

Women academics and those from BAME backgrounds engage less with Parliament. But why?



*Despite the current UK Parliament being more diverse than ever, it remains the case that academics who engage with Parliament are somewhat less representative. Women, those based outside London, and those from BAME backgrounds are significantly less likely to give evidence to select committees, for example. **Sarah Foxen** describes the drive across Parliament to address this problem and improve diversity by first understanding the reasons why some people engage more than others. All academics are invited to complete an online survey about the barriers to engaging with Parliament, with findings due to be reported on the Impact Blog later this year.*

Of all the political announcements we have heard in the past few months, perhaps one of the most positive was that on 8 June the UK voted in its “[most diverse Parliament yet](#)”. That being said, there’s still some way to go before we have a [truly representative Parliament](#).

But what about the backgrounds of those people who engage with Parliament? Sadly, the figures aren’t great. Research carried out by Dr Marc Geddes on [the demography of Select Committee witnesses in 2013–2014](#) showed that just 24.5% of oral evidence was given by women. Not just gender, geography is also an issue: 38% of witnesses came from London alone. As for scholarly representation, 75.6% of academic witnesses came from Oxbridge or Russell Group universities.

The most recent statistics available – from the House of Commons [Sessional Returns](#) of the 2016–2017 Session – showed a very small increase in gender diversity: 28.5% of witnesses last year were women. But we are all agreed this is not good enough, and we are a long way from meeting Prof Sarah Childs’ [target of 40%](#).

The good news is there is a drive across Parliament to do something about this. Just two weeks ago I sat in a session with staff from both the House of Commons and the House of Lords in which we talked about diversity and what can be done to enhance it. Equally, there is a [strategic focus](#) on increasing diversity and inclusion.



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But why is it that some people engage with Parliament more than others? If we are to overcome the obstacles to engagement we need to know what they are and how they prevent people from getting involved. It has been suggested that distance from London and anxiety around engagement are both factors which impact on participation; however, these are certainly not the only ones. For this reason, we have just launched an [online survey](#) about the barriers to engaging with Parliament *specifically for academics*, which we would love readers to respond to and share.

The survey is 14 questions long and should take around five minutes to complete. We would welcome contributions from anyone with something to tell us, although we are particularly interested in hearing from academics from groups who engage less with Parliament: women, academics from BAME backgrounds, and academics with disabilities.

After the close of the survey on 18 August, we'll be reporting our findings here and elsewhere and, most importantly, we'll be developing activities focused on addressing some of the barriers identified and supporting a wider range of academics to engage with the business of Parliament.

So please, take five minutes to [share your thoughts](#) and help us make Parliament and parliamentary processes more inclusive and representative.

The survey can be completed [here](#) and closes on 18 August.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

Sarah Foxen is a social science adviser in the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology ([POST](#)) – Parliament's in-house source of independent, balanced, and accessible analysis of public policy issues related to science, technology, and the social sciences. Working in collaboration with Parliament's [Universities Programme](#), Sarah's work focuses on increasing Parliament's engagement with academia and on supporting academics to engage.