

Chapter 6

Researching the Elites of Power: The Case of the Parliamentarians



Xavier Coller  and Manuel Alcántara 

1 Selection of the Samples

Imagine having—more or less—identified and defined your research topic. Specifically, let's work on the assumption that a researcher wants to know how consensus is built in politics; that is, how agreements are generated among political actors in which participants decide to support—or not to oppose—the same initiative, for example, what a future law will be. And that, in this context, you want to obtain the opinion of the actors, i.e., citizens' representatives. Or, for example, the plan is to do research on assembly members' opinions or political careers.

This is a difficult audience to reach compared with other sectors of the population because they: (i) tend to have a hectic agenda and spend a lot of time traveling or in meetings with other politicians, organizations, citizens, etc.; (ii) have other people who manage their agenda, who act as gatekeepers, and seek to restrict “additional” tasks such as interviews with researchers; (iii) are often fearful that the results of the interviews will be used for purposes that are not strictly academic or leaked to the media; (iv) frequently do not understand that collaborating with academics is also a form of accountability; and (v) sometimes do not know the purpose of academia.

The study will probably require either an in-depth or a broad approach, or a combination of both. That is, one would need to talk to a small group of people but focus on a few key issues and go into (almost) all their views in-depth, or survey many people in order to draw a general picture from which to draw conclusions about the whole population. These two perspectives are called qualitative and quantitative, but

X. Coller (✉)
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Madrid, Spain
e-mail: xaviercoller@poli.uned.es

M. Alcántara
Universidad de Salamanca, Salamanca, Spain

as King et al. (1994) argue, this distinction does not imply incompatibility. In both cases, it is necessary to select the participants. The selection criteria vary naturally depending on the study's objectives.

If a qualitative study is preferred, it is imperative to carefully select who will provide information: they should not only be “key informants,” but also “key actors” in a particular policy. In other words, selection criteria are needed. For example, Collier and his team have studied the construction of consensus and conflict in politics. The question they asked themselves at the beginning of the study was: “Is any politician worth talking to about this?”, and the negative response led them to talk to whoever was most familiar with negotiating with political rivals. This is a strong example of the need to select the right criterion: choosing the right people who have direct knowledge of the phenomenon under study. For this, it is necessary to identify who has been involved in negotiations on laws, for example, and try to interview them. Recently, in different online meetings of the team—social science is usually a collective enterprise and the COVID-19 pandemic required virtuality—new considerations arose about who could contribute information of interest to the study. These considerations led to the formation of the selection criteria. Several potential participants were brainstormed. In that vein, perhaps people in positions of responsibility in parliamentary groups could be interviewed since, to paraphrase Mills (1956), they predominantly decide the direction of a vote. Since there are periods of more or less conflict, it seems necessary to select experienced parliamentarians who can also give an insight into how the ways of “doing politics” have changed. It is also possible that men and women, younger or older people, deal differently with negotiations with rivals, and their experiences can strengthen the study. And, of course, it is also important to talk to people from competing parties and representatives of different territorial chambers.

Our research team's discussions resembled a “brainstorming” session. They were guided by one key question: “which parliamentarians should we target?”, which helped to determine some basic criteria: gender, age, experience (which usually goes with age), position of political responsibility, involvement in negotiating legislation (also associated with experience and political responsibility), parties, and the chamber to which they belong. With some of these variables, we can now construct Table 6.1, which we have used in our study to select key actors and respondents on consensus-building.

The logic behind this table is that of *variability* and *sample size*. To achieve *variability*, the objective was to choose key actors to help us better understand the varying perspectives on the construction of the consensus or the conflict. To do this, it seems logical to resort to the most relevant contextual variable: the chambers. We know that there are chambers in which the generation of agreements is more frequent than in others (Collier & Jaime-Castillo, 2022). Selecting people from one or the other may provide different perspectives. A second criterion is experience in managing the negotiation of laws. One can look for the drafters of laws in particular chambers and discard those who have no parliamentary experience unless they hold an important position in the parliamentary group (e.g., spokesperson, chairperson) and it is believed that they can provide some relevant insight as a “key informant.”

Table 6.1 Sample selection

	Chambers of representation									
	More consensus				Intermediaries		Less consensus			
	Navarre		Catalonia		Andalusia		Galicia		Valencia	
	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	Woman
Party 1										
Party 2										
Party 3										
...										
...										
Party N										
TOTAL	50 (5)		135 (14)		109 (11)		75 (8)		99 (10)	

Note: “Total” means number of seats in each chamber; in brackets is the number of final interviewees in each chamber

Additionally, the sex of the individual may be key not only because of the different ways in which negotiations may be handled (and this is a key explanatory variable) but also because it adds variability and strengthens the research. Finally, given that ideology or being part of the government or the opposition may be key, the party to which the Members of Parliament—hereafter MP—represents should be part of the selection criteria, and be transversal to all of them.

The result of the team’s discussions was Table 6.1 in which, in each cell, the names of specific people are written so that substitutions can be made if necessary. This comprised our “purposive sample.” These people are selected because they are supposed to have something to say, as they are familiar with the phenomenon we want to study: be it consensus-building, candidate selection, conflict management, socialization in parliament, psychological profile, political careers, or ideological inclination.

