

UNIT 4: Research Services For Parliamentary Committees

Learning Objectives

How does parliamentary staff know what they know?

After studying this unit you should:

- Be able to recognize the role of research in meeting the basic information needs of parliamentary committees;
- Understand the different types of research and the skills required by parliamentary staff in conducting research;
- Understand the importance of paying attention to the political, ethical and technical considerations in all legislative research.

Introduction

Members of Parliament need to have access to timely, up-to-date, accurate and well-researched information for effective decision-making. This unit points to the importance of legislative research in providing independent sources of information to MPs and the need for MPs to also have access to government sources of information for a complete picture on issues. This unit explains the different methods and types of research as well as the skills required by parliamentary staff to undertake such research. It stresses the importance of considering the political, ethical and technical considerations in all legislative research.

Members of Parliament seek better ways to select goals, design and choose alternatives to achieving the goals, and see that the alternatives are considered. To do this effectively, they need appropriate, timely and accurate information. Having access to up-to-date information is essential in order to highlight policy alternatives and to draw

attention to policy consequences. This becomes especially important at the committee level where members carry out in-depth analysis and debate issues. Parliamentary staff, therefore, must have a clear understanding of the information needs of Members of Parliament, and should possess the requisite researching skills to provide independent sources of information on national issues.

Independent research services are essential to supporting the work of parliamentary committees for two key reasons. First, while the executive branch often gets help from a large professional staff from the Ministries, Departments and Agencies, the Legislature does not usually benefit from that kind of support. Thus, it is critical for parliament to explore all possible avenues to help bridge this gap of expertise and ensure that MPs have access to accurate and up-to-date information to perform their work effectively. Secondly, and equally important for parliament, is not to rely solely on information provided by the Executive but to complement it with independent sources in order to understand what the alternatives are, and to have a total picture of every issue before passing laws and making policy choices. For these reasons, parliaments need to explore sources of information from their legislative researchers, other independent research, and also seek information from government sources.

Government sources of information

It is important for parliamentary committees to demand that the Executive provide the information necessary to enable parliament to monitor key issues and make informed decisions. Parliament and its committees must demand annual departmental reports, audited annual reports of each Ministry, independent Auditor-General reports and any relevant executive documents to ensure proper oversight on the executive's performance in its roles and responsibilities.

To promote the free flow of information between the executive and parliament, the Scottish Parliament, for example, has a protocol that spells out exactly how information from the Executive must be communicated to the parliamentary committees. The

protocol sets out clear guidelines on how the committees and the executive should work together. In particular, the protocol provides guidelines on how to ensure an open flow of information between parliament and the executive for a productive working relationship and the promotion of good governance. (More details of the protocol contained in Appendix 3: *Protocol Between Committee Clerks and The Scottish Executive*.)

Parliaments are encouraged to demand from the Executive comprehensive budget performance data and regular reports on the status of implementation of the budget after approval by parliament. Box 4.1 below highlights the recommended sources of budget information for Members of Parliament.

Box 4.1
Broadening Access to Information Budget Documentation – OECD Best Practices

- A Comprehensive Budget-Performance Data — a medium term projection
- A Pre-budget Report — a report on long term economic and fiscal policy objectives
- Monthly Report — a report on the progress in implementation including differences between actual and forecast amounts
- Mid-year Report — a comprehensive update on implementation of the budget, including updated forecasts and budget outcome for the medium term
- Year end Report — audited by the audit institution released within six months of fiscal year
- Pre-election Report — general state of government finances immediately before an election
- Long Term Report — an assessment of long term sustainability of current government policies

Source: OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

Independent sources of information

Parliaments need well-resourced libraries and information centres to perform their role. The Library of Congress in the United States, for example, is one of the best-resourced libraries in the world. Even more important is access to independent sources of information, which is critical for effective parliamentary work. Research becomes an effective way of obtaining unbiased analysis to help improve the quality of decisions of MPs. It is essential for parliament to have a core team of experts that provides access to analysis and vital information to guide the decision-making process. Germany, for example, has an information service with a staff of 85; Australia has a research center of a similar size at the disposal of the parliament; and, in Britain, the Research library employs about one hundred researchers. The US Congress has a well established Information and Research Service that includes the Library of Congress and the Congressional Research Service; there is also an independent Congressional Budget Office dedicated to budget issues. Research services are important for legislative work because it is only through research that legislatures get access to independent sources of information on issues before them.

