Title: The Role of Research Evidence in Improving Parliamentary Democracy

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Abstract: Parliaments perform an important democratic function in overseeing and scrutinising government, making new laws, and debating the issues of the day. Effective research use can ensure that policies are cost effective, ensure that those debating and scrutinising policy are informed by the best possible evidence, and scrutinise the work of government effectively. Yet, despite having a long history, little is known about how research is used in decision making. The ways that research feeds into parliamentary processes were examined in a recent session organised as part of the 2015 PACITA conference. This chapter outlines two empirical examples of work in this area: an analysis of two parliamentary debates and the work of an internal parliamentary research advisory service. However, gaps in knowledge remain. The chapter goes on to discuss a study being conducted, which is examining how research, of all types, feeds into parliamentary processes and the demand for such services from policy makers and parliamentary staff.

Introduction

The value of research for helping policy makers is now widely recognised (OECD 2015). Research can help policy makers to understand the root causes of societal challenges, assess policy options for addressing them, and evaluate the effectiveness of implemented policy responses. Many governments and international decision-making bodies now share a commitment to inform their policy decisions with the best available research. Millions of dollars are spent on funding relevant research internationally, and there is a rapidly increasing host of organisations focused on promoting and supporting the use of research in decision making. Yet, despite having a long history (Weiss 1979), surprisingly little is known about the extent to which research actually influences or is used by public decision makers in different contexts, or about which methods of providing research for policy-makers are most effective for improving that use under different circumstances.

One arena of public decision making that has been largely neglected within this discussion is legislative bodies (Tyler 2013). Although our understanding of research use within the executive functions of governments remains incomplete, these arenas have at least been increasingly examined over the last decade, particularly in sectors such as health (Gough et al. 2011; Graham et al. 2006, Nutley et al. 2007; Shaxson et al. 2013). In contrast, the role of research in shaping the democratic functions of parliaments — debating the issues of the day, creating and revising laws, and examining and critiquing the actions of government — although recognised as important (e.g. Nath 2011; Padilla & Gibson 2000), has been systematically overlooked (Spruijt et al. 2014; Tyler 2013). There are important economic, moral and democratic reasons for focusing on this issue. Effective technology assessment (TA) and the use of research can ensure that policies are cost-effective and do not waste public money (for example see Scott et al. 2001). Morally, there is an imperative to inform those debating and scrutinising policy with the best possible evidence to ensure that those who intervene in other people's lives do so with the most benefit and the least harm (Oakley 2000). Examining and challenging the work of the government in part relies upon parliament's ability to scrutinise the evidence around policies and as such, there are important democratic reasons for studying the role of research in this arena (Goodwin 2014; Spruijt et al. 2014; Tyler 2013). As parliamentarians receive a significant amount of research advice from parliamentary staff and elsewhere, developing our understanding of how this advice influences these

parliamentary functions is critical to improving our democratic institutions, and central to developing a comprehensive picture of the relationship between research and public policy.

Organisations Providing Research Advice to Parliaments

Thanks in large part to the work of the PACITA project and the European Parliamentary Technology Assessment (EPTA) Network, awareness and understanding of the different organisations providing research advice within parliaments across Europe has increased (Hennen & Nierling 2015). EPTA is a group of research advisory bodies that work with their respective parliaments via differing constitutional arrangements and processes. It includes two broad categories of members. The first category of EPTA members are internal offices based within parliaments. Examples include the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) in the UK and the Office Parlementaire d´Evaluation des Choix Scientifiques et Technologiques (OPECST) in France. The second category of EPTA member are external offices that have constitutional relationships to their parliaments. Examples of this include the organisation TA-SWISS, which advises the Swiss Federal Assembly and the Rathenau Instituut, which advises the Dutch Staten-Generaal.

Although not a member of EPTA, one example of an internal research advisory body is the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) research service within the Scottish Parliament. Established in October 1998, SPICe provides information on science, technology and engineering topics as part of a topically more diverse information service. The service forms one of the two broad teams which make up SPICe, the other being the information service. Those teams work closely together at a number of levels to provide a comprehensive research and information service to the parliament. The underlying purpose of SPICe is to ensure a well-informed parliament through the provision of accurate, impartial and timely research and information that helps Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) to better scrutinise government and hold it to account, and which enhances the quality of decision making, legislation, debate and policy making.

The Use of Research in Parliament

Knowledge about the formal systems and services within and outside (but with constitutional relationships to) parliament go some way to addressing the economic, moral and democratic obligations outlined in the introduction to this chapter. This is only one part of the puzzle however. There are many sources of research advice for parliamentarians that are not limited to organisations such as those within the EPTA Network. Most parliamentarians employ their own researchers and have access to the research functions within their own political parties. Intermediary organisations such as think tanks, social enterprises, and third sector organisations play a role (Guston & Sarewitz 2002; Pautz 2014; Sebba 2011, 2013; Smith 2013; Stone 2007; Williamson 2014), as do the media, businesses, academic institutions and other organisations (for example see Maynard & Evans-Reeves 2015). In short, there is no evidence to suggest that parliamentarians lack knowledge when it comes to decision making. What is missing, however, is evidence to show how these sources of research advice are used by policy makers in their parliamentary work and, within this, the effectiveness and impact of internal sources of research advice (as exemplified by the EPTA Network).

