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What do parliaments know? Advancing the study of science, knowledge and parliaments

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Democracy and knowledge: an important and urgent relationship

1. Renewed questions over mis- and dis-information in democratic societies, rise of so-called 'post-truth' politics, etc.
2. Public satisfaction in political institutions in decline, with some warning political systems at risk
3. Policy challenges increasing in scale and urgency: Covid-19, climate crisis and social and economic inequalities



Research and debates on science, knowledge and politics

- Political philosophy, sociology and philosophy literature opened up debates about different ways of knowing
- Science and Technology Studies (STS) demonstrates how science is ‘produced’ through discourses, social interests and practices in society
- Policy studies literature identifies types of research use, barriers and facilitators between worlds of policy and research, toolkits for scientists, etc.



What about parliaments?

- Informational theory of legislatures (e.g. Krehbiel, 1991) acknowledged long ago
- An arguably fragmented and disconnected literature has developed:
 - Legislative science advice and technology assessment offices (e.g. Akerlof et al., 2019; Bütschi and Almeida, 2016)
 - Institutional access to legislatures by interest groups (Cross et al., 2021) or descriptive representation (Geddes, 2018)
 - Or small-scale case studies, pilot studies, specific reviews, etc. (e.g. Crewe, 2017; Turnpenny et al., 2013)

A map showing mechanisms used by
parliaments around the world to access and
harness academic research

2,473 views

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Map of mechanisms

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Dutch MPs trial new 'gold standard' for scientific scrutiny

Parliaments routinely seek scientific advice, but a Dutch pilot goes one step further, asking academics to directly critique what the government is proposing

September 29, 2020

David Matthews

Twitter: @DavidMJourn

Academics have been brought in to directly scrutinise Dutch legislation, chiding the government for vague policy goals and aiming to offer lawmakers evidence-based alternative policies.

While lawmakers the world over routinely get advice from academics, the Dutch pilot scheme, which aims to become a "gold standard" for scientific scrutiny, goes a step further and asks researchers to directly analyse new legislation.

"What is very new here is that with this ap policymaking process," said Pieter Duisent

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Spain to establish parliamentary office of science

Nation's parliament has budgeted for a new office next year, following push from grassroots scientists' movement.

Michele Catanzaro



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The Role of Research in the UK Parliament



Dr Caroline Kenny
Research Associate, Department of Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy, UCL (UCL STEaPP) and Social Science Adviser, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST)

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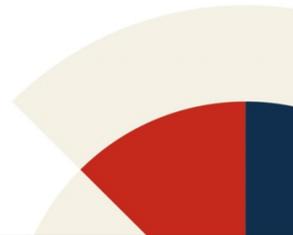
Announcement and call for contributions

February 2023

Dept. 3.2 – Research and Support in Parliamentary Matters

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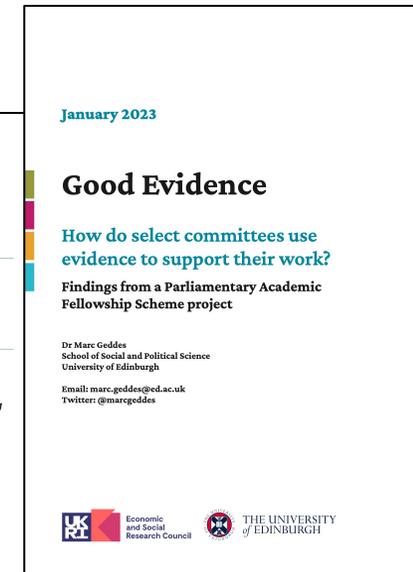
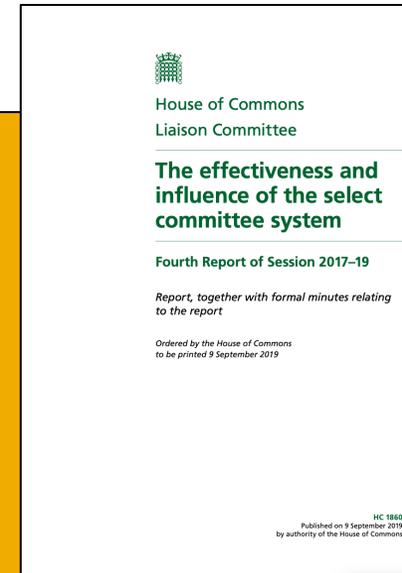


Interpreting parliaments as ‘knowledge institutions’

- Parliaments gather and **consume** knowledge: calls for information, public hearings, databases of documents, etc. which are used across the political domain
- Parliaments synthesise and **produce** knowledge: research briefings, legal decisions and texts, internal databases that affect the ‘rules of the game’
- Parliaments adjudicate and **evaluate** knowledge: parliaments validate, contest, accept or reject claims in reports, through speeches, etc.

