

**Improving Robustness in Qualitative Content Analysis:  
A three stage model for the analysis of parliamentary debates about the use of the  
referendum \***

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## **Abstract**

Qualitative approaches to content analysis are often criticized for failing to provide critical benchmarks able to account for the validity and reliability of their results (Krippendorff, 2004). This paper tackles this problem by proposing a three stage model based on (a) an exploratory approach of the data; (b) a semi-inductive coding strategy using computer-assisted software; (c) a triangulation of the coding scheme obtained. This is applied to the analysis of arguments expressed against the use of the referendum in UK parliamentary debates from 1975 to 2010. From a methodological perspective, this paper shows that the model reduces risks of misinterpretation by helping to test and re-test the robustness of content analysis results. From a substantive perspective, the paper shows how this model can usefully assist in the elaboration of analytical typologies.

## **Introduction**

The participation of citizens in decision and policy making is currently experiencing a blossoming of interest in political and academic circles that is unprecedented. Ranging from concern with issues such as climate change, social inequalities, poverty or crime, the potential of the public being directly engaged in political processes in contemporary democracies has seen an increasing variety of forms for participation: focus groups, deliberative polls, citizens' juries and participatory budgeting. In the United Kingdom, as an example, experiences such as the 1994 Channel Four Deliberative Poll on Crime, the 1998 Bristol Citizens' Panel, and the 2004 DTI Citizens' Jury have been acclaimed as great successes by policy makers and politicians alike.

In academic circles too, a strong advocacy for more public participation has grown, extolling its virtues and the compelling claim to making democracy both more responsible and responsive (Crosby, Kelly & Schaefer: 1986). Recent studies have shown that one can expect substantial benefits from including citizens in governance. For instance, Wang's survey of city officials across America found that collaboration between elected officials and citizens was often associated with the meeting of public needs and improving public trust in government (2001: 334). In addition, studies focusing upon 'discursive participation' have shown that public involvement in deliberative forums, conventions and panels can positively impact citizens' attitudes and behaviours, generating a greater sense of political efficacy and an increase in the frequency and recurrence of political action by citizens (Fishkin, 1995; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). Enthusiasm for citizen involvement in decision and policy making, however, means neither that representative democracy needs replacing, nor that all the possible modes of implementing participation within the latter have been exhausted.

One crucial mode of citizen participation especially continues to provoke controversy for both academics and politicians: the use of the national referendum (Qvortrup, 2007: 3). In this respect, debates at the level of high politics concerning transfers of national sovereignty in the context of the European Union are paradigmatic. In these debates, intense disagreement often arose between those parliamentarians favouring participation, who sought to defer decision-making to the people via referendums, and those opposing the use of such a device, who believed it to be their task, as elected representatives, to decide on behalf of the people.

Although much has been written about how citizens themselves think and feel about direct participation, there is little research that examines how political representatives conceive of the issue, or at least what stances on the subject they might make explicitly. This is a significant gap because the ways in which political representatives think about democracy, more precisely how they perceive their own roles and those of the people are fundamental questions pertinent to our understanding of how modern democratic systems function.

In this paper, we examine the rhetorical tools available to politicians to argue against direct participation. The cases considered here focus on several successive parliamentary debates in the UK concerning the referendum and its possible use in ratifying key European treaties or in dealing with critical European issues from 1975 to 2010. The paper uses a hybrid approach to content analysis with the aim of addressing the following questions;

- 1) Have arguments against the referendum changed since the 1970s?
- 2) To what extent does party affiliation influence arguments against participation?
- 3) To what extent does party politics (ruling party *v.* opposition) affect arguments deployed against the referendum?

## **Background**

The question of what a citizen's role is or ought to be in a democracy has long been at the heart of political study and practice. For a long time the consensus was that the delegation of power from the people to political representatives is necessary, even if only for practical reasons (Sartori, 1987; Dahl, 1989). Yet, traditional limits on the involvement of citizens in political decision-making have recently been tested with greater rigour. For instance, it has been argued that contemporary improvements in education and technological developments can and should enable more frequent and substantial participation by the people, using devices such as the referendum (Barber, 1984; Budge, 1996). If citizens are now better educated and informed on political issues than ever before, and if new technologies potentially allow them to partake in crucial political decisions that would shape their lives, then why should they be denied the right to decide for themselves?

