



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Parliaments

Louwerse, T.; Stockemer, D.; Sawyer, S.; Gagnon, A.

Citation

Louwerse, T. (2026). Parliaments. In D. Stockemer, S. Sawyer, & A. Gagnon (Eds.), *IPSA Companion to Political Science* (pp. 1-4). Cham: Springer Nature. doi:10.1007/978-3-032-06918-4_79-1

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4307129>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Parliaments



Tom Louwerse

Institute of Political Science, Leiden University,
Leiden, The Netherlands

Parliaments are key democratic institutions. Their election is arguably one of the most direct ways in which citizens can impact decision-making. As cornerstone democratic institutions, the conceptualization of “parliament” is taken more or less for granted in the most-cited journal articles that discuss them.

So what then is a parliament? The term parliament is used to denote the legislature in many democratic systems (Martin et al., 2014), most importantly parliamentary systems of government. Here the executive is not directly elected but derives its legitimacy from the confidence bestowed by parliament. Sometimes the term “parliament” is used in other contexts. The European Parliament, for example, does not fit neatly in the category of parliamentary systems but is still called a “parliament.” In contrast, presidential systems, in which the executive has its own independent democratic mandate, have legislatures that are called “congresses” instead of “parliaments.” Therefore, the term “parliament” is less prominent in the literature on the legislatures in presidential systems.

Parliaments fulfill various functions, including the political representation of citizens, the

initiation, scrutiny, and decision on legislation, oversight over the executive, and the protection of the constitutional and democratic order. Most of these functions receive attention in the most-cited scholarly literature on parliaments. A large share of these articles focuses, however, on the elections for parliaments, which is understandable in light of their key democratic role.

European Parliament

It is not surprising that the European Parliament (EP) prominently features in the scholarly literature on parliaments: It represents nearly 450 million people, and its proper name includes the word “parliament.” A large share of this literature focuses on EP elections. One topic that receives particular attention is the *Spitzenkandidaten* system that was introduced for the 2014 EP elections. The idea is that European party families name a lead candidate and the candidate whose family received the most votes would be appointed EC candidate. While this system was found to increase turnout (Schmitt et al., 2015), the political impact is more ambiguous (Christiansen, 2016; Hobolt, 2014). The impact of the economic crisis on vote choice and political trust is another electoral topic that features prominently. Trust in the European Parliament has been found to decline most in the countries hit hardest by the economic crisis (Dotti Sani & Magistro, 2016), and individuals who were hardest hit by the crisis and most discontented about European Union (EU) policies were

most likely to defect from mainstream to Eurosceptic parties (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016; Treib, 2014). In the context of Spain, the 2014 EP parliament elections have been argued to have contributed to party system change (Cordero & Montero, 2015).

These electoral changes have impacted the functioning of the European Parliament in between elections. The populist right did well in 2014, but its exclusion from powerful parliamentary positions at the time was—correctly—predicted to provide a breeding ground for a further electoral rise (Treib, 2014). Within the EP, radical right populists use new discursive strategies to show their opposition to gender equality (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021). Gender itself is an important factor shaping policy decisions, for example, in the area in environmental politics, with women members of the EP being more likely to vote for proenvironment legislation than men (Ramstetter & Habersack, 2020).

Parliaments naturally do not operate in isolation, and therefore the relations with other relevant actors are a topic of attention. In the EP context, one important mechanism are the so-called “trilogues” between Parliament, Commission, and Council that facilitate coordination in European legislative processes (Roederer-Rynning & Greenwood, 2015). Another important relationship for the EP is that with the national parliaments of the EU Member States. The financial and economic crisis that started in 2008 has resulted in closer EU coordination of economic policies. As a result, national parliamentary oversight over financial and economic policy has been effectively limited, while the EP has been argued not to fully compensate this accountability gap (Crum, 2018). Thus, where the “culture of trilogues” can be argued to strengthen the position of the EP, it has been less well able to provide oversight regarding economic governance.

National Parliaments

European integration is also a topic that features in the national parliaments of EU member states. Intergovernmental decision-making in the EU requires, after all, national-level accountability.

This does occur, but mostly outside of election time and more by government than opposition party MPs (Rauh & De Wilde, 2018).

Although usually regarded as a prerogative of the executive, national parliaments also play a role in defense and security politics. This is increasingly recognized in the scholarly literature, including two special journal issues, which both point to a politicization of foreign politics in national parliaments (Mello & Peters, 2018; Raunio & Wagner, 2017). The United Kingdom House of Commons has effectively gained the right to vote on the deployment of troops overseas (Strong, 2015). In a comparative study, Wagner et al. (2017) show, however, that parliamentary control over military intervention divides political parties: Those on the left favor strong parliamentary control, while those on the right favor few constraints on the executive.

Political contestation does not only take place along left-right lines but importantly also between government and opposition. During the early stages of the Covid-19 crisis, this dividing line was far weaker than normal, but after a few months opposition parties became more critical again (Louwerse et al., 2021).

