

Panel discussion "Science, knowledge and expertise in parliaments"

ECPR - SG Parliaments

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Outline

- ① **Paper 1:** The Politics of Evidence: When do MPs Use Science to Inform or Persuade?
- ② **Paper 2:** The European Parliament's integration of expert and experiential knowledge in addressing health challenges

Paper 1 - Introduction

- A promising paper with two main contributions:
 - ① Automatic classification of scientific claims in parliamentary speech
 - ② Assessment of the contexts in which these claims are used
- On the first point, I appreciate the use of methods that are both interpretable and computationally efficient. This increases the potential for the approach to be developed and published as a tool for other researchers.
- Regarding the research question, the focus is timely given the current backlash against science from certain political groups (e.g., anti-vaccine movements). It also can contribute to the literature on technocracy and the strategic misuse of scientific arguments.

Paper 1 – Framing and Theoretical Contribution

- I assume this is a draft with an exploratory approach. There is no strong hypothesis on the potential use or implications of scientific claims in parliamentary speech.
- Early in the manuscript, the authors raise interesting questions (e.g., Is scientific evidence cited to support a claim already made, or to gain visibility?). However, there is limited follow-up analysis.
- I was surprised not seeing hypotheses regarding the use of scientific claims across topics during the paper and then finding nice results including it. I believe this is important:
 - To demonstrate that the model is capturing **scientific claims**, not just **talk about science**
 - To explore important substantive questions, such as:
 - *Do MPs invoke scientific claims when public opinion is unfavorable? What might this imply for science's perceived neutrality or issue ownership?*
 - *Are these claims part of a broader scientific debate, or are they isolated references? What does this say about how science is used in discourse?*
 - *Is a scientific claim presented as a **position** in contrast to moral or ideological arguments? How has this evolved over time?*

Paper 1 – Theory and Case Selection

- The theoretical discussion presents a rich perspective on information gathering. However, the paper is not primarily about information gathering. It would benefit from greater engagement with literature on:
 - Scientific backlash and science as a rhetorical or power resource
 - Populism and how science is positioned in populist discourse
 - The role of technocrats in parliament
 - How the use of scientific claims varies by issue area
- A similar issue arises with the case selection. The Swiss case is presented as interesting, but the justification relies heavily on open-ended questions rather than a clear framing.
- It would be helpful to clarify:
 - Is Switzerland simply your case of study, or do you aim to explain something about it?
 - If the latter, I suggest reframing the case to highlight its analytical leverage — for example:
 - Switzerland presents substantial time variation in polarization. There is a visible rise in populist and anti-scientific discourse. This evolving context offers a strong setting to study the role of scientific claims in increasingly polarized parliamentary environments.

Paper 1 – Data

- The data collection effort is impressive and deserves to be emphasized more. This is a clear contribution of the paper, and you provide good justification — make that contribution more visible.
- While many current classification approaches rely on generative models (which are often more resource-intensive and less interpretable), this paper uses more explainable models — a notable strength.
- I encourage you to emphasize the explainability of your results. For example:
 - Include plots showing the most relevant words/features distinguishing class 0 vs. class 1
 - Illustrate model robustness by applying it to two contrasting debates (e.g., one involving a scientific expert in a committee vs. one involving an interest group)
- The key is to demonstrate that the model identifies **scientific claims**, rather than just **talk about science**. This distinction is essential.

Paper 1 – Data

- Minor methodological point: Is your test set held out until final validation? A bit more detail on your validation strategy would enhance the credibility of the approach.
- Consider if you want to split this project into two papers: one focusing on the model and descriptive results, and another on the theoretical implications and use of scientific claims in parliamentary discourse.

Paper 1 – Analysis

- The analysis would benefit from clearer hypotheses.
- The classification of topics is not clearly explained (e.g. CAP codes?) This is a very interesting aspect that could also contribute to the literature on issue ownership.
- On the question of "Who uses scientific claims?":
 - Why not control for issue area? Issue context likely shapes the likelihood and function of scientific claims.
 - If the reason is related to your regression design, it would be useful to elaborate.
 - Consider a multilevel model: disaggregating by issue could allow you to examine patterns like "which MPs respond to which types of issues?"
- Regarding the choice of statistical model:
 - Why use logistic regression and OLS?
 - If your dependent variable reflects frequency of use you can also employ a binomial or Poisson regression.
 - These choices depend on how you formulate your final hypotheses — but either way, the modeling decisions need clearer justification.

Paper 1 – Results

- **Minor comment:** Why is year included as a numeric variable? Unless you have a specific hypothesis about a linear time trend, it may be better to include year as a categorical variable (i.e., year fixed effects).
- One of the most interesting findings is the higher use of scientific claims in debates on *civil rights*, *education*, and *environment*. This could be a key selling point of the paper.
- You might consider exploring this pattern more deeply. For instance:
 - Do MPs invoke scientific claims more often in civil rights debates when public opinion is less favorable?
 - Could these areas reflect higher levels of politicization or public contestation, increasing the strategic use of science?
 - Is there a difference in how science is framed across these issue areas — as authority, justification, or depoliticization?