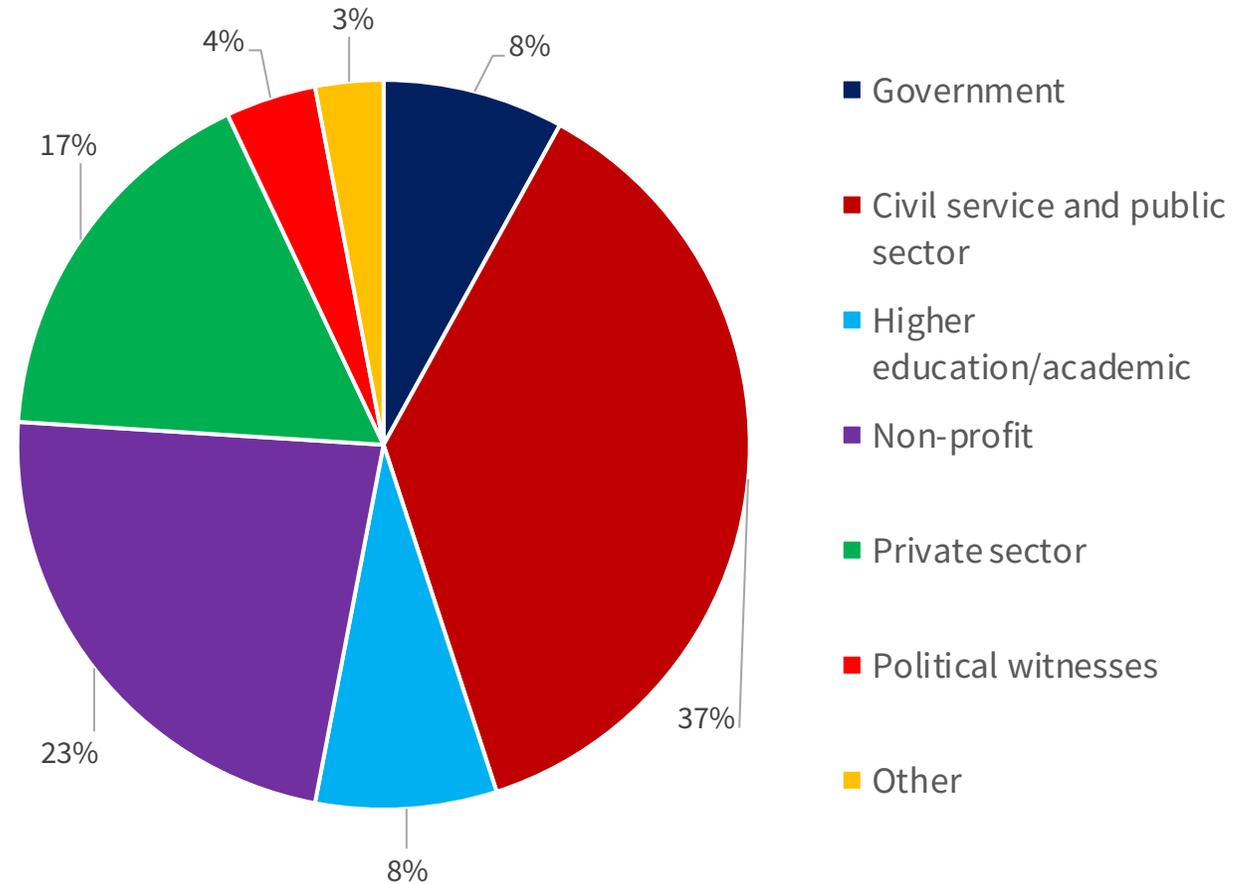
Case study: the UK Parliament

- Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology
- House of Commons Library
- House of Lords Library
- MPs, peers and their offices
- All-Party Parliamentary Groups
- Political parties
- Bill committees
- Select committees



Sources of knowledge

- Research on oral evidence for 2013-14:
 - Organisational breakdown →
 - Gender: 24% women / 76% men
 - Geography: London/South England dominate
- Going beyond the numbers: why does the knowledge base look like this? What do MPs do with this information?



