biographical data.

Technical and administrative procedures

40. Accompany citizens to start and sign petitions correctly:

40.1. better inform the public of the constraints and procedures related to petitions;

40.2. popularize the procedure for petitions and their content;

40.3. design a petition form or template in multiple languages;

40.4. provide the Assembly and constituency offices with tools and resources to support petition originators and petitioners in a non-partisan manner.

41. Ensure the accessibility of petitions and the signing process:

41.1. preserve petitions in paper and digital formats;

41.2. simplify the signature process (e.g., reduce the steps required);

41.3. remove the CAPTCHA test and ensure that the entire petitions process is accessible to people with disabilities.

The dissemination and consultation of petitions in progress

42. Improve the publicizing and visibility of ongoing petitions:

42.1. on the Assembly's website and social networks (with visuals encouraging sharing);

42.2. on the National Assembly Channel.

43. Deploy customizable communications tools to inform the public about new ongoing petitions:

43.1. mobile app with notifications;

43.2. newsletter with direct links to the web pages of the petitions in progress.

44. Accompany petitions with a simple description of their objectives and potential impact (e.g., explanatory video prepared by citizens that can be shared on social networks).

45. Direct citizens to petitions that may be of interest to them when they sign another petition on the Assembly website (e.g., link to petitions on related topics).

46. Improve the visual presentation and classification of ongoing petitions, and develop a more efficient and relevant search tool (filters by themes, signature deadline, etc.).

47. Illustrate the progress of each petition with a simple visual display (steps completed and to come, important dates, etc.).

The examination and follow-up of petitions tabled

48. Be transparent about the petitions process:

48.1. establish clear and objective criteria for considering or rejecting petitions and make them public (e.g., number of signatures);

48.2. make public the identity of the persons who sit on the committee or panel responsible for selecting petitions.

49. Have petition originators appear at hearings.

50. Establish individual and collective follow-up mechanisms with the petition originator, the petitioners and the general public:

50.1. issue a press release to inform the general public of the decisions of the committee or the petition selection committee (consideration or rejection of petitions tabled);

50.2. send the government›s response to all petitioners;

50.3. inform petitioners of the follow-up to the petition and ensuing developments (e.g., steps taken and to be taken, how the requests or ideas are integrated into departmental actions, etc.);

51. Encourage MNA sponsors to champion petitions under their responsibility by instituting an obligation of result (legal commitment).

Other considerations and proposals regarding petitions

52. Set up a «suggestion box» system to allow citizens to share their ideas with MNAs, while establishing certain criteria to frame the process.

53. Submit and prioritize specific questions or requests to elected officials.

54. Entrust the selection of petitions to be examined by parliamentarians to an independent committee made up of citizens (e.g., standing or ad hoc committee, citizens› office, citizens' department).

55. Enhance the petitions process with a debate or exchange on the problems and issues raised by the petitions, which would include an interactive component between elected officials and citizens.

56. Have recourse to petitions or a signature register to establish legislative priorities (bills to be studied as a priority).

57. Have recourse to petitions or a signature register to launch a people›s referendum.

58. Have recourse to petitions or a signature register to censure an MNA on the basis of facts (concern for accountability, reminder of unfulfilled commitments, etc.).

59. Have recourse to petitions or a signature register to remove an MNA from office.

Public consultations

The types of consultation

60. Encourage individual participation in public consultations.

61. Hold more general consultations to give citizens the opportunity to express themselves.

62. Hold different types of consultations to encourage accessibility and participation of all citizen profiles (in person, virtual, mobile, etc.) as well as politically neutral surveys.

63. Promote a user-friendly digital platform for persons with disabilities (e.g., Zoom rather than Teams).

64. Promote citizen consultations prior to a bill (e.g., consultation on a draft bill).

The selection of witnesses

65. Be transparent about the choice of consultation procedures and the selection of individuals and groups invited to hearings.

66. Go beyond the immediate network of elected officials, cross party lines and broaden the range of invitations:

66.1. set up a registry where interested groups and individuals could register to participate in a consultation that concerns them (e.g., a «citizen registry» similar to the lobbyists registry).

67. Ensure that a range of groups and individuals representing a diversity of citizen profiles and ideological positions are heard:

67.1. implement measures for equity of representation;

67.2. invite representatives of persons with disabilities and community organizations who reflect citizen realities.

68. Disseminate statistical data on the profile of the participants heard.

The dissemination of information on the consultations

69. Organize educational activities on the concepts and mechanisms of public consultations at the Assembly (e.g., invite young people to attend committee proceedings).

