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The *Present* of Parliamentary and Legislative Studies

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In this article, Michelle M. Taylor-Robinson, Emma Crewe and Shane Martin discuss the present of parliamentary and legislative studies. The exchange is based on a Roundtable on the past, present and future of parliamentary studies, which was held online on 9 June 2021 as part of the Annual Conference of the UK Political Studies Association's Parliaments Specialist Group.

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1. Michelle M. Taylor-Robinson

In the present era, the field is benefitting from a more global view of parliamentary and legislative studies and more interaction of scholars across regions of the globe, which is intellectually fruitful and exciting. During my term as *Legislative Studies Quarterly* (*LSQ*) comparative co-editor, I was really pleased by the willingness of scholars whose case expertise is, for example, European parliaments, the US Congress or Latin American legislatures to review papers using data from other regions. Having our work read and reviewed by scholars whose expertise is from a different world region forces us to be thoughtful about the scope conditions of our theories, utilise literature from beyond 'our region', test theory boundaries and to explore moving parts in the theory that previously were a constant. For example, how do rules for behaviour by legislators vary across parliamentary and presidential systems, or how do the dynamics of executive–legislative relations differ across countries with parliaments that have been operating for more than a century compared to legislatures that only came back into being at the end of a period of authoritarian rule with the onset of the Third Wave of democracy? Study of career trajectories of backbenchers has benefitted

from work that takes concepts such as static, progressive and discrete ambition (Schlesinger, 1966), or the electoral connection (Mayhew, 1974) and extends it to cases where the career-building benefits of posts differ or the value of maintaining one's seat in the congress is low, or where a legislator's connection to his/her constituents is less clearly laid out—as in a country with closed-list proportional representation (PR) elections rather than single member districts (e.g. Carey, 1996; Jones *et al.*, 2002). There is also more work, though I would say it is still way too little, examining legislatures in authoritarian regimes, and in semi-democracies (see e.g. Arioti (2021) about African legislatures, and Szakonyi (2018) about subnational legislatures in Russia).

Yet, despite these felicitous developments, we still work too much in our silos. There is too much isolationism within the presidential systems field, or parliamentary systems field. Cheibub and Limongi (2011) advocated for greater comparison across presidential and parliamentary systems, as has Tsebelis (1995) regarding numbers of veto players, and Shugart (2006) about bargaining incentives. But these appeals need to be reiterated, and hopefully they will be taken up by a new wave of parliamentary and legislative studies scholars. Building from Shugart (2006), the mix of institutions that operate in a country (number of important parties, legal powers of executive and legislatures, powers of agenda setting and control in the legislature) may matter more for how MPs, party factions and executives behave than simply whether the system is parliamentary or presidential. Yet, scholars typically do not cite literature that bridges the presidential/parliamentary divide. And studies that utilise data from more than one type of system are rare (see Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2021a,b). If we looked at our work more on a topical basis than a type of system or region basis, that could facilitate building bridges, and I hope it will take theory development and testing to the next level. For example, what types of behaviour by MPs do nomination and electoral system incentivise, when taking into consideration the different types of activity that are available to MPs within a legislature (e.g. given the extent of party control over who gets the opportunity to speak, or if chamber rules give the relevant committee chair the right to speak on a bill but speaking is much less feasible for the average backbencher, or whether a private member bill has a realistic chance to come up for a vote)? Or how do chamber rules, such as for putting together the chamber's order of business, work across formal and informal coalition systems or pre- and post-election coalitions? Or how do career trajectories develop, and are they different for 'traditional' MPs compared to MPs from historically under-represented groups across parliamentary and presidential systems, unicameral and bicameral systems, unitary and federal systems and what are the implications for representation of diverse interests and for policy?