Let us now turn to the way in which we face a classic problem of qualitative research: the scope or *number of people to interview*; that is, the size of the *N*. Just as in random sampling, the *N* is defined by the size of the population and, from it, we make generalizations that rely on randomness and margin of error; in qualitative studies the approach is usually different. Purposive samples are used to know the different views, explanations, and interpretations interviewees have about a particular phenomenon and its correlates. But even in those circumstances, we need to have an idea about how many people we need to interview. This was our problem at the start of the consensus-building research, which led to the following solution. Since we knew the population of representatives, we followed a rule of thumb by establishing a percentage and making sure that in all the above table’s cells, there was a name written. If the number of regional parliamentarians in Spain is 1212, for example, an achievable proportion might be 5% or 10% (about 61 or 121 parliamentarians). If we had wanted to study the four extreme cases in the table, then we might have tentatively decided on 10% for each chamber, and would therefore interview a total of 48 MPs. This is not a strict rule, but we have sought to apply it with

flexibility and common sense, since the aim is to ensure some variability, and this requires a certain amplitude.

Sample surveys of parliamentarians are becoming increasingly common and pose special problems. The people to whom the questionnaire is administered are usually chosen at random to ensure the sample's reliability and the subsequent generalizability of the results to the population. This is the case of the study known by the acronym PELA (Parliamentary Elites in Latin America), which has been carried out since 1994 by a research team at the University of Salamanca (Spain), led by Manuel Alcántara and linked to the Political Science department at the Ibero-American Institute (García et al., 2013; Rivas Pérez & Bohigues, 2019; Rivas Pérez et al., 2020; Barragán et al., 2020).¹ The study is based on face-to-face interviews with representative samples of members of the legislature from 18 countries. The sampling criterion predominantly takes into account the partisan composition of the particular Congress, although it also considers gender differences and, later, territorial representation. Given the different chamber sizes in the Latin American countries covered by the PELA study, the sample ranges from 90% (Costa Rica) to 25% (Mexico) of the chamber's composition. On the other hand, in countries whose legislature is bicameral—that is, in half of the countries studied—it was decided from the outset to focus the study exclusively on the lower house (Congress of Deputies), whose size is always larger than that of the upper house (Senate).

One of the most recurrent problems is that although the sample is initially random, the refusal of some parliamentarians to respond leads to substitutions in the sample and that, in relatively small populations, there comes a time when almost the entire population is included. Randomness is undermined here and also, therefore, the generalizability of the results. It may also happen that the research team decides to take the entire population as the target group in order to obtain a more or less acceptable response rate. In this case, there is no randomization and the results of the study may be affected by self-selection bias or nonresponse. Self-selection and nonresponse both bias external validity and increase generalization error (Mateos & Corral, 2022). In both cases, one solution we have applied is sample calibration (Collier & Sánchez-Ferrer, 2021, p. 7). This requires complete population information on basic variables (e.g., gender, party, and territory of choice) in order to obtain unbiased estimators that facilitate the generalization of results.

2 Access to the Field

Access to parliamentarians poses fewer problems than access to, for example, intelligence services, members of terrorist organizations, or other groups in complex or clandestine situations. However, they do pose challenges that to overcome with some success by applying various solutions and anticipating problems given the

¹ See <https://oir.org.es/pela/>

context in which these MPs operate (see previous section). These difficulties can result in a refusal to participate, which can jeopardize the success of the research. Some of these problems can be anticipated at the access phase and mitigated by letters of introduction sent to parliamentarians. The goal of each researcher is to gain access and convince the representative to participate in the study. To this end, the approach should be adapted to the cultural environment of the country in which we are working (e.g., in the use of language, norms of courtesy...) while maintaining broad common features.

Access to representatives is made by means of initial contact with a letter to two types of key actors. On the one hand, to the leaders of the institution (President of the Chamber, Parliament Bureau members). On the other, to the leaders of the parliamentary groups (spokespersons, general secretaries). This letter informs them about the study and asks for their support in encouraging representatives to participate. A general template can be found in Box 6.1. In our experience, it is desirable that institutional and parliamentary group leaders are informed about the planned study. It is a sign of deference to them which, at the very least, can help to prevent vetoes due to lack of knowledge and can help gain access to parliamentarians in their groups.

The credentials with which we present ourselves to the institution are important. Therefore, we seek the endorsement of a relevant personality, whether academic or, as in some of our studies, political. But it is important not to mix political endorsements; that is, one political figure should be used to support the researcher among the representatives of party X, but not for party Y. For instance, in one of our surveys (Coller, 2016, 2018), Professor Juan J. Linz—one of the most prestigious social scientists of the last century, Yale University professor and Prince of Asturias award for social sciences in 1987—endorsed the research and sent a letter to all parliamentary leaders, which defused possible reluctance and opened the doors of some parliamentary groups. This was the first survey in Spain of parliamentarians from the 19 chambers of representation (Congress, Senate, and 17 regional chambers) and some reluctance to participate was foreseen. That project also taught us that there are two types of gatekeepers: politicians and staff. The *politician* can be the parliamentary leader or political “boss” of many MPs. The *staff* forms the secretariat of the group; they are the administrative apparatus that manages the day-to-day running of the parliamentary group. Their influence is discussed below.

Once the parliamentary leaders have been contacted, it is time to gain access to each of the people chosen to be interviewed. Given that we are dealing with political representatives, there is nothing better than a formal presentation in the form of a personalized letter sent by post. In Boxes 6.1 and 6.2 we propose two models that we have used with some success. Although the exchange of messages by email is common, given that a political representative may receive many messages every day, for the first introduction it is appropriate for the parliamentarian to receive a formal letter. Sometimes it may also be considered necessary to make a call to the recipients of this letter in order to expand on the explanations or to answer questions. Our experience shows how an explanatory letter requesting cooperation can open many doors.