Answers to this question are likely to open a Pandora's Box. Arguments can best be categorised by reference to the age-old debate between *Elitists and Participationists* (Bachrach, 1969; Pateman, 1970; Cook and Morgan, 1971; Pennock, 1975). Their views differ radically on questions such as that of *rightful authority*, or of what the aims should be of *good government*? The elitist position was most famously expressed by Edmund Burke when he told the electors of Bristol that 'Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.' However, even liberal constitutionalists in the classical vein have not regarded parliament to be all-powerful. In defending representative government, theorists such as John Locke argued that power was indeed given to Parliament, but that this was in the form of a *concessio imperii*: a temporary and limited delegation of power. The establishment of a representative democracy does not, thus, imply that the people have given up their rights in absolute terms, but that they have simply transferred the execution of their rights legitimately to another body.

As for the aims of good government, elitist and participationist answers differ to such questions as whether government should seek to foster participation so as to develop civic virtue or whether it should instead seek to provide stability, and protect free speech and minorities. Even if it is such that one can have it both ways, to an extent, arguments direct against citizen participation in political decision-making still cannot be pushed too far without coming up against the fundamental source of a democracy's power. As Budge argues, for example, given the inherent relationship between the notions of democracy and popular sovereignty, it becomes questionable as to whether limits can and should be placed on how and when the people can decide upon the manner in which their government is to function:

'If Democracy justifies itself as empowering citizens, making government their own rather than an external authority, how is it still possible to defend restrictions on democratic citizens' power to decide what governments should do and how they operate?' (Budge 1996: 1).

By now, and loosely based on this debate, a flourishing comparative politics literature has developed, in which the referendum device and its use have been assessed numerous times within different constitutional arrangements (Butler and Ranney, 1994; Gallagher and Uleri, 1996; Qvortrup: 2002; LeDuc, 2003). Along with this, analysis of popular support for institutions that allow for direct democracy has also been carried out on the basis of empirical study and public surveys (Dalton, Burklin and Drummond 2001; Cronin 1989; Budge 1996; Norris 1999).

In a European context, debates over the referendum are particularly common and divisive if they concern transfers of national sovereignty to the European Union (EU). In part this is because many of the recent referendums on new EU treaties, such as the Constitutional Treaty or the Treaty of Lisbon, have yielded rejections of these treaties, e.g. in the Netherlands, France or Ireland. Moreover, these debates bring to the surface the arguments against, and in favour of, the referendum, as seen in Greece in November 2011 when Prime Minister Papandreu first announced a referendum on a controversial EU bailout plan, only to withdraw the proposal under pressure days later.

The United Kingdom (UK) is, however, the paradigmatic case. With one of the most Eurosceptic publics, the wishes of the people have often been in direct conflict with those of elected representatives. In other instances, the issue has divided MPs and cut right across party lines, as when Conservative backbenchers supported a referendum on Britain's EU membership against the wishes of the government in October 2011.

Especially at a time when traditional conceptions regarding the relationships between governments and the governed are being challenged, it is necessary pinpoint the voice of the representatives in this debate. Understanding the ways in which political representatives conceive of their own roles and that

of the electorate would appear to be critical, not least because they have the power to alter the 'division of labour' between electorates and representatives.

### **Parliamentary debates as data**

There are many possible ways of tackling the question of how political representatives consider the national referendum. For example, political representatives can be participants in opinion surveys and interviews. As several elite studies have pointed out, however, major problems arise in terms of identifying, gaining access to and actually interviewing elites, in addition to the task of observing their behaviour over time (Moyser & Wagstaffe, 1987). By contrast, this particular study intends to employ a rather-less utilized source of information to examine the views of political representatives: parliamentary debates.