In the present era, there are exciting new sources of data being used by parliamentary and legislative studies scholars. One example is *automated text analysis*,

facilitating analysis of parliamentary questions (PQs), plenary and committee debates, bills. Though the learning curve for utilising this technology is steep, there are language challenges for cross-national work, plus challenges to creating valid dictionaries—this kind of data is giving the field a more fine-grained view of what legislators do, such as how and when MPs use PQs to address local concerns (e.g. Zittel *et al.*, 2019), or the type of speech MPs use when they rebel against their party compared to when they toe the party line (Slapin and Kirkland, 2020). Another novel use of speech data is analysis of voice pitch to study emotional intensity of legislators (Dietrich *et al.*, 2019). Another new source of data comes from *social media*, including how MPs use social media (e.g. Jones *et al.*, 2018) or how social media is used to attack MPs (see Ward and McLoughlin, 2020). *Experiments* have become a standard tool in parliamentary and legislative studies, building understanding about traits and experience that voters value in candidates (e.g. Clayton *et al.*, 2020 experiment conducted in Malawi), how citizens respond to rebels in parliaments (e.g. Wagner *et al.*'s (2020) experiments conducted in Britain, Germany and Austria), or how legislators respond to different types of constituents (e.g. Dhima's (2022) experiment in Canada). *Network analysis* has also become part of the toolkit of legislative scholars, building understanding of who works with whom on legislation (e.g. can women MPs work together across party lines to pass women's interest legislation, or are they likely to be punished for reaching across to other parties; see, e.g. Barnes (2016) studying legislative activity by members of Argentina's provincial legislatures, Muraoka (2020) about women and minorities elected via reserved seats in Pakistan, Holman and Mahoney (2018) about women in US state legislatures and Skigin (2019) about the Argentine and Uruguayan legislatures).

Concurrent with expansion within (some) legislatures in the diversity of people elected, scholars are studying what that increased diversity means for how legislatures operate, who is represented, career paths, etc. This work examines how women legislators compared to men, legislators from different social classes and different race/ethnic groups do their job. This work also considers the impact of electing MPs via quotas, such as do quotas affect the quality of MPs, the kind of work they see themselves as having a 'mandate' to do and whether legislators elected via a quota get an equal 'quota of power' within the chamber and chances to advance their careers (e.g. Franceschet *et al.*, 2012). Yet, this work is often published in journals connected to other sub-fields of political science, and many of the scholars studying this new diversity of legislators do not view themselves to be 'legislative studies' scholars (for more information, see Powell *et al.*, 2021, the Women in Legislative Studies website[1] and the 'Spotlight Section' in *PS: Political Science & Research* 53(2) called *Interviews, Reflections, and Advice from Women in*

[1]https://womeninlegislativestudies.org

Legislative Studies and edited by Harbridge-Yong and Sin). This is unfortunate for parliamentary and legislative studies because expanding our understanding of who sits in the legislature, how they got there, where they go and most immediately what they are able to do while in the legislature (bills, PQs, other types of speeches, oversight) is important for making the field of parliamentary and legislative studies relevant. The world is roiling from insufficient representation of historically under-represented groups, and lack of representation is threatening the legitimacy of democratic regimes. When, where, under what types of institutional designs is the diversity of MPs increasing, both in the numbers of MPs and their access to positions of power within the legislature? Another important component of this field of research—and one that should be incorporated more into parliamentary and legislative studies—is how and when parliaments and legislatures as institutions are raced and gendered (see e.g. Childs, 2013), and how that affects the ability of different legislators to provide representation to constituents (e.g. research shows that female legislators spend more time than males on constituency service (Schwindt-Bayer, 2010; Crewe, 2015), to pursue a legislative agenda, participate in parliamentary debates and what topics they present (Bäck *et al.*, 2021), and to move up the political ladder.

2. Emma Crewe

Parliamentary and legislature scholars are a surprisingly small academic community of mostly political scientists, legal scholars and historians, although as Michelle points out that is partly because some of those writing about political institutions and politicians identify as belonging to other academic subdisciplines. Given the centrality of legislatures to democratic political worlds, these institutions still deserve greater and more diverse attention than they get. The legislatures outside Europe, North American and Australia remain beyond the scrutiny of scholars to a surprising degree. Nizam Ahmed (2020) is a notable exception as a public administration scholar who has written about every aspect of the Bangladesh Parliament, even contrasting it to other South Asian legislatures, for many decades. Michelle is unusual for a US scholar in having researched legislatures in both various Latin American countries but also in North America (e.g. in Crisp *et al.*, 2004) and even asked broader questions about representation and accountability to citizens across Latin America (Taylor-Robinson, 2020) as well as gender in legislatures globally (Taylor-Robinson, 2014). It is no coincidence that another political scientist who has redressed the neglected legislatures in the Global South (Rai and Spray, 2019 about women MPs), and connected their study of them to comparative work between Global South and North (2014), is also a feminist: Shirin Rai. Feminists have a habit of challenging the

status quo, making new socio-political connections across geo-political and cultural boundaries, and often take that innovative spirit into areas beyond feminism.

