

MAKING PARLIAMENT SPEAK

Methods and Issues in the Analysis of Debates within Political Assemblies

International conference, 13-14 October 2010, Paris



The debates that take place within political assemblies are paradoxical in many respects. First, they represent, from a procedural point of view, a visible and public sequence of parliamentary work, in contrast to the committee work, which is usually conducted behind closed doors. Plenary sessions constitute places and moments where members of parliament perform before an audience and stage their positions. Second, most debates in plenary sessions have a specific purpose, that is to say the drafting and elaboration of legislation, culminating in the final vote on its adoption. In other words, the relationship of parliamentary discourse to decision-making is complex, since debate necessarily precedes the final vote, but is nevertheless structured by its anticipated outcome.

Although parliamentary debates occupy a central place in the process of publicizing, justifying and validating political work and norms, the socio-logic of parliamentary debates is under-researched. The public is often ignorant of what is said and done to the point that voters, journalists and even specialists are regularly surprised by amendments that somehow passed unnoticed through debate and parliamentary discussion. Jurists and specialists of public law also tend to neglect parliamentary sessions as necessary steps in the law-making process, while ascribing to the "legislature" an idealized rationality. As for political and social scientists, with few exceptions, they have neglected the study of parliaments and parliamentary life. Indeed, academic work on parliamentary debates remains scattered, fragmented and contradictory, and the core issue remains somewhat of a puzzle.

The aim of the conference is therefore to confront these different studies in order to better grasp the specificities of this moment of parliamentary work and its status within the political and legislative processes. By adopting a resolutely *pluralist and interdisciplinary* perspective that includes sociology, political science, law, history and anthropology, the conference seeks not only to identify, but also to create dialogue between the *different methodological, epistemological and theoretical approaches* that can be used to study the production of debates within political assemblies and the conditions under which these debates take place, on the basis of *empirical and original material*. There is, firstly, a methodological goal, which consists in comparing and assessing the many methods analyzing such debates. Secondly, the ambition is to articulate empirical data within broader questions: What could the analysis of political debates contribute to our understanding of the political work of parliamentary assemblies? What do MPs say in the context of parliamentary debates and what are they unable to say? What does this specific part of parliamentary life teach us in terms of content of MPs' speeches when they publicly debate: what is said and what remains unsaid? How do procedures and rules frame the debate? Under which conditions can debates free MPs from such constraints? How can one best characterize these debates, which seem to be too constrained to be deliberative, too public to be true negotiation, and too marginal to reflect real political posturing?

Three aspects deserve special attention:

- a. *Debates within political assemblies as specific moments in the law-making process and the policy orientation*

The role of parliaments and political assemblies must be examined. Debates are interpreted in contradictory ways. Many analyses stress the fact that parliaments are weak because of government dominance during the preparation of laws and because of the upstream framing (by different commissions, by former governments or even by the media) of the debates. Other analyses, foregrounding the mythical figure of the Legislature, tend to overestimate their importance. This conference seeks to address several issues: What do debates reveal about parliament's role in law-making and its role as a check on government? What do they teach us about the modalities of negotiation and the achievement of compromises on the floor? How could such studies be extended in order to deepen our understanding of debate participants and the roles they play in parliament?

- b. *Deliberation within political assemblies: theory and practice*

Although usually taken for granted, the deliberative nature of parliamentary debates should be questioned. Some scholars insist on the deliberative dimension of the parliamentary process, while others contest any idealised and normative conception of these exchanges. Elster shows that argumentation is often

developed in a strategic way. Ethnomethodology stresses the embeddedness of debates within broader networks, their orientation to external audiences, and the constraints placed on them by past and future elections. Looking at these questions, the conference seeks to address, using the debates as data, another set of issues: appropriate methodologies, the nature of empirical data, the importance of the sequence of the debates within parliamentary work, and concrete and observable ways in which debates unfold (including rituals, symbols and emotions).

c. *Norms, representations and values in parliamentary debates*

Like any type of speech, debates convey norms, representations and values. These are mainly reflected in the discursive repertoires used by MPs. In this respect, the conference seeks to tackle the following questions: the relations between MPs' expertise, political values as expressed during the session, and the political treatment of social problems; the manner in which debates make visible attempts to impose specific conceptions of society; the mechanisms that influence political positions, including partisanship, differentiation strategies, gender, etc.

We call for papers addressing one or several aspects of parliamentary debates, and especially the methods used to deal with them, their contribution and their pitfalls.

We encourage scholars of all disciplines, theories and methodologies, with the only requirement that they base their analyses on original and empirical data. Contributions from sociology, political science, linguistics, law, history and anthropology are welcome. The material can be written or audiovisual and the methods can be qualitative or quantitative. All theoretical approaches (e.g. semiotic, pragmatic, strategic, deliberative, constructionist, ethnomethodological, critical, rationalist, or socio-political) will be considered. Moreover, there is no limitation as to the countries and the historical periods in which parliamentary debates have taken place. All scholars can propose their contribution, independent of their professional status.

Working languages: English and French

One-page proposals must be submitted before March the 12th, 2010, to the following address:
faireparlerleparlement@gmail.com

Schedule:

12 March 2010: deadline for proposals

April 2010: selection of the proposals

15 September 2010: deadline for written contributions (5000 words)

13-14 October: conference in Paris

Organizing committee:

Cécile Vigour, SPIRIT, CNRS – Sciences Po Bordeaux

Olivier Rozenberg, Centre d'études européennes, Sciences Po

Claire de Galember, Institut des Sciences Sociales du Politique (ISP), CNRS – ENS Cachan

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Partner institutions: Science Po, Sciences Po Bordeaux, Ecole Normale Supérieure de Cachan, the French Association of Political Science (and the Research Committee on Parliament and Parliamentarians), the French Association of Sociology (and the Thematic Committees "Sociology of Law" and "Methods")