Due to the confluence of various developments in political science, analysing parliamentary debates is currently at a crossroads (Bara, Weale & Bicquelet, 2007: 577). Parliamentary deliberations – as forums for the formation of political language – have attracted numerous studies which take their origin from the field of conceptual history (Colclough, 2005; Ihalainen, 2007; Palonen, 2006). These works explore how political concepts such as, *inter alia*, popular sovereignty and democracy gradually acquired new meanings ( See Ihalainen 2007). More recently, the empirical study of parliamentary debates has captured the attention of political scientists more broadly. This trend has mainly been initiated by the so-called rise of deliberative democracy and a focus on the discursive elements of political interaction, including that between political representatives (Uhr 1998). Recent empirical studies in this vein have sought to understand how political representatives frame policy issues in parliamentary settings (Steenbergen et al. 2003).

Despite the centrality of parliamentary institutions, speeches made by political representatives are often dismissed on the grounds of substance, or sometimes the lack of it, in that they fail to capture 'real interests'. Rational choice institutionalists, amongst others, typically argue that political actors have a set of preferences or tastes and behave instrumentally, thus, so as to maximize the attainment of these preferences (Hall & Taylor, 1996: 942). In rational choice terms, it follows that the behaviour of political actors is likely to be driven primarily, if not solely, by strategic calculation and affected by actors' expectations about how others are likely to behave as well (Shepsle & Weingast 1987). One might therefore consider deliberative assemblies as political institutions wherein which office seekers use language instrumentally (i.e. to pass a bill or to be re-elected). Following this line of reasoning, the 'language' used by political representatives to defend their stance hardly matter insofar as it only reflects strategic calculus and does not represent the genuine beliefs of politicians. Since true beliefs

are not expressed in parliament and since rhetorical manoeuvres seem to prevail, the study of parliamentary discourse appear in this gaze hardly attractive.

Such criticisms converge with the objection that analysing parliamentary debates concerning the use of the referendum is hardly an interesting pursuit, insofar as positions on the issue are mostly determined by party lines and motivated by strategic purposes: to force the government or the opposition into a certain position. Lijphart, for instance, argued that governments only submit issues to referendums if they are certain that they will win (1984: 204); others have suggested that referendums are held only when a government believes that it is likely to provide a useful *ad hoc* solution to particular constitutional or political problems (King, 2007: 279). If referendums are indeed controlled and ‘pro-hegemonic’<sup>1</sup>, then it makes little sense *a priori* to study what political representatives have to say on the issue.

Yet this ignores two important points. First, backbenchers sometimes rebel against their own party’s stance and representatives often overtly express their disagreement with their party’s course of action (for instance, Labour former Europe Minister Keith Vaz and former minister Gisela Stuart in the UK). Second, the fact that political representatives resort to certain kinds of arguments (and dismiss others) is in itself an important point which deserves to be examined more closely. The choice to resort to particular ‘rhetorical strategies’, as it were, shows - at the very least - which arguments might be considered legitimate in the context of political debates and which are not. This harks back to the distinction made by Quentin Skinner between empirical and conceptual reasons for studying parliamentary debates. At the empirical level, Skinner argues, disputes tend to revolve around the question as to whether the ‘speech-acts’ of political representatives are sincere. Yet this is not the most important question insofar as we cannot know with absolute certainty whether politicians are being sincere or not, nor what their real motives are. More interesting, rather, is to focus on what representatives are actually doing; that is, to consider their intentions in light of what is actually said or actioned on their part (Skinner, 2002: 145-150).

To summarize this point, one could say that transitory beliefs become important in political debates, only if they find expression. In that sense, the legitimating role of language is more important than a representative’s real beliefs insofar it allows one to gain an insight into the rhetorical tools available to politicians and their usage in arguing a point.

## Methods of Analysis

Our approach to analyse these debates is to use summative content analysis (See Hsieh and Shannon,

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<sup>1</sup> Referendums are said to be ‘pro-hegemonic’ when they are used by the ruling elites to only strengthen their power (See Qvortrup, 2002).