However, I think Michelle paints a slightly too rosy a picture of breaking down barriers between Global South and North when studying parliaments and legislatures. It remains rare and, in contrast to her work, most of the research continues to assume that studies in the Global South rest on assumptions of deficits and the search for solutions rather than open-minded inquiries which are as much about discovering what is going on from the viewpoints of different protagonists. Some research on democracies in Europe and North America continues to rely on normative questions, positivist methodologies and ahistorical theorising as well. Why is this? The pressure on specific social science disciplines is to fix problems, produce generalisable laws and predict human behaviour even though history moves situations into different cultural logics or political economic situations. The need to reimagine democracies around the world has become more pressing than ever, and within this is the political desire for legislatures to be more representative and accountable to citizens while acting as an effective check on the executive, so what is at stake is how parliamentary and legislative scholars respond to this. Unsurprisingly, parliamentary and legislative scholars, predominantly political scientists, are influenced by the world they inhabit and many respond to both their own pressures within the academy—in the case of some specific disciplines to be 'scientific'—but also those created by those with whom they interact. Let us take each of these acculturating processes in turn. As far as science is concerned, within hierarchies of knowledge in metropolitan centres of the globe, it is scientific and legal 'evidence' that attract prestige, funding and hegemony. They may establish their perceived regimes of truth in different ways (as Latour, 2010, pp. 229–43 explains), and their confidence may be dented by recent attacks on science during the pandemic and on the rule of law in many democracies, but their gold standard status often remains beyond doubt within parliamentary studies. This may be partly because parliamentarians (until recently) played an important role in reproducing the dominance of legal and scientific knowledge in debates, committees and engagement with the media.

There are small signs that the dominance of narrow forms of legal and scientific knowledge production may be diminishing. Some aspects of this are troubling in political worlds, but within parliamentary and legislative studies, it is mostly positive. To elaborate on the exciting new developments in methodology and sources of data outlined by Michelle, as an anthropologist, I would draw attention to a greater tolerance for ethnography in many social sciences. The interest seems to be greater in the UK than in the USA, but it is more wholehearted still in France (Rozenberg, 2018). The political scientist, Louise Thompson (2020), explains that ethnographical approaches in parliamentary studies have

become more popular in the UK in part because the Westminster parliament has opened up to embedded researchers so in-depth, long-term immersive and emergent approaches have become far more practical. With a few exceptions, recent ethnographic work on legislatures has mostly been carried as part of doctoral studies—in political science by Prior (2019), Geddes (2019) and Miller (2021) in Westminster and in anthropology by Amy Busby in the European Parliament (Busby, 2013), in New Zealand by Jessica Bignell (2018), and in Indonesia by Heikki Wilenius (2020). They share in common an approach of taking seriously the informant's perspectives on their own practices and studying their everyday practices, meaning making and processes of interaction in ways that reveals rather than ducks the contradictions.

Ethnography has been portrayed by a few as micro-studies with no potential for generalisation in a positivist science sense (see Martin *et al.*, 2014). But ethnographers generalise in the same way as phenomenologists rather than positivist scientists: by inquiring into general patterns created by processes and relationships and achieving rigour through reflexivity, a sense of history and attention to plural interests. By studying the rhythms of politicians' work, for example, as they shapeshift between audiences, agendas and locations, their similarities and differences can be traced systematically. Different disciplines tend to have different ideas about what is involved in ethnographic research, disagreeing most fundamentally about the utility and requirements of reflexivity and history. Those who see themselves as social 'science' researchers expect predictable patterns (as the political scientist, Lisa Wedeen (2010) explains, whereas those who see social science as different from natural science, or even position themselves within the humanities, tend to aim for plausible theory about similarities and differences, or continuities and breakdowns, generated by comparative analysis (e.g. Ingold, 2014; Rai and Johnson, 2014).

