



Conclusions

Abstract Beyond summarising the core themes of the book, namely that of reflecting on qualitative research in parliament; research collaboration, expertise-sharing and project management; as well as assessing the practices to make qualitative research known to and accessible to actors in the European Parliament, the concluding chapter is an open-ended discussion on the future venues for qualitative research in political institutions generally and the European Parliament more specifically. We discuss the epistemic benefits of how our research adds to and/or challenges the ‘traditional’ political science approaches. In conclusion, we also provide a thorough and transparent discussion of what we would do differently from the perspective of time. We conclude by proposing what could be next for qualitative research in the European Parliament. For instance, we debate both the potential for new legislative and institutional powers as well as future crises inevitably bringing issues in terms of research topics and access. Finally, we stress the informality of many procedures, practices and mechanisms we witnessed and discuss its meaning for transparency and democracy.

Keywords Assessment · Epistemic benefits · Retrospection · Future research

INTRODUCTION

This volume has provided a hands-on, step-by-step guide on doing qualitative research in parliaments. The discussion has been based on our own experiences of conducting a large-scale qualitative study in one supranational parliament—the European Parliament. Based on that experience, we formulated concrete pointers to overcoming obstacles and challenges faced by qualitative researchers studying parliaments. For us, the European Parliament constituted a unique environment and a larger field in which the gendered practices, processes and policy outputs of the political groups were situated. Throughout the book, we have explored the practical achievements and drawbacks that relate to the collaborative gathering and analysis of dense qualitative data (interviews, ethnography and documents) with an international team of six researchers at various career stages.

As a guide, this book has provided approaches and unique insights to conducting qualitative methodologies in the form of seven chapters each tailored to deal with a specific step of the research process. Its practical and illustrative approach answers questions such as *how to gather a large-scale qualitative data-set of interview, ethnographic, and document data in a parliamentary environment? How to handle raw data through storing and coding? How to make sense of coded data? How to transform qualitative data gathered and coded collectively into findings for single- or co-authored articles?* In this concluding chapter, we provide an overview of the main points developed in the book. We reflect on our methodological choices, on what we would do differently, and finally we discuss the potential trajectory of qualitative research in the study of parliaments.

REFLECTIONS ON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN PARLIAMENTS

In comparison to other methodologies, qualitative approaches pose different research questions about parliaments and their activities than positivist and quantitative studies do. This book has presented the main advantages of conducting qualitative research in parliaments. It highlighted the usefulness of such an approach for the better understanding of the everyday dimensions shaping democratic practices and policy-making in parliaments, whilst also providing concrete, user-friendly advice on how to conduct such research in practical terms. For example, rather than

asking and measuring *what impact far-right groups have had in parliaments*; it might ask: *how do parliamentary actors experience the impact of far-right groups in parliaments?* Likewise, enquiring *how sexual harassment in parliaments is understood by parliamentary actors and what they understand as best ways of preventing it* may replace or coincide with measuring its frequency and impact. Thus, applying qualitative research to the study of parliaments advances knowledge on policy constructions, internal practices and processes that shape parliamentary work; whilst quantitative analyses of roll-call voting typically overlook relevant aspects about interpreting these votes, such as analysing how they are understood, and exploring the processes and informal dimensions that led to them. Interpretive research questions, as shown in this book, provide thicker descriptions and investigate how parliamentary actors make sense of parliamentary activity.

When it comes to assessing parliaments with regard to their gender equality policies and practices (understood intersectionally), the use of dichotomous or binary variables measured in formal indicators (such as sex or age seen as not interrelated categories) as is often the case in quantitative research, does not capture complexity and can often create progress bias. Qualitative research, on the other hand, challenges the illusion of progress in relation to equalities, and highlights the practices and processes that reproduce gendered and racialised inequalities. Meanwhile, interview environments can be overly controlled and unnatural, not capturing everyday factors affecting parliamentary actors' constructions, behaviours, or experiences. As shown in this guide, qualitative research is typically designed to capture the complexity of parliamentary life and work whilst reflecting on the nuances and limitations of the methodology itself.

Rather than measuring variables, we captured affective atmospheres in parliaments, and rather than measuring frequencies, we explored the variant discursive constructions of policy issues by parliamentary actors and analysed them through interpretive methodologies. This required solid and transparent strategies, but also constant reflection on what conditioned that knowledge and the replicability and generalisation possibilities of it. For instance, insights gained from ethnography allowed us to question the specifics of parliamentary activity, which generated actual concrete examples, rather than generalised statements.

Whilst qualitative methodologies tend to provide rich and varied datasets, the gathering and analysis of them can be immensely time and

resource consuming. We have given this book a strong focus on collaborations and sharing expertise because we believe it is what made the handling of dense qualitative data possible. Sharing the expertise and burden of data gathering, coding and of data interpretation can be a key strategy to handle big qualitative datasets in a timely fashion, and geared towards publication outputs.