Box 6.1: Model A: Cover Letter

I am writing to you to ask for your collaboration and help. We are a team of academics who are conducting the third survey of parliamentarians in Spain to learn about their perceptions on a variety of issues, focusing on the construction of consensus and political conflict. This study is sponsored with competitive funds by the Ministry of Science and Innovation under the code PID2019-108667GB-I00. More information is available at <https://consenso.uned.es/>.

Our study is part of the international *Comparative Candidates Survey* project, of which I am the coordinator in Spain, and in which academics from more than 30 countries carry out the same survey of their parliamentary representatives. This is an international programme of great prestige and impact, which has made it possible to advance our knowledge of the political representatives of the world's leading democracies.

The team carrying out this work comprises professors from UNED, the University of Burgos, Pablo de Olavide University and the Autonomous University of Madrid. We are backed by a long and solid academic track record. Perhaps you have heard about our research or we have interviewed you at some point. You can find some of our work on our website. I am giving you these references so that you will understand that I am asking for your help in a reputable academic project of international relevance.

Our study is based on a survey of parliamentarians from the 19 chambers of representation in Spain. I would be very grateful if you could help us by answering the questionnaire, which you can access via the QR code below or on the website <https://consenso.uned.es/encuesta/>. It takes about 30 minutes to answer. The questions require no prior preparation. The answers are confidential and anonymous so that the person is not identified and their individual answers are not made public. The analysis of the data is always done on an aggregate basis and never identifies individuals, as you can see in our publications on the aforementioned website.

I would be grateful if you could answer the questionnaire so that the multiplicity of political voices in Spain is reflected in this international study. Thank you very much for your participation in this research to better understand the functioning of our democracy.

Should you have any questions, please contact us by phone or by email at your earliest convenience.

Box 6.2: Model B: Cover Letter

Dear Assembly Member and President of the Assembly,

The new situation in Latin America suggests that the progress of politics, in terms of its quality, is not possible if it is not accompanied by an improvement in the quality of the political class. Within the political class, those engaged in legislative work are a substantive part of it. They play an important role because of their place in the political system, as party members, as well as because of their positioning in day-to-day legislative and oversight issues. However, despite the importance of this group, there are few empirically based studies.

In this context, the present research, for which we ask for your invaluable collaboration, aims to analyze the opinions, attitudes and values of members of this assembly, continuing a line of action initiated 25 years ago by the University of Salamanca <https://oir.org.es/pela/>. Carrying out a new wave of interviews in your country will contribute to the study of Costa Rican Assembly members in the context of the socio-political change that the country is undergoing.

Since you have the ideal characteristics to be included in the representative sample, we would like to ask you to kindly lend us your time to conduct an interview with Dr. XXXX (email), who will be assisted by the research associate Dr. YYYYY (mobile phone). You will be given a personalized questionnaire, which you will be assisted to complete. The results of the questionnaire will be employed in a general publication at national and Latin American level, and the anonymity of your answers is fully guaranteed.

We thank you on behalf of ourselves and the entire research team for your invaluable collaboration, while reiterating the confidentiality of this study. We would also like to take this opportunity to inform you that we remain at your entire disposal for any questions you may have about this project or for any other reason you may consider appropriate.

In addition to institutional leaders and parliamentarians, one may encounter staff gatekeepers. These are people who are protective of the MP's agenda, and experience shows that it is highly desirable to cultivate a good relationship with them because, as has happened to us, whether or not one conducts interviews will ultimately depend on their understanding of the study and their willingness to make the researcher's life easier. It has always (or almost always) worked well for us to have a friendly conversation, to explain how important it is to participate in the study, or to convey the idea that their help is necessary to move forward.

It is worth taking a look at the letters of introduction in Boxes 6.1 and 6.2. Other similar to these have been used in our research in order to eliminate or defuse problems. They contain some of the elements mentioned above as ways to avoid potential pitfalls. Note that in order to generate favorable opinions and to show full transparency to avoid suspicion, the objective of the study is stated, and further

information is provided on a reference website. To reinforce confidence in the study, we provide information about the credibility of the research group by highlighting the team's experience and institutional endorsement. To convince the representative of the importance of their collaboration, the relevance of the study is highlighted, emphasizing its international dimension, and reasons are given for carrying out the survey. In order to obtain the parliamentarian's collaboration, ease of response, the duration of the survey and, above all, the confidentiality, and anonymity of the survey are emphasized. So as to ensure efficient communication, a contact form is provided.

On the other hand, the contacted MP or their staff may want to verify the nature of the study or the authority of the research team. It is important that study participants have all the information available to them and can clarify any doubts they may have. This also helps to convey the idea that we are committed to transparency. Therefore, based on our experience, we suggest the following:

- (i) Create a project website that provides all available information, including objectives, methodology, team members, credentials, non-partisan endorsements that reinforce the team's authority, the kind of results you are looking for, etc. This website will also serve as a letter of introduction, can be used as a reference in your contacts with parliamentarians, and will enable more efficient communications. Here are a couple of examples: <https://oir.org.es/pela/> and <https://consenso.uned.es/>
- (ii) Create a professional email address hosted by your institution so that you can be contacted whenever needed. For example, we use proyecto.consenso@upo.es (Universidad Pablo de Olavide) or elites@usal.es (Universidad de Salamanca).
- (iii) Clearly show the institutions providing financial support for the study. This support is often interpreted as an endorsement of the research.
- (iv) List the research team's scientific publications on the subject.

