

Researching Presidential Activism using Mixed Methods

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Abstract: Dr Philipp Koeker describes the benefits and challenges of using mixed-methods research. His study investigated how and why Eastern European presidents use their veto powers, mixing statistical analysis and elite interviews.

Keywords: activism; decision making; democratization; Eastern Europeans; election types; expert opinion; financial capacity; language barrier; political behaviour; political elites; political power; political process; political scandals; political science; power and authority; power and power relations; practices, strategies, and tools; presidential communication; presidential duties and responsibilities; trust; veto power; vetoes and veto overrides; wiretapping

Transcript:

My name is Phillip Köker. I'm a postdoctoral research associate at University College London School of Slavonic and East European Studies. I'm a political scientist and my research deals mostly with presidents and the way in which elected heads of state in European democracies get involved into political decision making. But I'm also interested in new parties and party system change.

In this case study, we're going to look at presidential activism, the use of formal constitutional powers by presidents, and the way in which we can study it using mixed methods. Specifically we're going to look at how I study presidential activism with a

combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and the specific challenges that I faced in doing that.

To give you some context, the democratic transformation of Central Eastern Europe after 1989 produced quite a number of political systems in which presidents possessed more than just a ceremonial role. They were given the power to veto legislation--so to send it back to Parliament and refuse their signature--or to play a key role in the appointment of governments after and between elections. There's a great amount of scholarship on how we can measure these different presidential powers. However, there's surprisingly little on how presidents actually use them in practice.

In my research, I wanted to find out why and when presidents used their powers and what factors can explain that presidents decide to become active. I did not only want to give a general explanation of presidential activism, but I also wanted to shed more light on the different and intricate mechanisms that underlie presidential decision-making and the use of presidential powers. To achieve this goal, I decided to use nested analysis. Nested analysis is a mixed methods approach developed by Evan S. Lieberman, which allows researchers to combine quantitative and qualitative methods into one coherent research design in order to achieve both generalizable results as well as qualitative, in-depth insights into the subject that they're studying. In this case study, we're going to look at how I use nested analysis to study presidential activism and discuss some of the problems and challenges that I encountered.

The first step in nested analysis is usually a large scale statistical analysis which allows researchers to test general hypotheses about relationships between variables. In my case, two of the hypotheses I was mostly interested in was whether the presidents who are elected directly by popular vote would be more active than presidents elected by Parliament. Another hypothesis was that presidents would be more active if they're in cohabitation or ideological opposition to the government than when their own party participated in the

cabinet. To test my hypotheses with this data, I used both event count regression models and event history analysis. This allowed me to analyse the general occurrence of vetoes as well as the time in between vetoes by individual presidents.

My result showed that popular presidential elections and the presence of cohabitation were in fact positively and significantly associated with a more frequent use of presidential vetoes. However, there was still a few problems. On the one hand, the fit of some of my models was not perfect and there were a few variables which I could not include in my statistical models. Also, how could I know that my results were not merely correlation, but also an indication of causal mechanisms? The second step of nested analysis specifically designed to deal with some of these problems that I've just described. However, it was here that I faced even more complicated challenges.

Based on the predictions of my statistical models, I chose 12 specific president cabinet pairings from four countries-- Estonia, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia-- to serve as case studies for in depth analysis. These case studies allowed me not only to validate the results of my quantitative analysis, but also to find additional or alternative explanatory factors. But in order to conduct these case studies, I needed more and better data. Therefore, I decided to conduct elite interviews. In particular, I wanted to interview people who were directly involved in presidential decision making and the use of presidential powers or people who could tell me more about the relationship and power relations between president and government and president and parliament. There were three groups of elites I was most interested in. First, these were presidential advisers and other high ranking members of the presidential administration. I also want to talk to former members of government or former members of Parliament who were in power during the specific time period that I selected for my case studies. Last, I wanted to talk to national experts and journalists who would help me to send the responses that I got from my elite interviewees into a wider context and validate them.

There were a number of challenges that I faced in arranging and conducting my elite interviews. The most general problem was that not all people I contacted were immediately available for interviews or wanted to talk to me. While this is normal interview based research, in my case, it made things slightly more difficult. I selected very specific time periods for case studies and number of people who could give me the information that I needed for my research was relatively limited. To counter this problem, I among others engaged in snowball sampling. I asked the elites who had agreed to be interviewed by me to recommend other respondents or people who might have similar knowledge. I also tried to interview people who were active immediately before or immediately after the time periods I was interested in.

Despite these challenges, I was still able to complete 65 elite interviews overall. Another problem was language. Political elites are generally more likely than other respondent groups to speak a foreign language. However, in my case, not all of the people I wanted to talk to were actually fluent in a foreign language. This was overall less of a problem in Estonia and Hungary where most elites were fluent in English or German and I could interview them in these languages. In Poland and Slovakia, however, elites tended to lack foreign language skills. While I speak Polish and could thus interview Polish elites in their language, in Slovakia, it meant that I could simply not interview as many people as I wanted to. And being a PhD student at the time, I also lacked the funds to hire interpreters. To deal with this problem, I eventually decided to interview more experts and to use more archival material to at least approximate the information I could have gained from elite interviews.

A third challenge was the recording of interviews and subsequent attribution of responses. Some of my respondents were quite wary to have their interviews tape recorded. On the one hand, it was due to the fact that we talked about their personal political views or informal formal mechanisms of political bargaining, which they did not want to be made public. On the other hand, there had been a number of political scandals in my case study

countries which involved, albeit secret, wiretapping of politicians. Eventually, I decided to take most of my notes from interviews by hand in order to increase rapport and establish a relationship of trust with my respondents. Furthermore, I assured confidentiality for my respondents, which meant that I was not coaching them personally or attributing anything they had said directly to them. Unfortunately, this meant that I could not use all information that I'd gained in my study, as including it would have meant it violates this agreement of confidentiality.

After finishing my interviews and writing my case studies, I still had to bring together the quantitative and qualitative results. The case studies also showed that the causal mechanisms that I assumed to be behind these results actually existed in practice. However, I also found that there were results from the statistical analysis which were caused by different factors that I had initially thought. While in these cases the qualitative evidence that I gathered was not enough for further generalizations, the in-depth study of the mechanisms involved now provide the starting point for future studies on the subject. Furthermore, the synthesis of my results also showed variables that were not included in my theoretical or statistical models. For example, I could show that presidents use their powers more often when there were deep divisions within or between government parties, and that they used their veto more often irrespective of whether they were in a friend relationship with the government or in cohabitation.

In summary, my research could, among others, show that directly elected presidents use their powers more frequently than presidents elected by Parliament. And it could also test a number of other hypotheses adequately for the first time. Using nested analysis, I could thereby not only provide a general test of relationships between variables, but also provide in-depth insights into presidential politics and the decision-making mechanisms involved. However, in each step of the research process, I faced certain challenges that could not be completely offset by the combination of methods. Nevertheless, mixing methods can provide

a solid foundation to reach valid and reliable conclusions. For this, the relation between the different methodologies and the role of each method must be clearly defined from the start. Researchers must also embrace the respective ontological and epistemological assumptions that are associated with each methodological strand. Only when both approaches are recognized as equally contributing to the results can the full power of mixed methods approaches unfold.

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