2005: 1283). Unlike conventional approaches to qualitative content analysis, summative content analysis typically begins by identifying and quantifying certain words or content in a text with the purpose of understanding their contextual use. After quantification of the manifest content of the text (during what could be regarded as an ‘exploratory’ phase), the analysis moves on to a second phase to include latent content analysis – that is, the interpretation of underlaying meanings of words or themes. One of the main advantages of summative content analysis is that it blends qualitative and quantitative analyses while preserving the essential features of each. Put simply, it respects context in the qualitative tradition, while simultaneously generating outputs with the statistical rigor necessary for quantitative study. To assist in this task, we use two types of computer assisted data analysis software; (a) an exploratory approach to text analysis relying on automatic descending classification: the Alceste package; (b) a traditional inductive approach relying on manual coding and indexing: QDA Miner.

The Alceste<sup>2</sup> software utilised here combines textual and statistical analyses. It relies upon co-occurrence analysis, which is the statistical analysis of frequent word pairs in a text or *corpus* (in this case parliamentary debates). Within this corpus, homogeneous subsets of words are identified on the basis of their lexical profile (Brugidou, 2003: 418). As defined by Max Reinert, this ‘method can be used to determine the main word distribution pattern within a text or a discourse (a corpus). The technical procedure leads to selecting classes, each determined by a pool of words mathematically linked together and having the highest significant frequency of occurrence, i.e, those which the speaker tended to use most repeatedly. These classes with their content and function words subscribe to different types of discourse with their specific vocabulary and syntax’ (Cited in Brugidou, 2003: 418).

In its initial phase, the software breaks down the corpus into Context Units of two different kinds: ICU and ECU. Initial Context Units (*ICUs*) are sampling units corresponding to the divisions of the text specified by the user, to which one or several variables can be assigned (in the analyses below, each speech-act constitutes an *ICU*). Each *ICU* has been coded with the variables name, year and party). The corpus is then fragmented into Elemental Context Units (*ECUs*). These are ‘gauged sentences that the program automatically constructs based on word length and punctuation in the text’ (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2005: 705). *ECUs* are classified according to the distribution of their vocabulary. A data matrix is created allowing an analysis of statistical similarities and dissimilarities of words in

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<sup>2</sup> ALCESTE stands for *Analyse des Lexèmes Co-occurrents dans les Énoncés Simples d'un texte* [Analysis of the co-occurring lexemes within the simple statements of a text]. Its algorithm, based on Benzecri’s important contributions in textual statistics, was created by Max Reinert at the CNRS.

order to identify repetitive language patterns. Alceste crosses the Context Units and the presence/absence of words (*forms*) in the following way;

	<b>Form 1</b>	<b>Form 2</b>	<b>Form 3</b>	...	<b>Forms p</b>
<b>ECU 1</b>	0	1	0	...	...
<b>ECU2</b>	1	0	0	...	...
<b>ECU3</b>	1	1	0	...	...
...	...	...	...	...	...
<b>ECUn</b>	...	...	...	...	...

This classification proceeds by successively splitting the ECUs into classes on the basis of vocabulary oppositions; ‘the procedure searches for maximally separate patterns of co-occurrence between the words classes’ (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2005: 710). Classes are constructed according to the lexical content of each ECU by grouping similar *forms* (or words) on the basis of  $\chi^2$  discriminating Criteria. What is obtained through this *Decreasing Hierarchical Classification* is a number of classes of words which should be representative of the main themes of the analysed text. The profile of each class is then established in relation to their specific vocabulary. Key words and sentences are ranked in terms of their  $\text{Chi}^2$ . This indicates the degree of association of the word to the class.

Complementary operations are performed during the last stage of the analysis such as supplementary classifications within different classes (Listing of ECUs), *Ascending Classification* (graphic representation of the association between different groups of words), Factorial analysis of the Correspondences (spatial representation of the relations between the classes). The latter provides a way of transforming numerical information about classes, speakers and *forms* (words) into a visual format. The distance between points (representing the variables, forms and classes) accounts for their degree of association and is measured by the “chi-squared distance” (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2005: 710). This provides a means for researchers to derive their own understanding of the results.