Source: Geddes, 2018



From sources to ‘evidence’

- Factors that affect knowledge use
 - Who has submitted evidence? → Credibility and types of knowledge
 - Why has somebody submitted evidence? → Political and financial motivations
 - What recommendations does the evidence make? → Impact of evidence
- Evidence is bound up with process and procedure
 - Long-standing tradition for a diversity of viewpoints in committee hearings
 - Evidence is only *one* consideration of many: politics, power, justice, etc.



Changing trends, patterns and practices

- Diversifying evidence use: lived experience has grown significantly
 - Incorporated through different formats: written evidence, surveys, focus groups
 - Greater volumes pushing at the limits of what the process is designed to do?
- A growth of emphasis on diversity and inclusion
 - Long-standing tradition for political diversity (Geddes, 2021)
 - A focus on gender- and diversity-sensitive parliaments (IPU, 2011; Childs, 2016)
- Innovations in evidence-gathering: committee visits, focus groups, surveys, use of social media, etc.

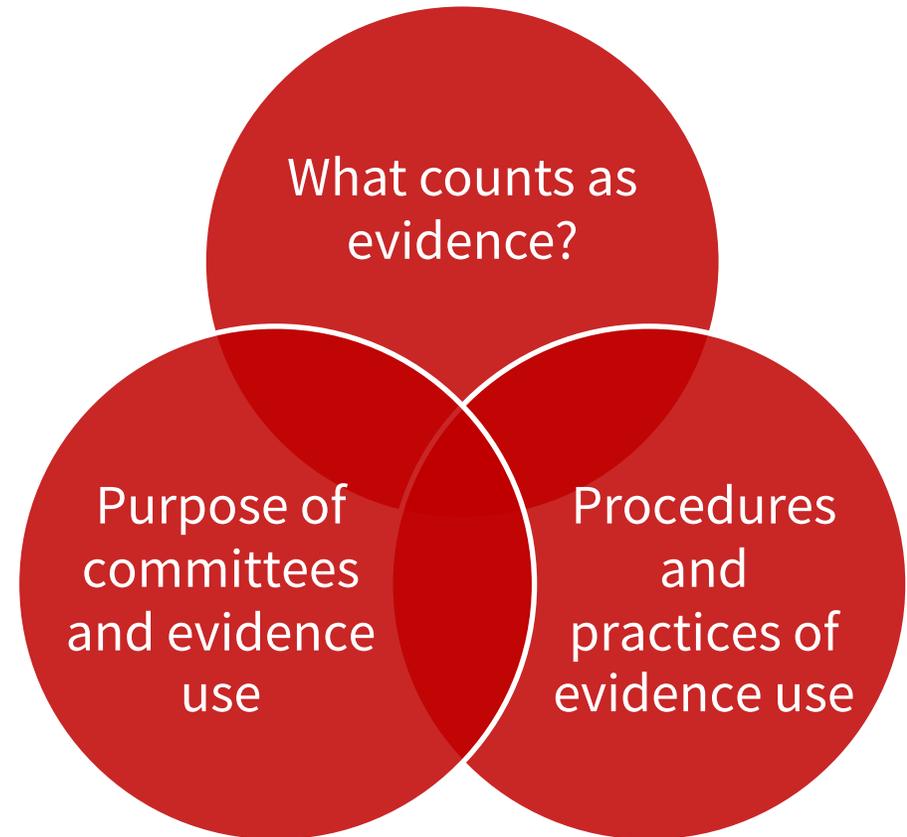


Challenges for committees

- Growth in the volumes of evidence that committees receive
- Unclear what principles underpin 'lived experience'
- Tensions in promoting diversity of evidence
- Committees are asked to fulfil more tasks without more resources
- Processes for gathering evidence has not changed
- Time pressures are intense and constant
- Some perceived lack of training around innovations and types of knowledge

Implications

- Gathering, producing and evaluating knowledge use is bound up with
 - Practices, procedures and processes within an organisation
 - Interpretations of what ‘counts’ as authoritative or credible knowledge
 - Wider parliamentary and democratic norms and principles
- Democracy entwined with knowledge – we cannot understand one without the other





Concluding questions

- What does it mean to re-interpret parliaments as ‘knowledge institutions’?
 - How do we conceptualise and analyse parliaments as knowledge institutions? How does this relate to parliaments as primarily political/democratic?
 - What impact does knowledge use have on parliamentary functions and wider democratic governance?
- What are the implications for parliaments and knowledge use?
 - What principles should underpin ‘good’ knowledge use in a democratic institution? What do we mean by ‘good’?
 - What organisational procedures should parliaments adopt to promote principles of ‘good’ knowledge use?