Another potential risk to representatives' participation is that the MP may believe that his or her views will be made public. This is a typical problem that can arise from mistrust or ignorance about academic work. The effect is that the person decides not to participate in the study. We have found two ways to address this problem. Firstly, there are two ways of proving that anonymity is guaranteed. On the one hand, the person can be referred to our previous studies in which there is no personal identification of the information or opinions expressed in a questionnaire or interview. For this purpose, it has been useful for us to have a project website on which to locate the references of these studies. On the other hand, this guarantee of anonymity can be emphasized in the first contact with the potential interviewee, and also with the help of an academic endorsement. Secondly, a confidentiality agreement can be drawn, signed by each member of the research team, in which they

undertake not to disclose any de-anonymized content of the interviews or questionnaires, nor to individually identify the opinions expressed by the interviewees.²

In our experience, the credibility of the team, the international relevance of the study, and the guarantee of anonymity have been the three key elements in MPs agreeing to collaborate in the study.

3 Interviewing Politicians

Fieldwork is the most stimulating period of any study. This is when team members come into contact with their subjects and there is uncertainty about the success of the research. In this environment, one can observe the gestures, the intonations, listen directly to the arguments, and perhaps take notes of reflections during the questionnaire (if not using a tablet). This method boosts the representative's confidence in the process. The trade-off is that it is much more costly in terms of money, human resources, and personal energy. In the first survey of parliamentarians in Spain (Coller et al., 2016, 2018), the survey was carried out face-to-face, thanks to a large budget and large team. Interviews were conducted in the 19 chambers of representation spread throughout the country (Congress, Senate and 17 regional chambers). Nevertheless, in subsequent waves, a mixed system was used: interviews were conducted online, by post and in person.³

In the PELA study, interviews are conducted within the first quarter following the start of the parliamentary term by two members of the research team who are usually *non-nationals* of that country. This foreign condition has sometimes posed problems in that the interviewers have sometimes been seen as agents or spies for the government or the opposition. But it has also brought advantages—the dress code requirements for accessing the buildings of the House of Representatives were usually relaxed for foreigners. Previously, MPs have been contacted by letter and a visit made to their offices to establish direct contact with support staff in order to set up the interview and fix the date(s). Given the occurrence of public holidays or blocked dates for parliamentary activity, it is advisable to check that these do not exist when scheduling fieldwork.

Once the appointments have been planned, it is useful to have a series of questions ready, the answers to which will help the researcher to better understand—and explain—the phenomenon under study. In thinking about the questions to pose, there are three contextual aspects on which we have focused in our work. First, for the reasons noted above, we need to consider the limited time to ask questions. Second, it is unlikely that we would be able to contact the same person again to ask questions we have missed. Third, we cannot waste our interviewees' time, as this

²An example of a confidentiality agreement in Spanish can be found at this website (consulted November 2022): <https://consenso.uned.es/opinion-y-percepciones-de-los-protagonistas/>

³See Roberts and Vandenplas (2017) for the errors and benefits of mixing methods, and Tourangeau (2017) for the use of mixing methods in survey research.

may damage our reputation and make further studies difficult, or even deter other MPs who have not yet been interviewed. These three factors lead us to prepare interview scripts or questionnaires that are short, concise, clear, unambiguous, and allow us to obtain the information necessary for our work.

For interview scripts, it is essential to formulate open questions so that the interviewee can elaborate on them in their interview. However, when dealing with politicians, who are experts in the art of speaking, our experience is that they tend to elaborate. As time is limited, experience dictates that questions should be specific and directed to the topic of interest. For example, asking “How do you explain consensus in politics?” is less appropriate than anticipating what elements might explain consensus and asking about them, such as “How do you think the national political climate affects the ability of rivals to reach agreements in regional parliaments?” Notice how questions that point to the causal relationship between the dependent variable (agreements, consensus) and an independent variable (national political climate) are asked. No generic questions are asked. Otherwise, what happened to one of us could also happen to you: despite to what we understood was quite a closed questionnaire, the verbosity of the interviewed parliamentarian combined with researchers’ difficulties in handling these situations led to a four-hours long interview! On other occasions, the long duration was due to the parliamentarian commenting on—or attempting to correct—questions, which he or she may find to be poorly formulated, or on which he or she has an opinion. For example, there are parliamentarians who on the ideological scale (1–10, where 1 is extreme left and 10 is extreme right) have questioned the numbering (“why is it that being left-wing is worth 1, and being right-wing is worth 10?”) or the nature of the scale itself, proposing alternatives such as “don’t you have a scale of fascism, 1—a little fascist, 10—very fascist?”. Naturally, it is explained to them that these scales are internationally used conventions; but these interventions increase the length of the interview. Nevertheless, there are interviews that are completed in 20 min because of the respondent’s speed of response.

Parliamentary surveys usually offer closed-ended questions, although there are often some open-ended questions. Vis and Stolwijk (2021) review some of the most relevant surveys and we recommend their work so that you can access the questionnaires from there, as well as the Comparative Candidates Survey.⁴ One of the most consolidated parliamentary surveys is that carried out in the PELA project. The PELA questionnaire is structured on the basis of questions that are mostly closed-ended, which facilitates coding for better comparative data handling.

There is one aspect of information gathering with difficult-to-access political actors that is worth noting: one of the most important decisions is to reinforce the anonymous nature of the information collected. If the researcher conducts a semi-structured interview (whether face-to-face, by telephone, or over the Internet), it is advisable to record the conversation and then transcribe it. Before recording it, you should ensure anonymity, indicate that the interviewee is assigned a code whose

⁴<https://www.comparativecandidates.org/documents>

correspondence with the name is known only to the research team (or the principal investigator) and, especially, obtain their approval to be able to record the interview.⁵ To introduce the use of tape recordings and the guarantee of anonymity in a natural way, an introduction to the interview can be read before starting to ask questions, such as the one reproduced in Box 6.3.