Finally, the representative role of parliaments is assessed through the lens of descriptive representation of women (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019) and younger voters (Stockemer & Sundström, 2018). A very different perspective on the representative role of parliament is Rai’s (2015) analysis of political performances in parliaments. Notably, this is the only article in the top-20 most cited that has an empirical focus on a non-European parliament: India.

Future Focus

Given their central democratic role, it comes as no surprise that the term parliament is used in a large variety of studies, including parliamentary behavior, legislative policy-making, relationships with other institutions, and parliamentary elections. Geographically, there is a strong focus on the European Parliament and national parliaments of established democracies.

The term parliament is mostly used as a *context* rather than a *concept* in the most-cited literature. This is understandable given the key role of the institution: Parliaments are part of many democratic processes and thus feature in different subfields. Offering a clearer conceptualization of “parliament” may, however, clarify whether findings are expected to hold only for parliaments, or also for other types of legislatures, or indeed the more general category of assemblies. In addition, this short analysis of the term “parliament” barely touches upon the field of legislative studies, which is at the core of how parliaments work (Martin et al., 2014). We should therefore look beyond the use of the *term* parliament, and focus on the use of the *concept*.

Competing Interest Declaration The author(s) has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

References

- Christiansen, T. (2016). After the *Spitzenkandidaten*: Fundamental change in the EU's political system? *West European Politics*, 39(5), 992–1010. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2016.1184414>
- Cordero, G., & Montero, J. R. (2015). Against bipartyism, towards dealignment? The 2014 European election in Spain. *South European Society and Politics*, 20(3), 357–379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2015.1053679>
- Crum, B. (2018). Parliamentary accountability in multi-level governance: What role for parliaments in post-crisis EU economic governance? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(2), 268–286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1363270>
- Dotti Sani, G. M., & Magistro, B. (2016). Increasingly unequal? The economic crisis, social inequalities and trust in the European Parliament in 20 European countries. *European Journal of Political Research*, 55(2), 246–264. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12126>
- Erikson, J., & Josefsson, C. (2019). The legislature as a gendered workplace: Exploring members of parliament's experiences of working in the Swedish parliament. *International Political Science Review*, 40(2), 197–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512117735952>
- Hobolt, S. B. (2014). A vote for the President? The role of *Spitzenkandidaten* in the 2014 European Parliament elections. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21(10), 1528–1540. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2014.941148>
- Hobolt, S. B., & De Vries, C. (2016). Turning against the Union? The impact of the crisis on the Eurosceptic vote in the 2014 European Parliament elections. *Electoral Studies*, 44, 504–514. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2016.05.006>
- Kantola, J., & Lombardo, E. (2021). Strategies of right populists in opposing gender equality in a polarized European Parliament. *International Political Science Review*, 42(5), 565–579. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120963953>
- Louwerse, T., Sieberer, U., Tuttnauer, O., & Andeweg, R. B. (2021). Opposition in times of crisis: COVID-19 in parliamentary debates. *West European Politics*, 44(5–6), 1025–1051. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1886519>
- Mello, P. A., & Peters, D. (2018). Parliaments in security policy: Involvement, politicisation, and influence. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 20(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148117745684>
- Rai, S. M. (2015). Political performance: A framework for analysing democratic politics. *Political Studies*, 63(5), 1179–1197. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12154>
- Ramstetter, L., & Habersack, F. (2020). Do women make a difference? Analysing environmental attitudes and actions of Members of the European Parliament. *Environmental Politics*, 29(6), 1063–1084. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2019.1609156>
- Rauh, C., & De Wilde, P. (2018). The opposition deficit in EU accountability: Evidence from over 20 years of plenary debate in four member states. *European Journal of Political Research*, 57(1), 194–216. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12222>
- Raunio, T., & Wagner, W. (2017). Towards parliamentarisation of foreign and security policy? *West European Politics*, 40(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2016.1240411>
- Roederer-Rynning, C., & Greenwood, J. (2015). The culture of trilogues. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 22(8), 1148–1165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2014.992934>
- Schmitt, H., Hobolt, S., & Popa, S. A. (2015). Does personalization increase turnout? *Spitzenkandidaten* in the 2014 European Parliament elections. *European Union Politics*, 16(3), 347–368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116515584626>
- Stockemer, D., & Sundström, A. (2018). Age representation in parliaments: Can institutions pave the way for the young? *European Political Science Review*, 10(3), 467–490. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773918000048>
- Strong, J. (2015). Why parliament now decides on war: Tracing the growth of the parliamentary prerogative through Syria, Libya and Iraq. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 17(4), 604–622. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-856X.12055>
- Treib, O. (2014). The voter says no, but nobody listens: Causes and consequences of the Eurosceptic vote in the 2014 European elections. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21(10), 1541–1554. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2014.941534>

Wagner, W., Herranz-Surrallés, A., Kaarbo, J., & Ostermann, F. (2017). The party politics of legislative–executive relations in security and defence policy. *West European Politics*, 40(1), 20–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2016.1240413>

Additional References

Martin, S., Saalfeld, T., & Strøm, K. W. (Eds.). (2014). *The Oxford handbook of legislative studies*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199653010.001.0001>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any non-commercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

