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Parliaments



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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*.

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