Box 6.3: Example of an Introduction to the Semi-structured Interview

Thank you very much for agreeing to collaborate with our study on the construction of consensus and conflict in Andalusian politics. As you have been informed, this is an open and anonymous interview. This means that your name will never appear in our analysis linked to any statement. Each interviewee has a code. Yours is XXX00000. In order to facilitate our work, please agree to an audio recording of the interview. For information purposes, if you wish, we can send you a transcript of the interview when we have it ready.

[Start recording after agreement has been obtained]

Thank you very much for voluntarily agreeing to be interviewed and giving your consent to record this conversation. As you know, we are trying to find out the views of parliamentarians on how consensus is generated in the discussion of laws. I am not going to ask you about specific individuals, nor do I want you to identify anyone in this conversation. Nothing you say will be attributed to you personally, but to the code XXX00000, and will remain so in our files. The correspondence between passwords and names is only held by the study's director. We have a limited amount of time, but if were necessary to stop the conversation, we will contact you again for resuming it.

If the participant does not give consent to be audio-recorded, there is no other choice but to recur to the traditional method of using a notebook, and taking hand-notes. If there are two people doing the interview—this could be facilitated in online interviews—, this should not be too much of a problem, but if the researcher is alone, as has happened to some of us, it can be challenging to juggle taking notes of the answers. We recommend to use the question numbers, and employ keywords, abbreviations, and relationship arrows; whatever it takes to help you recall the interview. Immediately after the interview, it is necessary to sit down in front of the notes and reconstruct as much of the conversation as possible. Again, the keywords, abbreviations, and graphics used will help the researcher to evoke the conversation as faithfully as possible.

The collection of information through questionnaires can be more varied. We have conducted surveys in person, by telephone, or remotely, either by post or through Internet platforms. The latter is quite common, although a face-to-face

⁵See Coller and Ramírez de Luis (2019) or Jiménez et al. (2018) for two studies based on semi-structured interviews to MPs.

survey is usually the most effective with parliamentarians.⁶ In PELA, for example, surveys are carried out in person, but instead of going to the interview with a paper questionnaire (which always requires the data to be entered into a computer program for processing thus augmenting the probability of making mistakes), tablets are used to write down the answers, which go directly to the data processing program. In any case, it is also useful to reinforce the guarantee of anonymity and the importance of consent when introducing the questionnaire (see Boxes 6.4 and 6.5).

Box 6.4: Sample Questionnaire Introduction (Online)

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this third academic survey of parliamentarians in Spain. As has been mentioned by mail, the survey is part of an international study called ‘Comparative Candidates Survey’. You can find more information on the survey website.

The survey deals with different aspects of the political reality in Spain. We thank you in advance for your candor. Any response to the questionnaire is treated as anonymous and no personal identification of your answers is ever made. The statistical treatment of the data is always aggregated. It is very important that this international survey reflects the different political voices in Spain.

You are going to fill in an anonymous survey which requires some attention. It usually takes just under 30 min to answer. Please, always use the same device to answer. We recommend using a computer (you can increase the size of the letters by pressing the ‘control’ and ‘+’ keys at the same time), but you can either use a tablet or a mobile phone. We also recommend taking the survey without interruptions.

If you have any suggestions, you can contact us when finishing the questionnaire.

Informed consent: If you feel that all your doubts have been clarified and you wish to participate in this study, click on the box to give your consent to answer the survey and then click ‘next’.

I have read the information about this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary, so I can leave the survey at any time, and I can leave any question unanswered. I am 18 years of age or older and give my consent to participate in the proposed study.

I do not consent to participate in this study.

Box 6.5: Example of an Introduction to a Questionnaire (Face-to-Face)

Good morning/afternoon. The Iberoamerican Institute of the University of Salamanca, Spain, is conducting a survey among members of the assembly to learn about their opinion on various issues related to their political and legislative activity. We would therefore like to thank you in advance for your cooperation. You have been selected arbitrarily using random methods. We guarantee the absolute anonymity and secrecy of your answers in strict compliance with the laws on statistical secrecy and personal data protection. Once the information has been recorded anonymously, the individual questionnaires will be destroyed immediately.

⁶See Freire et al. (2020) for an analysis of the pro and cons of different ways of managing questionnaires.

Although this introduction in the interview scripts and questionnaires helps to focus the interviewee, it is also important to adopt a script and questionnaire structure that provides a good balance between efficiency in time management and obtaining useful information for the study. For this reason, the scripts and questionnaires we have used in our work have a structure similar to this:

1. Introduction.
2. One or two general and introductory ice-breaker questions.
3. Clear and specific questions, with a simple grammatical structure and neutral in terms of values (not introducing bias). Questions should preferably be organized into themes or blocks and be concise.
4. In one of our surveys, it was helpful to ask at the end about their satisfaction with the questionnaire. This gave us an idea that we were on the right track—more than 85% satisfaction and dissatisfaction concentrated at the ideological extremes—and also served as a hook to convince other parliamentarians.
5. Farewell. Acknowledge its participation, indicate the participants when the aggregated results will be available, and leave the door open for future contacts.