However, as we consistently mentioned throughout the book, such a collaborative approach demands strict organisation and a high level of transparency and trust between the researchers. For instance, we found that clear and standardised labelling of data and formally designated people overseeing each task was a good organisational strategy. Furthermore, sharing the workload sometimes included outsourcing different tasks, such as interview transcriptions, which was only possible thanks to generous funding. Rather than listing instructions on how to conduct qualitative research in parliaments, this book, as suggested in the title, has offered some ideas to *guide* other researchers in this endeavour. Without doubt, there are things we would do differently.

HINDSIGHT: WHAT WOULD WE DO DIFFERENTLY?

When conducting qualitative research, one of the main concerns involves gathering data that is sufficiently representative of the field. In our case, a better cross-section of nationality representation mattered as our field was a multi-national parliament. On this aspect, we could have had a stronger representation of some nationalities, which was often made impossible or difficult because of language barriers or accessibility/availability issues. Some of these challenges may have been resolved if we could have allocated more resources to alleviate language obstacles and reach more non-English speakers. For instance, we could have offered an interpreter for participants from un(der)represented member states. Likewise, we could have explored ways to integrate the insights of hard to reach groups in parliament, such as staff hired for catering, cleaning and maintenance services who—in the case of the European Parliament—are contractually more vulnerable, French-speaking, have less flexibility with their working day and limited experiences of participating in research interviews. At the same time, this would have demanded different ethical considerations, as we would have asked for time and contributions from people who are not remunerated on a par with other employees of the European Parliament. We would also need to reflect on what use we would be to the

more vulnerable employees and what our research could improve in a normative sense.

Even though we found interview and ethnographic data to be highly useful in answering questions about discursive constructions as well as formal and informal practices of parliamentary work, we found, retrospectively, that a ‘solid’ pool of official documents from political groups helped us to cross-check the details and intricacies of processes. For example, guidelines for new parliamentarians and harassment policies. These may not be accessible online, but can be obtained through informal contacts in parliament. This takes time and demands a pro-active, reaching-out attitude and requires knowledge of who is in possession of such documents and might be willing to share them.

As the discussion in Chapter 6 illustrated, there are obstacles to using interviews as ‘objective’ sources of information, especially when considering the risks of memory alteration when recollecting events, and the tendency of actors to under—or over-represent some events and/or their own role in them (e.g., Berry, 2002; Beyers et al., 2014; Fowler et al., 2011). In this sense, documents can help to cross-check information gathered via interviewing. Having several ethnographers in the research team may also be an asset, especially as it allows for a more diverse representation of activities. For example, a lot of parliamentary meetings are held simultaneously, which means that prioritisations have to be made when scheduling observing activities.

In recent years, Twitter and other social media platforms have become a significant aspect of parliamentary activity and parliaments themselves are moving towards the idea of ‘smart parliaments’ (Fitsilis & Mikros, 2022). Concomitantly, there is greater acknowledgement that politicians and parliamentarians have integrated all kinds of social media in their daily activities, both for sharing information and for surveying their popularity. In that sense, we recognise that gathering digital data has become an important part of research, including qualitative research, but has mostly remained outside the scope of our research.

With regard to data analysis and especially coding, we could have also explored some innovative forms of coding, as detailed in recent textbooks (Saldana, 2021). For example, the analysis of ethnographic data could also include process codes, meaning the codes that highlight what parliamentary actors were doing during observations. Furthermore, coding can quickly become routine and less analytical or precise. In that sense, even though Chapter 5 stressed the importance of communicating trans-

parently, there are always more opportunities for team debriefing. For instance, interactive and collaborative platforms such as Padlet, provide a forum for asynchronous communication. This facilitates ways in which multi-member research teams could share posts as ideas arise in the excitable process of coding, as well as in more general periods of reflection outside the formal coding process. Such forums may be seen as more digital and interactive versions of the research diaries or memos presented in this book.

By its nature, and epistemological orientation, qualitative research and especially ethnography require a large degree of improvisation, borne largely from the timing constraints of parliamentarians, as well as sometimes interpreting and exercising the autonomy provided by a parliamentary pass on a study visit. It is therefore important to establish a presence in the parliament. Practices to achieve this can include: an active project website and Twitter account; an identifiable project logo; clear, user-friendly documents on the research project such as information sheets and interview schedules, posters advertising events (displayed in the parliament) and roundtable co-operation from parliamentarians at events who might repost the details of the event for further publicity and invite and alert their networks to researchers' presence. Although these tactics are not enough, and can be swiftly weakened by unexpected events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, we also acknowledge that research findings remain largely disseminated in the English language, providing a *de facto* limit to the possibilities of sharing knowledge more widely.