The discipline in parliamentary and legislative studies which relies most heavily on ethnography is my own, anthropology, and it is scarcely seen in these institutions. A few anthropologists have analysed parliamentarians and parliaments in the context of something else—Ilana Gershon contrasted the practices of legislatures versus courts (2011), while David Mosse (2020) wrote tellingly about the relationship between parliament and civil society when trying to understand why equalities law on caste failed. But mostly they stay away from elite institutions, with a few exceptions (see above for recent examples). If you take politicians seriously, and even try to imagine what the world looks like when standing in their shoes—for example, trying to understand their contradictory experience of political work, as I did (Crewe 2021)—then the discomfort of complicity and collusion becomes challenging. Since anthropology as a discipline has an uncomfortable history of being born out of racist colonial encounters, many

of us find it difficult to study, and therefore develop sympathy, for those in powerful positions in those hierarchies. So, most avoid this domain altogether.

Contemporary parliamentary scholars in all disciplines benefit from well-established and highly active networks, especially in the UK and the USA, which aids multidisciplinary work in important ways. In the UK alone, there is the Political Studies Association Parliaments group,[2] the bi-annual international Wroxton Workshop for Parliamentarians and Parliamentary Scholars,[3] and the Study of Parliament Group,[4] to name just a few. The latter is especially unusual, as it is composed of parliamentary officials and scholars who meet to discuss legal complexities, procedural issues, and the challenges of running parliament, but also the scholarship that helps shed light on the work of politicians. These networks are complemented by others located in universities (e.g. the Centre for Democratic Engagement in Leeds University[5]) and more informal ones created by funded programmes (e.g. the Global Research Network of Parliaments and People in SOAS, University of London[6]). The community of parliamentary scholars seems to be energetic about interacting with each other even if silos persist as Michelle makes plain (see also Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2021*c* in this issue). Even though I welcome greater space allowed for research that is motivated by the search for knowledge, and not necessarily addressing specific democratic deficits, this community has an increasingly important function in many societies. The scrutiny of democracy and the political institutions within it should not be left to journalists; it is healthy for any political system if scholars are investigating all its aspects with a critical lens. Both democracy, and the scrutiny of it, is a work-in-progress.

3. Shane Martin

I really enjoyed reading, and learnt a lot from, Michelle's and Emma's perspectives on the current state of parliamentary and legislative studies. Certainly, as an area of study, contemporary legislative studies have much to celebrate in terms of research excellence and contribution to our respective disciplines. I will start by reflecting on some of the thoughts of my distinguished colleagues above, before discussing some of my own perspectives, pertaining in particular to

[2]www.psaparliaments.org

[3]www.wroxtonworkshop.org

[4]www.studyofparliamentgroup.org

[5]www.cde.leeds.ac.uk

[6]www.soas.ac.uk/parliaments4people

methodological changes in political science and the rapid growth of data science and the role of parliamentary and legislative studies in the 'text-as-data' revolution.

First, let me echo Michelle's observations that we are now a more (what I would term) geographically cosmopolitan discipline and that the sub-discipline now exposes us to work from outside the country or countries we ourselves study. And these can only be good things. They require scholars to think about assumptions, how they write (in particular avoiding the mistake that everyone should care about our research question and answer), and the generalisability of our arguments. Although many may think this trifling, one of the papers I enjoyed reading most was an extension of my own work (Martin, 2016) by Ladwig III (2020). In my paper, I had argued that while backbench legislators belonging to the governing party could face an 'electoral cost of governing' co-partisan cabinet ministers could insulate themselves from these costs by providing pork to their constituents. And I used evidence from Ireland to corroborate the argument. Ladwig III extended the study to India, but demonstrated that no such vote-buying strategy worked for cabinet ministers in India, thereby and rightly calling into question the generalisability of my thesis. It is a topic I would love to return to in future research, but although my argument was not proven in the Indian case, it was a delight to see someone apply it to a very different setting and a setting I knew almost nothing about. I would very much welcome more such research, where we test theories in parts of the world not included in the original study. But as I will discuss in the 'future' section below, we are far from a truly global subfield and while much has been achieved in breaking down geographical boundaries, they still exist, and to the detriment of the field and discipline.