Projects such as the EU-funded Parliaments and Civil Society in Technology Assessment (PACITA) have done much to further understanding of the ways that research feeds into decision making. As Bütschi and Almeida in this volume show, research "offers useful tools and techniques" that can analyse the impact of different interventions and developments, engage a range of groups whilst also providing "a space for constructive dialogue and the generation of ideas on technology-related issues, allowing for common strategic thinking" (see also Bütschi 2012; Bütschi and Almeida 2014). Bütschi and Almeida explore and discuss the needs of policy makers regarding research advice through an analysis of two parliamentary debates that took place within the PACITA project. In these debates, policy makers considered TA policy advice and shared their expectations and visions. The

analysis by Bütschi and Almeida shows that policy makers are all-too aware that often the knowledge that they rely upon is not only fragmented, but also influenced by lobbyists and interest groups. It is for these reasons that the policy makers in these debates expressed "great expectations" towards research advisory organisations, such as those that are part of the EPTA Network, to provide them with independent and structured policy advice.

Relying upon research advice or TA institutions is not always sufficient however. An examination of six public controversies in the Netherlands has shown that while the use of research can enhance debate, it is not "trouble free" (Blankesteijn et al. 2014). Levels of public trust in science decline once it is used in part for policy-making purposes and science itself can be used to support very different positions (Tiemeijer & De Jonge 2013). It is in this light that the limitations of research should be acknowledged as well as its role amongst other sources of evidence such as public consultations and the views of stakeholders other than scientists.

Building on these empirical studies is a study being led by Dr Caroline Kenny at University College London and the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). A core part of this UK ESRC-funded project is a systematic analysis of the role of different types of research in parliamentary processes. The study examines the types of research that feed into the UK parliamentary system and the ways in which this happens. It also explores the factors (processes, mechanisms and cultures) that shape whether and to what extent research is used, and the role of an internal research advisory organisation – POST – within these processes. This study will contribute much to existing knowledge in this area and it is hoped that the study will be extended across Europe to allow a comparative analysis of the ways in which research feeds into and informs parliamentary processes. A study of this type would not only strengthen international networks between different parliamentary and research communities committed to enhancing the effective use of research within public policy, but also develop a comprehensive understanding of the different mechanisms that can facilitate the use of research in parliaments and how these mechanisms operate under different conditions.

Conclusion

Although many governments and international decision-making bodies share a commitment to inform their policy decisions with the best available research, surprisingly little is known about the extent to which research influences or is used by public decision makers in different contexts, or the mechanisms that are effective in enhancing the use of research in decision making. Existing knowledge in this area is largely theoretical and a wide range of models, theories and frameworks have been developed and used to describe and inform research use. Empirical knowledge in this area has been primarily conducted outside Europe and in certain topic areas, particularly health. One arena of public decision making that has been largely neglected within the existing literature is legislative bodies.

The importance of understanding research use in parliaments is increasingly being recognised, both in literature and by policy institutions that are funding related networks and capacity building projects. This paper summarises existing knowledge about the role of research in parliaments and legislatures internationally. It outlines the work that has been done to describe the different ways that research advice is organised within parliaments and the factors that shape the design and operation of such structures. The chapter has shown, through an analysis of parliamentary debates, that that research can have an important role within parliamentary and legislative bodies to support their democratic functions of scrutinising and challenging the work of government, debating the issues of the day and creating and revising laws. However, it has also shown that the use of research in such processes is not without difficulties. The use of research by policy makers can create public distrust and it is not yet known how knowledge from research sits alongside knowledge from other

sources including the media, intermediary organisations such as think tanks, and the views of different stakeholders as the public more generally. In discussing these issues, this chapter outlines a study being undertaken by POST to explore the ways that research of all types feeds into parliamentary processes. It is hoped that findings from this study will contribute to the development of a framework for future research that addresses the limitations of the existing literature and to further understanding about the ways that research influences parliamentary functions. Such a framework would encompass comparative empirical analysis of multiple parliamentary systems in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of how particular mechanisms can facilitate the use of research in parliaments under different conditions. In addition to strengthening international networks between different parliamentary and research communities committed to enhancing the effective use of research within public policy, such a framework would advance our basic understanding about how research informs decision making and provide practical suggestions for how current practices can be improved.

Acronyms:

Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology	POST
European Parliamentary Technology Assessment	EPTA
Parliaments and Civil Society in Technology Assessment	PACITA
European Union	EU
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	OECD
Technology Assessment	TA
United Kingdom	UK
Economic and Social Research Council	ESRC

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