These preparatory aspects should culminate in successful fieldwork, which is when the information required is collected. It is also to note that during the interviews, which usually take place in the chambers themselves, it is common for the assembly member's advisors to be present. In our experience, in approximately one-third of cases, the advisor intervenes occasionally when the deputy has a doubt. Interviews that are conducted face-to-face should not be left to be completed without the interviewer being present. This is an important aspect because, otherwise, the results of the research can be biased as there is no guarantee that it is the representative and not his or her technical staff/advisors who are responding to the questionnaire. However, in the case of Spain, where representatives do not usually have many advisors, the experience is somewhat different.

In any case, surveying parliamentarians can be frustrating because of the nonresponse after all the efforts made to obtain their cooperation. We do not believe that this frustration generates animosity toward some MPs or their parties, although it is true that anticipating the nonresponse of MPs from some groups, if it finally occurs, one has the feeling of a self-fulfilling prophecy and tends to think "I thought so." One way to deal with this uncertainty is to try to ensure that sufficient information is collected to proceed with the analysis. To this end, in our works we have followed a strategy of anticipating problems in the design, access, and contact phases. However, during the fieldwork, it is necessary to get the interviewee to reflect on the issues we propose or to respond to the questions in the questionnaire. Two of the problems we have identified in the fieldwork we have carried out are that MPs may have little interest in participating in the study and, on the other hand, give little or no response.

Lack of interest in participating in the study is a problem that has led us to reflect that it is common among parliamentarians who often fail to see the short (or long) term usefulness of studies that put their work in the spotlight. Nor do they often understand that participating in these academic studies is an anonymous form of

accountability to the public. The effect can be *low participation*, reducing the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that will not be reflected in the results of the study. To reduce the impact of this problem, we have pursued several lines of action.

- (i) Illustrate the relevance of the study by pointing out that this research contributes to a better understanding of reality by facilitating a collective reflection of our world or, in the case of parliamentarians, of representative democracies. This argument is probably the least effective, given that many politicians lack knowledge about what is done in academia.
- (ii) Show the relevance of the study for the actors (parties, institutions) by suggesting that the results of the research can be beneficial to them, depending on the topic under study. For example, one can emphasize the better functioning of institutions, an enhancement in the quality of democracy, improvements in the selection of candidates, etc.
- (iii) Show the importance of the study in the political and social context in which it takes place. Sometimes it is useful to define the scenario in which the study occurs (for example, the existence of a political conflict, the negative perception of politics and its actors, the discrediting of institutions, etc.) to emphasize that a greater understanding of reality can help to provide solutions or, at least, a better knowledge of it, which is the first step toward finding solutions.
- (iv) Obtain the endorsement of a prestigious, reputable academic, who is widely recognized or, perhaps additionally, the backing of a political leader whose endorsement will only be valid for his or her colleagues.
- (v) To raise the visibility of the institution hosting the study, in our cases, they are our respective universities. For many MPs interviewed in the framework of PELA, the University of Salamanca was not only a prestigious institution, but also a university where they aspired to study a postgraduate degree. This explains why, on several occasions, MPs took pictures with the interviewers and posted them on social networks. On the other hand, some Spanish MPs have studied at UNED and have therefore shown a greater willingness to collaborate than others.

The lack of response or nonresponse sometimes hides not disinterest, but forgetfulness. It is not uncommon for parliamentarians to tell us that they started to implement the survey but did not finish it and then forgot, or that they intended to make an appointment for an interview but then forgot to do it. It is understandable that with busy schedules and multiple foci of attention, our subjects forget to respond to the questionnaire or to give us an appointment for an interview. In these circumstances, we believe that the following actions have worked well:

- (i) Send reminders by email inviting them to participate again and gently reminding them of the study's relevant aspects already included in the contact letter. Sometimes it is useful to set a deadline for participation in the study. We have found it useful to use "level of satisfaction" with the questionnaire (see previous section). As the level of satisfaction was over 85%, we were able to use

these data to launch it on social media, and mention it in reminders, to encourage other parliamentarians to respond.

- (ii) Make substitutions for non-respondents. This usually works when we are talking about purposive samples or random samples, but does not work when we are targeting the population as a whole, as no substitution is possible.
- (iii) Contacting representatives who have asked us for results by leaving a contact email and asking them to encourage other colleagues in their seats to respond. This has worked for us, and has slightly increased the response rate.
- (iv) Relying on parliamentary advisors or technical services, who often have a professional sensitiveness for the relevance of the work conducted from the academia. They can be asked, for example, to remind MPs to respond to the survey. But to do this you need to have previously developed a good relationship with these gatekeepers, which is highly recommended for the success of your research.

4 Research Ethics

According to our experience, there are two main sources in research ethics. On the one hand, there are regulations or ethical codes of professional associations that oblige researchers to follow certain channels (for example, the recommendations of the European Commission (2018) or the code of ethics of the American Sociological Association (1999)). On the other hand, there are the researchers' personal commitments to open science, anonymity, confidentiality, transparency, and feedback to study participants. Over time, we have come to realize in our work how important these beliefs are, both for integrating science into society and for engaging parliamentarians. In this context, we have observed a paradigm shift from that social scientist who observes without much accountability, to the social scientist who is aware that s/he is conducting research with taxpayers' money, who takes transparency and accountability to society as an obligation, and who intends to transmit and disseminate the results of his/her work.

Applying research ethics to the studies on parliamentarians has led us to make it a rule of conduct to provide full information to study participants and to maintain a transparent attitude. To this end, the most effective instrument we have developed are the websites of our research projects or institutes, where potential participants can obtain complete information on the research design and the progress of the studies. In our communications with MPs, we always include a link to this website.