And I think Emma points to one very important reason for improved (if still imperfect) cross-geographical engagement: the role of professional associations and networks. These have really grown and strengthened during the period under review here. The Legislative Studies Section of the American Political Science Association continues to go from strength to strength. In Europe, the ECPR's Standing Group on Parliaments was founded and has developed an exciting series of events including a Summer School, Conference and series of topic-specific workshops, as well as participating fully in the ECPR's conferences and joint sessions. In the UK, the Political Studies Associations's Specialist Group on Parliaments is very active and has a strong network focus. And further afield, I have had the pleasure to attend some of the conferences organised by the newly formed Legislative Studies Group (*Grupo de Estudios Legislativos*) of the Latin American Political Science Association (ALACIP). These networks are important because they allow for cross-fertilisation of ideas, foster new research collaboration (more about this below), but above all else remind us that parliamentary and legislative studies is a community. And while we rightly should hold peer-

reviewed research to the highest standards, co-operation needs to evolve and we should not be scared about supporting the publication of world-leading parliamentary and legislative studies in our very best journals.

Speaking of journals, the present period very much represents a golden age for parliamentary and legislative studies with no fewer than three mainstream English-language journals dedicated to legislative studies: the flagship *LSQ* (so admirably co-edited by Michelle for part of the period being discussed here), *The Journal of Legislative Studies* and *Parliamentary Affairs*. Of course, the very best parliamentary and legislative studies should also appeal to the wider discipline and should also appear in the discipline's top general journals. But a healthy set of sub-field journals must surely be a mark of a strong sub-field, and if this is the case, legislative studies is in a good shape with the three above-mentioned periodicals. But more can be done and it is noteworthy that the citation impact factor for legislative studies journals do not always reflect the quality of research published in these journals.[7] In other words, and put simply, not enough people are reading and citing parliamentary and legislative studies (at least parliamentary and legislative studies published in our field journals). And this means, we must ask whether we are producing and *framing* appropriately the cutting-edge and interesting research that we need to, in order for the discipline to flourish.

A second recent development I want to point to is the growth of team-based research and co-authorship (see Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2021*b*, p. 2). Contemporary legislative studies are very much a collaborative effort, although single-authored work continues to exist. But the complexity of designing, conducting and drafting research means that it often requires the synergies created by team-based research. And here conferences and professional associations are critical in facilitating the emergence of collaborative research, although we need to be conscious of the disadvantages faced by scholars unable to participate due either to physical distance or resource limitations. We must also be mindful of gender and other forms of inequality which may consciously or unconsciously exclude women or minority groups from research and collaborative networks. Thankfully, the period under review has seen the elimination (or near elimination) of all-men panels at conferences and workshops. Parliamentary and legislative studies however remains a male dominated subfield and in part for this reason it is wonderful to see initiatives such as Women in Legislative Studies (@W_inLS)—'[w]orking to engage, support, and promote women who study legislative politics.' As I will return to in the next section, we must also work hard to ensure that legislative studies as a subfield reflects society more generally.

[7]For example, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*—our field's flagship journal enjoys an impact factor of 2.159 in the 2020 Journal Citation Reports (Clarivate Analytics) – ranking it only 82nd of 183 Political Science journals.

I must beg the reader's indulgence and self-indulge a little more by pointing to one relatively recent publication which was at least designed to provide a foundational infrastructure to help parliamentary and legislative studies grow. I am referring to the *Oxford Handbook of Legislative Studies*—published in 2014 and co-edited with the redoubtable Thomas Saalfeld and Kaare Strøm. Comprising 33 chapters, the volume was designed to provide an authoritative and up to date survey of the field. Some colleagues and many of my own students have told me it was and remains a very useful reference point, and it has been a particular delight to occasionally see a copy in the library or research services library of various parliaments I have happened to visit. A really interesting question I am beginning to ask myself is how it would look different if we were today sitting down to plan a second edition. Certainly, much would remain the same, although we would likely want to dedicate more space to minority representation and legislatures in different settings.

And finally, let me conclude by discussing briefly one fascinating development over the last decade: the explosion in interest in parliamentary debates. Rightly, for many years previously, legislators (roll-call) voting behaviour and committee work was a major focus for scholars. But over the last decade, increasing attention has been paid to what legislators say in parliament, including in debates and at question time. This new-found fascination partly reflects the under-study of parliamentary debates in earlier times but also the growth in what is at its most basic automated textual content analysis. In particular, the development, largely by political scientists, of text-as-data methods, found a natural application in parliamentary studies—large, and often comparable, bodies of words ready to be analysed. The interested reader can look no further to the recently published volume edited by Bäck *et al.* (2021) titled *The Politics of Legislative Debates*. Technology and methods will continue to evolve and we will surely pay growing attention to sentiments and the consequences of words and sentiments in legislative debates.

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Conflict of interest

None.

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