In the second stage of analysis we use a traditional qualitative data analysis software, QDA Miner, to manually highlight and systematically code manifest content themes (or classes of words) previously identified by Alceste. Like other similar computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo, ATLAS-ti or MAXqda, QDA Miner assist in managing data analysis by enabling thematic coding and allowing the assessment of relationships between variables and themes (i.e, in our case, relationships between the occurrence of a particular argument and the year or party affiliation of a speaker). QDA Miner also enables researchers to develop clusters (or higher order categories) and help managing the analytic process by offering useful tools for visualizing connections and patterns in the data (See Lewins and Silver 2007).

Our approach to qualitative content analysis is thus ‘hybrid’. Codes and themes are not purely generated inductively from the raw data. Rather, our coding strategy is guided by a structured process based on initial quantification of the corpus by Alceste. There are several advantages to be gained from using a hybrid approach to the analysis of textual data. First, codes do not emerge as an *artifact* guided either by intuition or by endless iterations between the researcher and corpus construction - the coding frame is instead generated by unobtrusive data elicitation based on word frequencies and co-occurrences. Second, automatic data generation is checked against careful tagging and manual coding of the data under consideration to avoid hasty interpretations. This helps assessing the internal consistency and applicability of *a priori* codes but also enables developing new codes (or categories) overlooked by the automatic approach (in other words, the coding scheme remains open to new thinking). Any text that could not be categorized within the initial coding scheme generated by Alceste was given a new code and was included in the analysis of results.

## Corpora

The first corpus that we analysed comprises of five House of Commons debates about the use of the referendum to ratify key European treaties spanning from 1975 to 2010. As mentioned above, we first ran an analysis using Alceste, we then checked and elaborated upon the categories automatically generated by the software by manually coding the transcripts with the help of QDA Miner. To check the consistency of our coding strategy we ran an inter-coder reliability test.

### **Parliamentary debates about the use of the referendum on EU issues:**

- 1) **Continued UK Membership of the EU.**  
HC Deb 22 November 1974 vol 881 cc1687-771 (Tim Renton) Amendment.
- 2) **European Economic Community Referendum**  
HC Deb 21 May 1980 vol 985 cc507-15 First reading (Dennis Canavan) First reading, Private member Bill.
- 3) **Ratification of the Maastricht Treaty**  
HC Deb 21 February 1992 vol 204 cc581-650 (Richard Shepherd) Second reading
- 4) **Ratification of the EU Constitutional Treaty**  
HC Deb 23 April 2004 vol 420 cc565-608 (John Maples) Second Reading
- 5) **European Union Bill and Parliamentary Sovereignty**  
HC Deb 7 December 2010 vol (?) cc191- (William Hague) Second Reading

The third stage of our analysis provides a test for the replicability of our results. We applied our coding scheme to the analysis of UK parliamentary debates about the use of the referendum, this time

on non-European issues, for the same period of time. If we can reasonably expect that specific arguments against the use of the referendum expressed during the debates on EU related issues will not find resonance in our second corpus (for contextual reasons), we also expect that ‘core arguments’ (principled arguments) should be voiced here.

### **Use of the referendum on non EU issues**

#### **1) National Referenda**

HC Deb 22 November 1974 vol 881 cc1687-771 (Tim Renton) Motion

#### **2) Referendums on Scotland and Wales**

HC Deb 16 February 1977 vol 926 cc525-51 (George Gardiner) Amendment

#### **3) Cruise Missile Referendum**

HC Deb 20 April 1983 vol 41 cc287-95 (Daffyd Wigley)

#### **4) Referendum in Northern Ireland**

HC Deb 22 April 1998 vol 310 cc930-40 (Paul Murphy) Order

#### **5) Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill (AV Referendum)**

HC Deb 12 October 2010 vol ? cc197-294 (Mark Harper) Amendment

### **Results**

*Preliminary results will be introduced and discussed during the conference presentation. Sincere apologies to our readers and to our discussant.*

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