Furthermore, for both conviction and more pragmatic reasons, we also believe that ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, as well as demonstrating that we have met these objectives in the past, is a rule that guides our studies. For example, these can include letters of recommendation that support these two principles (anonymity and confidentiality), websites that highlight the confidentiality commitments of team members, publications (also on the web) that show that the processing of information never identifies anyone individually, and publicly available databases

that do not contain anything that could identify respondents.⁷ According to some parliamentarians, this information, in combination with some other details such as the reputation of the research team, has given them the confidence to collaborate in the study.

Our teams follow the rule of accountability both to society and to those persons who participate in the study. We fulfill the former through something that is increasingly requested by academics: academic publications such as articles, books, and chapters of books, but also informative publications in the press, blogs, or via participation in television and radio programs. Accountability to MPs participating in the study has a double dimension. The latter has a double dimension. On the one hand, we offer participants the opportunity to see the results of the survey first-hand: they are sent a report of aggregated results. This, we believe, also helps to consolidate the credibility of the team and that of its individual members, as it fulfills a number of commitments made. On the other hand, in those cases where an agreement is reached with the leaders of the chamber, sessions are organized for the presentation of the data and discussion with assembly members and advisors in the months following the work. These types of actions support principles that are at the core of ethics in research: open science, anonymity, confidentiality, transparency, and ongoing contact with the study participants.

Nowadays, many universities have their own ethics committees. Like everything else in life, sometimes they work quickly and meet the needs of the researcher, sometimes less so. The conventional thing to do in these cases is to present to the committee the research question and methods and highlight how it may affect the research subjects. For example, if one does a survey, it should be explained how informed consent would be obtained. It is also normal that the ethics committee will give the go-ahead or suggest some modifications (or prevent the researcher from carrying out the project, but we do not know of any cases). A problem can arise when the committee in question does not respond, or takes too long to respond because this poses a dilemma for the researcher: should one delay the research? In our case, and we imagine that all other similar cases do the same, we decided to go ahead knowing that we complied with the rules governing research ethics. In surveys, we asked for oral recorded consent after informing the representative. The website and the introductory mailings are important for this. In all cases, consent was given (if this did occur, the survey would not go ahead). In the in-depth interviews, recording of the interview was requested and the MP was asked to confirm that they gave consent and that they were explained the details of the research. In one of our studies, an MP refused to be recorded, but a paper form was available to sign the consent form, and the interviewer took notes during the interview and then completed them later with what he or she remembered from the interview.

⁷PELA's databases are placed at <https://oir.org.es/pela/> one year after finishing the fieldwork. They are fully available to the scientific community. Data from the surveys to Spanish MPs (anonymized databases) are deposited at the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (www.cis.es) where they are openly available. More information can be found at <https://zenodo.org/communities/consenso/?page=1&size=20>

When dealing with people in positions of power, we can expect attempts to control or influence the research results, especially when the aggregate results will be made public. For example, party leaders may have an interest in ensuring that their parliamentarians do not appear too radical or too moderate, and may therefore try to exert some kind of influence or pressure to adjust the results to their wishes. At the same time, when dealing with sensitive populations, the university or research center hosting the research team may have an interest in not upsetting—or, conversely, on upsetting—people on whose decisions their future, budget allocation, growth, etc. may depend. To our knowledge, we have never faced this kind of problem nor felt any kind of pressure, either at the beginning of our careers—when we were most vulnerable to such attempts—or afterwards. Anyway, we do not think that the pressure would have worked either...

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

In short, in our experience, research with parliamentarians requires a number of steps to ensure that the work is successful. We have elaborated on the steps that we have followed in our work to deal with anticipated or experienced problems.

- (i) Be clear about the research topic and how to approach it.
- (ii) Develop a set of questions to help get the required information.
- (iii) Select the people to contact to obtain information. Sample building may follow different criteria, but it is useful to have clear criteria in place.
- (iv) Contact is a key step, as this is where the credentials of the research team are presented, the nature of the study is explained, guarantees of anonymity are given, and participation in the study is requested. A letter should be sent by post, accompanied by a follow-up email. The ultimate goal is to get the cooperation of the person you are contacting. A letter of support or endorsement from a prestigious academic or political leader (specifically aimed at their colleagues) is never a bad idea.
- (v) Sending emails or making phone calls to reinforce the letter of introduction and set a date for the interview. This practice is more common in qualitative studies with generally lesser-motivated sample groups.
- (vi) In sample studies, it is useful to previously introduce the study to people with institutional weight—e.g., Parliamentary Speakers, spokespersons, political leaders, etc. —in order to ask for their help in conducting the study, and to encourage them to help motivate their colleagues to participate.
- (vii) Schedule interviews and set a time frame for fieldwork.
- (viii) In sample surveys, it is useful to send reminders to complete the questionnaire. It is common for parliamentarians to postpone this task and then forget.
- (ix) Obtain the consent of the interviewee and keep a record of it.