Knowledge exchange can also make qualitative research known to and accessible to actors within and without parliaments. Whilst there was some spillover to the practitioner world (Warasin et al., 2020), knowledge exchange was not a priority for our research funder. Different funders and universities might have different expectations, as well as the expertise and infrastructure for such activities. A follow-up activity is to measure any benefits accrue as a result of sharing research findings, such as changing understandings within or about parliament, or catalysing action going forward within parliaments. Whilst researchers in majoritarian parliaments are cautiously warned not to align oneself with a particular tribe (Crewe, 2021), parliaments that are not organised along majoritarian lines might provide more flexible opportunities to share knowledge with different groups.

LOOKING AHEAD: WHERE NEXT FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON PARLIAMENTS?

A future academic endeavour that promises much interest, would be a state-of-the-art study on the types of qualitative methods that have been used in parliaments, where, and with what epistemic effects. This would provide this exciting field of study with a synthetic and comprehensive perspective on ‘what’s already out there’. For instance, it might provide more nuanced insight into how focus groups are underrepresented in the methodological literature on political institutions and parliaments (possibly due to time and linguistic constraints). Meta-level academic reflections, and further debate on the types of data that qualitative methods produce in parliaments are needed, as well as discussions about what implications these have for researchers’ normative positions on social justice, gender equality and the fairness and equity of representation of own-voices.

On a more practical level, the qualitative research of parliaments may be affected by emerging challenges, if not crises, within and external to parliaments. Parliamentary crises, and the politicisation of policy areas and practices, inevitably bring about topical and thematic issues in terms of research subjects and access to them. In the case of the European Parliament, examples include the ‘Qatar scandal’ that has foregrounded and exposed a lack of transparency in parliamentary practices (e.g. secret ballots and the conciliation committees), as well as the significant degree of informality in the parliament around lobbying. We would hope that academic access is not compromised or impeded due to the parliamentary reforms, whilst at the same time increasing the transparency obligations of all the staff and MEPs working both within and without the European Parliament premises.

New or extended parliamentary powers and reforms may also bring about new analytical foci and affect the points of entry, actors and settings to be engaged with, as happened with the increasing powers of the European Parliament following the Lisbon Treaty reforms. We also saw with the onset of Covid-19, how we were obliged to turn the pandemic-related scientific and technical problems into research and academic opportunities. First, the technical and institutional access problems (travel restrictions and remote work modes) changed our means of data gathering as we conducted interviews online or via telephone.

We also experienced new layers to data collection due to the Covid-19 restrictions, which resulted in novel approaches and methodological contributions.

Secondly, Covid-19 restrictions have yielded a new research field on the democratic access, transparency, and the policy content of EU responses. Crises often exacerbate existing inequalities, and the Covid-19 pandemic has been no exception: inequalities based on gender, race and ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, age and class have become more marked, and those already vulnerable even more so. In the vein of exploring the new policy areas that a parliament can have influence in, Elomäki and Kantola (2023) in an article on ‘Feminist governance in the European Parliament: The political struggle over the inclusion of gender in the EU’s Covid-19 response’, looked at lessons learned from previous crises, and collaborations across political group lines in the current situation. Unexpected future developments or policy crises will undoubtedly provide ample material for further research along similar lines.

The relationship(s) between the executive and parliaments may also bring about changes in the focus for research. As we have seen at the EU level, subsequent Commission Presidents led efforts to make their own mark on EU policy processes and reforms in different fields. We experienced variance in the approaches to gender equality and economic and social policy, amongst other things, as different levels of priority were placed on them by Barroso, Juncker and von der Leyen in just the last 15 years. We have explored these in several publications (see for instance, Berthet, 2022a, 2022b; Elomäki, 2021; Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022; Elomäki & Gaweda, 2022) aiming to explore the changes, often in longitudinal or time—and context-specific ways. Looking forward, explorations of change in the institutional and behavioural processes as well as in policy-making will always remain core research foci for parliamentary studies.

Relatedly, future research could focus on the materialism of parliaments, involving not only their physical spaces (Verge, 2022), but also the socio-economic organisation and their embeddedness in the locations. In particular, anthropological literature has been good at pursuing this angle (Lewicki, 2016). For example, in the case of the European Parliament, its surrounding infrastructure could and should be examined, extending the research discussion to the relationship of EU institutions with Brussels and Strasbourg as locations. The power hierarchies, and how they play out

in the spaces of Brussels and Strasbourg in relation to domestic populations, should also be examined. From an intersectional gendered point of view, issues such as childcare and child rearing infrastructures in Belgium or France; racist policing; and also the Strasbourg seat and its relationship with the constituencies could be prime bases for future research. Moreover, parliaments have large budgets, so studies of procurement contracts could be conducted to ensure that they are socially just. Furthermore, considering the massive contemporary global challenges, future parliaments should be expected to move towards greener and more sustainable solutions. Thus, the ways these transformations occur should also be an area of future enquiry.

We conclude with the wish that this guide will be of equal help to those who are exploring more established agendas, as well as researchers who are investigating new avenues of research. As beacons of democracy where anti-democratic and anti-gender forces play out, parliaments will certainly present more, rather than less, topics to research qualitatively.

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