Paper 1 – Closing Remarks

- This project has strong potential, particularly in light of the growing influence of anti-science movements and their penetration into official political discourse.
- The methodological approach is solid and includes many strengths that could be more clearly highlighted and marketed.
- The implications of the research feel somewhat underdeveloped. Misuse of scientific discourse in parliament can contribute to the broader delegitimization of science. Similarly, the ideological use of scientific claims may erode trust in certain scientific domains more than others.
- I thoroughly enjoyed reading this paper — both the topic and the methods are inspiring and thought-provoking. That said, narrowing the scope, sharpening the hypotheses, and refining the theoretical framing would significantly strengthen the final contribution.

Paper 2 – General Comments

- This is a very compelling PhD research proposal with strong potential to make significant contributions — both theoretically and methodologically.
- On the theory side, it addresses an important gap in the literature by focusing on knowledge in the European Parliament, which is often underrepresented.
- On the methods side, it is refreshing to see a qualitative grounding in the conceptualization of key measurements — something that is increasingly rare but more valuable than ever.
- I do have a few suggestions that might help strengthen how the project is framed and presented, particularly to highlight its originality and relevance more clearly.

Paper 2 – Introduction

- The research question (in the introduction section) appears somewhat broad. While ambition is a strength — especially in a PhD project — this breadth slightly obscures the core justification of the study.
- As currently framed, the “health issue” seems to function primarily as a case to explore a broader phenomenon. If that is your intention, consider elaborating on what makes the health domain a valuable lens. What generalizable insights does it offer for understanding knowledge use in parliamentary settings?
- Alternatively, you could narrow the focus in the introduction and explicitly justify why health is the central object of study. For instance, you might highlight:
 - The unique relationship between health policy and scientific expertise
 - The political salience of health issues in recent years, particularly in relation to populism
- Either approach can work well — just ensure the framing aligns with the core objectives of your project and helps clearly position your contribution.

Paper 2 – Literature Review

- The literature review does a good job of engaging with multiple strands of research, which helps position the project within a broad academic conversation. This is a strong foundation.
- That said, since the core concepts are quite abstract, incorporating a few illustrative examples — especially from parliamentary debates or specific health policy cases — could make your argument more concrete and accessible. This would be particularly helpful when presenting to interdisciplinary or non-expert audiences.
- As the project develops, you'll likely need to narrow and deepen your engagement with one or two key theoretical frameworks. But for a PhD proposal, this breadth is a very promising starting point.

Paper 2 – Theoretical Framework

- Reaching the theoretical framework felt like a turning point — this is where the project truly comes together. The justification for focusing on health and COVID becomes clear, and this section could even serve as the starting point for your introduction.
- Regarding Figure 1: Have you considered more explicitly what “not using knowledge” means in your framework? Clarifying this could strengthen your conceptual distinctions and help anticipate potential endogeneity issues — for example, why certain actors choose **not** to invoke expertise.
- Regarding Figure 2: The model is promising. You might consider extending it by including additional relevant actors or influences, such as Parliamentary committees, Interest groups, Funding sources, MPs’ policy agendas or electoral incentives, Media attention...

Paper 2 – Methodology I

- It's great to see that your methodological approach begins with a qualitative exploration — this adds depth and helps ground your later quantitative analysis.
- Table 1: Your salience measures are a good start. You might enhance them by including a simple time trend from a media database like Factiva.
- On the question of uncertainty: is “past uncertainty” the best measure? Perhaps think about alternative or complementary proxies, such as the number of contradictory statements...
- You mention that you plan to map all IGs. That's excellent — it's a big effort and a strong asset. I would suggest introducing this earlier in the proposal and referencing it briefly in the literature review.
- Regarding citation analysis: while it's a promising strategy, be mindful of potential measurement issues — such as implicit citations, misattributions... Even if you don't address these in detail now, I am curious to hear more on this.

Paper 2 – Methodology II

- The proposed analysis has strong potential for scalability. That raises an important design question: do you envision this primarily as a broad framework that starts with health as a case (and can later be extended with classifiers and further expertise)?
- Or, would it be more strategic to narrow the focus and fully develop health as your core object of study — emphasizing its particular relevance (e.g., its connection to science, trust, and populism in contemporary politics)?
- Both are valid and promising strategies. Choosing one will help clarify your theoretical framing and methodological scope — especially when it comes to publication plans.
- **Citation counts:** is this your main proxy for measuring “use of knowledge”? If so, it's worth reflecting more on potential limitations — e.g., visibility might have different strategic effects depending on the actor (positive for some interest groups, negative for others).

Paper 2 – Concluding Remarks

- This is a very promising PhD project with strong potential — both theoretically and methodologically.
- At this stage, some additional work on narrowing the scope and clarifying key decisions would make the proposal even stronger. That doesn't mean locking yourself in — these choices can (and likely will) evolve over time.
- These comments are meant to help you better frame and communicate your research at this early stage. You're clearly on a solid path, and the foundations are already there for an exciting dissertation.