As in all things, once the steps have been defined, a number of elements need to be in place in order to successfully complete the study. Based on our experience, these include:

- (i) The project website. The aim is to refer interested people to a web page that includes an account of the team conducting the research, the way in which the study is carried out (the methodology), the objectives, the sponsoring bodies, the publications resulting from the research project, news about the study in the media, the commitment to anonymity and research ethics, commitment to confidentiality, etc. The aim of this website is to serve as a letter of introduction and to help resolve doubts and encourage participation in the study. Although there are many, two examples are: <https://oir.org.es/pela/> and <https://consenso.uned.es/>
- (ii) An institutional e-mail address (not personal) to establish contact with the research team.
- (iii) A confidentiality undertaking, signed by the research team.
- (iv) In the case of qualitative studies, a list to identify each person interviewed.
- (v) A standard letter of introduction that is usually tailored according to the sex of the person, party, or any other relevant characteristic.
- (vi) Sample reminder emails in the case of sample surveys.
- (vii) Interview script and/or questionnaire. In both cases, the purpose and nature of the survey should be explained to the respondent.
- (viii) Timetable shared by the whole research team to keep in mind the phases of the study and each person's responsibilities.

Acknowledgements This chapter has been possible thanks to participation in the project 'El conflicto en la política española (1980–2018). El nuevo escenario de Andalucía en perspectiva comparada' (P18-RT-5234), sponsored by the Junta de Andalucía, and the project 'La construcción social del consenso en entornos políticos multipartidistas' (PID2019-108667GB-I00), sponsored by the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación.

References

- Barragán, M., Rivas Pérez, C., & Rivas Otero, J. M. (2020). PELA-USAL: A methodological tool for the study of elites. In M. Alcántara, M. García Montero, & C. Rivas Pérez (Eds.), *Politics and political elites in Latin America* (pp. 3–26). Springer.
- Coller, X., & Jaime-Castillo, A. (2022). "Mucho ruido y muchas nueces... en la política autonómica", *Agenda Pública*, 17 January 2022, accessed November 2022. <https://agenda-publica.elpais.com/noticia/17619/mucho-ruido-muchas-nueces-politica-autonomica>
- Coller, X., & Sánchez-Ferrer, L. (Eds.). (2021). *Politicians in hard times. South European MPs facing citizens after the great recession*. Palgrave.
- Coller, X., Jaime, A., & Mota, F. (Eds.). (2018). *Political power in Spain: The Multiple Divides between Politicians and Citizens*. Palgrave. [Translation of Coller, X., A. Jaime and F. Mota (eds) (2016), *El poder político en España: Parlamentarios y ciudadanía*, Madrid: CIS.

- Coller, Xavier and Fernando Ramírez de Luis (2019), “Unstable preferences and policy changes: Spain”, in Leonardo Morlino and Cecilia Sotilotta (eds), *The politics of the Eurozone crisis in Southern Europe: A comparative reappraisal*, : Palgrave, 133–171.
- Jiménez-Sánchez, M., Coller, X., & Portillo-Pérez, M. (2018). MPs of traditional parties’ perceptions on candidate selection in times of political crisis and reform. In G. Cordero & X. Coller (Eds.), *Democratizing candidates selection. New methods, old receipts?* (pp. 147–171). Palgrave.
- Freire, A., Coller, X., Andreadis, I., Jaime, A. M., Serra da Silva, S., & Kartsounidou, E. (2020). Methodological challenges in the study of political elites: Some reflections from Southern Europe. In A. en Freire, M. Barragán, X. Coller, M. Lisi, & E. Tsatsanis (Eds.), *Political representation in Southern Europe and Latin America before and after the great recession and the commodity crisis* (pp. 120–135). Routledge.
- García, F., Mateos Díaz, A., & Rivas Pérez, C. (2013). Veinte años de élites parlamentarias en América Latina (1994–2014). *Revista de las Cortes Generales*, 89, 135–174.
- Keeble, C., Law, G. R., Barber, S., & Baxter, P. D. (2015). Choosing a method to reduce selection bias: A tool for researchers. *Open Journal of Epidemiology*, 5, 155–162. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojepi.2015.53020>
- King, G., Keoane, R., & Verba, S. (1994). Designing social inquiry. In *Scientific inference in qualitative research*. Princeton University Press.
- Kott, P. S. (2016). Calibration weighting in survey sampling. *Wiley interdisciplinary reviews: Computational statistics*, 8(1), 39–53.
- Mateos, A., & Corral, M. (2022). Partial nonresponse in political elite studies: An approach to parliamentary elites in Latin America. *Quality & Quantity*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-022-01317-9>
- Mills, C. W. (1956). *The power elite*. Oxford University Press.
- Rivas Pérez, C., Rivas Otero, J. M., & Barragán, M. (2020). The PELA (Parliamentary Elites of Latin America) surveys, a general overview: Objectives, methodologies, scope and time span. In A. Freire et al. (Eds.), *Political representation in Southern Europe and Latin America: Crisis or continuing transformation?* Routledge.
- Rivas Pérez, C., & Bohigues, A. (2019). El PELA como instrumento para el estudio de las elites políticas en América Latina. In M. Montaña & M. Cortes (Eds.), *La profesionalización de la política* (pp. 33–58). Universidad de Guadalajara.
- Roberts, C., & Vandenplas, C. (2017). Estimating components of mean-squared error to evaluate the benefits of mixing data collection modes. *Journal of Official Statistics*, 33(2), 303–334.
- Tourangeau, R. (2017). Mixing modes: Tradeoffs among coverage, nonresponse, and measurement error. In P. P. Biemer, E. D. de Leeuw, S. Eckman, B. Edwards, F. Kreuter, L. E. Lyberg, C. Tucker, & B. T. West (Eds.), *Total survey error in practice: Improving quality in the era of big data* (pp. 115–132). Wiley.
- Vis, B., & Stolwijk, S. (2021). Conducting quantitative studies with the participation of political elites: best practices for designing the study and soliciting the participation of political elites. *Qualitative and Quantitative*, 55, 1281–1317. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-020-01052-z>