Research in Parliament

Research for parliaments involve two distinct groups identified as the producers of information (research staff) and the consumers of the information (Members of Parliament). Ideally the producers of information should be dedicated researchers who are engaged by parliament itself such as the congressional research staff in US. In practice however a number of countries, especially those in emerging democracies, increasingly rely on information from researchers in universities, research institutions, think tanks and civil society organizations to complement the work of the parliamentary research team.

Research staff need effective training in legislative research, which is different than ordinary research, in order to maximise the accuracy and usefulness of information they

produce. They must also have skills to present the information in a meaningful form for their target beneficiaries, the consumers. Member of Parliament often have very little time to review and internalize information due to competing demands on their time. Again, parliaments by their very nature are often made up of representatives with varying backgrounds and expertise. Additionally, the immense range of policy issues with which parliament deals (e.g. Energy Crises, or budget deficit) makes it impossible for any single MP to be an expert in all areas; therefore, it becomes absolutely critical that research information is repackaged and presented in a meaningful form for use by Members of Parliament.

Research- Definition

Research is systematic in the sense that it has its own norms and techniques, and its own methods and procedures. Research is conceived as both an activity and as a process grounded in theory. The core objective of research is to clarify the unclear and to find answers to questions, ultimately adding to knowledge and to improving our way of life. Research may be seen as a tool for use in the production of knowledge, goods and services.

Types of Research

The broad types of research include pure research, which deals with questions that are intellectually challenging but may or may not be practical now or in the future; applied research which ultimately is expected to be helpful in solving problems or have practical applications now or in the future; and action research, which often has immediate application and is conducted specifically to find immediate applicable solutions to the problems or issues that are under investigation.

Regardless of the form it may take, research, as a concept ought to be regarded not only as a systematic process of learning about physical, technological, political,

social, psychological, economic, cultural, or medical aspects of reality, but also as the application of those findings in improving living standards. Research is an activity, a process and a tool.

The Research Process and General 'Tools' of Research

Research is best seen as a process with clearly defined stages. Though interrelated, each of these stages must be clearly identified and defined in order to achieve the desired results. The basic stages of research are:

- Clear identification of the research problem or question;
- Formulation of the research design, which involves planning data collection, sample selection, collection and analysis;
- Data gathering as much information about what already exists and identifying data to be collected, to address the question or problem under investigation;
- Coding and analysis of the data, which allows the researcher to bring some order into the data collected, and to bring related data together to make meaning;
- The final stage involves interpreting the results to reflect the research hypothesis.

The researcher needs tools and sometimes a variety of means to gather data and make information meaningful. The tools assist the researcher in deriving conclusions from a body of data and 'discovering' the things that were hitherto unknown.

General 'Tools' of Research

The general 'tools' of research include:

- **The library and its resources** – One fundamental task that must serve, as the foundation for research is the literature review process. This is essential to ensure that the researcher has gathered all relevant information that is available on the issue or problem under investigation. Skills in finding information from

libraries, the Internet, and electronic databases are important since they often hold volumes of valuable information from previous research.

- **Techniques of measurement** – Research requires precision in order to generate findings that are meaningful. There are well-established techniques for measuring quantitative and qualitative research. While the former requires proper sampling techniques to ensure that research findings from numerical analysis are generalized, the latter does not rely on samples, is not aimed at generalization and does not focus on numerical values. Instead, the emphasis of qualitative research is on observation, attributes and meaning. Understanding the different techniques of measurement and developing skill in conducting qualitative and quantitative research is fundamental.
- **Statistics** – This relates basically to collecting and classifying numerical data. It is therefore used in quantitative research and in a very limited extent in qualitative research. Legislative researchers need to be knowledgeable enough in the basics of descriptive statistics, which provide description of the sample data such as the mean and inferential statistics (used to infer the truth or falsity of a hypothesis e.g. correlation) in order to carry out basic statistics themselves, and to communicate meaningfully with statisticians when they are needed for the more complicated analysis.
- **The computer and its software** – Basic skills in using computers and related application software is now necessary for all professionals. Researchers need computer skills to conduct the literature review process, the data gathering process, and analyzing data and presenting the findings. Skills in Internet research use of statistical software packages, Microsoft PowerPoint, Microsoft Word and other related application software packages are necessary for researchers.
- **Clarity of language** – Communicating research findings in the right language to the target audience helps determine the usefulness of the information to the

consumers. Members of Parliament are such a heterogeneous group that research information must be repackaged with minimum scientific and technical language for it to benefit all people.

Clearly, to carry out any good research one must have adequate skills to utilize these tools effectively and be knowledgeable enough to delegate tasks to the right people in order to get the desired results.

Categories of Skills Required

Additionally, legislative researchers and parliamentary staff require scientific and creative skills to be effective.