70. Clarify the vocabulary used and popularize the information so that it is understandable for everyone (e.g., use simpler language, revise the way the information is transmitted to ensure that the entire population is aware of it).

71. Provide tools to educate people about public consultations (e.g., popularization videos, «Did you know?» capsules, webinars, etc.).

72. Use dynamic visual cues to direct the public to current consultations on web pages, bills and parliamentary mandates (e.g., prominent «Get Involved» link or button, better visibility of the calendar and dates to remember, etc.).

73. Disseminate information regarding public consultations on all available platforms, in several languages and in all regions of Québec (traditional media, digital media and social networks).

74. Systematically provide information and discussion papers in a format that is accessible to persons with disabilities.

75. Deploy customizable communications tools to inform the public about new parliamentary mandates, current consultations and ways to participate:

75.1. mobile app with notifications;

75.2. newsletter with direct links to the web pages of parliamentary mandates.

76. Rely on local intermediaries to transmit information on the consultations underway and reach a greater number of citizens, notably:

76.1. MNAs in their ridings;

76.2. community organizations and interest groups with their members and partner networks;

76.3. municipalities, in their territory.

The preparation of written and oral interventions

77. Allow sufficient time for the preparation of written or oral testimony, namely the time required to learn about the issues, consult with members and the network of partners, take a position, draft a brief and prepare for a hearing (the ideal timeframe cited by participants is two to three months).

78. Avoid holding consultations during vacation periods and allow for flexibility regarding the date set for submitting briefs.

79. Provide a clear and concise summary of how a public consultation will be conducted (e.g., summary of steps, instructional video, plain language explanations, etc.).

80. Provide support and accompaniment to individuals and groups within the framework of consultations (drafting briefs, preparing for hearings, etc.).

81. Deploy complementary resources to help citizens better understand the problems and issues examined in preparation for their intervention (e.g., brief information notes, questions and answers on the bill or the parliamentary mandate).

Public hearings

82. Take into account the obstacles related to the costs and constraints of travelling to the Assembly to participate in hearings and propose solutions to disadvantaged individuals and groups so that they can be heard during consultations (e.g., use of videoconferencing, scheduling accommodations, etc.).

83. Provide financial support to less affluent organizations to enable them to participate in hearings held at the Assembly.

84. Designate a resource person to accompany individuals with disabilities who come to the hearings (getting around the Assembly, directions regarding emergency measures,

etc.) and provide them with adapted furniture in committee rooms and service areas (washrooms, restaurants, etc.).

Online comments

85. Better publicize the possibility of making comments online as a means of citizen participation.

86. Provide guidance or support to ensure that the content and format of comments are relevant, while avoiding to induce bias (e.g., provide a summary or highlights of the mandate under consideration, establish thematic sections to allow comment on different aspects or sections of a bill, provide the identity of one or more recipients).

87. Make public on the mandate site the number and content of comments received, as well as the identity or status of the persons who commented (interest group, specialist, citizen, etc.) and establish a search engine by keyword or category.

88. Establish some form of follow-up or accountability with regard to the comments received (e.g., provide a response within a specified time frame, follow up on suggestions).

The follow-up to consultations

89. Revise the process and communications following a consultation to introduce more transparency and better tracking of the changes made due to public consultations (input from consultations, decisions arising from them, etc.).

90. Provide a personalized response to individuals and groups who participated in public hearings to inform them of the follow-up given to their recommendations.

Other considerations and proposals regarding consultations

91. Introduce a citizen consultation process on certain budgetary decisions.

92. Allow citizens to forward questions or have an interactive exchange with MNAs at press conferences.

93. Create panels of interested people, by theme (health, environment, immigration, etc.);

93.1. by random draw, form focus groups composed of citizens with diverse profiles to discuss aspects of a bill or parliamentary mandate related to their areas of interest;

93.2. forward the results of the exchanges to the MNAs.

94. Use civic platforms or technologies to facilitate the dissemination and search for parliamentary information, the follow-up of mandates, public consultation, exchanges between the public and MNAs, the formulation of questions or solutions by citizens, etc.

95. Create a citizen's committee or department, exclusively composed of «ordinary citizens» (e.g., chosen by random draw) that would be empowered to contribute to parliamentary work and have decision-making powers.

96. Reserve a certain number of parliamentary seats for «ordinary citizens» so that they can intervene and contribute to the proceedings (for each committee or at the Assembly level).