Scientific skills – These include the clarification of ideas and the development of standardised procedures for collecting and analysing data. These skills are used in carrying out competent and creative research. Systematic scientific skills lie at the heart of legislative research as a technical activity. Scientific skills are divided into these categories: information-structuring, information-collection, and information-analysis.

Information structuring skills sharpen the legislative researcher's ability to clarify ideas and examine their correspondence to real world events. Information-collection skills provide the legislative researcher with approaches and tools for making accurate observations of persons, objects, or events. Information-analysis skills guide the legislative researcher to draw conclusions from empirical evidence.

Creative skills – This involves applying the basics of 'policy analyses' to generate relevant information for law making and informing policy choices. Critical thinking and critical analysis of issues become crucial.

Legislative research also involves the efficient and effective use of available resources to accomplish research activities. Planning and management skills are as important to

legislative research projects as they are to other organisational endeavours. Research management skills are critical to successful research project outcomes.

The practice of legislative research requires the simultaneous consideration of all the skill areas mentioned above.

Lawmaking and Research

The role of legislative researchers is to improve the law making process and its outcomes. This is why their efforts are defined as the creation and critical assessment of legislature-relevant knowledge and its communication to decision-makers.

The tasks of legislative researchers are:

- To organise, analyse, evaluate, interpret and summarise available facts;
- To present costs and benefits of issues when requested to do so by law-makers;
and
- To assemble such authoritative opinions as may be available in respect to legislative questions under discussion in the legislature.

Legislative research: political, ethical and technical considerations

Legislative research is conducted in a political environment. It affects, to a greater or less extent, what problems are analysed, who does it, how it is done, what decisions are made as a consequence, and how those decisions are implemented. Legislative research must cope with politics.

Political Feasibility Considerations

Legislative researchers must possess both political and social knowledge in covering all possible aspects of a piece of legislation. They must have a clear understanding of the political background of a particular research topic. This must be considered from the

perspective of the relevant committees, political party positions on that subject, stakeholders and society at large.

Why political consideration?

Where the aim of a legislative researcher is to provide the best possible advice based on rigorous research, the lawmakers may operate to minimise their loss of political power or to maximise the votes they get at the next election. Some political considerations include: local interests; personalities; habits; prejudgements; and rivalries.

If researchers leave out all of the elements involved in creating a political consensus that so regularly constrain political decision, they will be left wondering why the legislature fails to get on as rapidly as it ought to in achieving their goals.

Ethical Consideration

Ethics and morality are central to law-making because the legitimacy and authority of the legislature and, therefore, the decisions it makes, are enhanced when its actions are informed by ethical considerations. Sound and viable legislative decisions are based on the quality of information available to lawmakers. Due to the role that legislative research plays, there needs to be objectivity in its conduct.

Legislative researchers should not be inclined to particular beliefs or ideologies in conducting research and should always avoid presenting personal views. In a situation where the legislative research findings are in direct conflict with a given political, social, religious or economic ideology, legislative researchers must present clear options that harmonise the various interests.

Invariably legislative decisions are taken around the idea of political interests. Consequently, legislative researchers need to concern themselves with the fact that lawmakers make political decisions based on available information.

Technical Consideration

Law making is an accumulation of experiences. While legislative researchers might come up with scientific results, lawmakers might have different or opposing views based on their own experiences. On the other hand, law making is an effort to address problems. They will often address negative socio-economic conditions of the people. However, the conditions that may be perceived as a problem in one area may not be a problem in another area. In this context, legislative researchers are advised to be conversant with the present definitions of 'old' policy issues (i.e. why did the particular policy remain as it is or why was the particular policy developed the way it is?)

In preparing legislative research arguments, researchers are advised not to advocate their own research findings but rather to structure their arguments in a self-supportive manner. One way of building their own capacity to argue and support legislative research results is to look comparatively at a wide range of local, national and international perspectives and experiences. The legislative researcher is required to have a clear understanding of the law-making arena and the perceptions of the alternatives under consideration.

In sum in structuring legislative research arguments, legislative researchers should consider the economic, political and social circumstances surrounding previous experiences and their relevance to the current legislative research issue(s).

Unit 4 Questions

Please answer each of the following questions. If you are taking this course in a group you may then meet to discuss your answers.

1. How important is research to a parliamentary committee?
2. List the general tools for effective research.
3. What basic skills are required by parliamentary staff to conduct research?
4. What are the key ingredients of legislative research?

Select Bibliography

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Suggested Additional Reading:

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Perspectives And Experience From Around The World. Available at

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