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Title: Semi-structured elite interviews in a nested analysis framework: Studying presidential activism in Central and Eastern Europe

Author: Philipp Köker

Abstract: My PhD research deals with the use of presidential powers in Central and Eastern Europe during the first twenty years since the end of Communism. While previous research mostly debated the nature of the new regime types and measured presidents' powers, I wanted to explore and explain how presidents actually use their constitutional prerogatives. My study uses a mixed-methods approach that combines statistical analysis of an original data set on the use of presidential powers in nine Central and East European democracies with qualitative elite interviews in four selected countries. This case focuses on the 65 semi-structured interviews that I conducted with political elites in Estonia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia and the challenges of nesting them into them into the statistical analysis. In particular, it addresses problems of how to prepare interviews based on quantitative findings and sampling strategies to counter bias through non-response. The case also highlights specific problems related to elite interview-based research in post-socialist Europe and sets these into perspective to the existing literature. Last, if offers more general advice on how to successfully integrate interviews into a mixed-methods framework.

Relevant disciplines: Economics; Political Science; Sociology; Social Policy

Academic level: Advanced Undergraduate; Postgraduate

Methods used: semi-structured interviews; mixed-methods research; nested cases; cross-national comparison; purposive sampling; snowball sampling

Keywords: political elites; elite interviewing; semi-structured interviews; nested analysis; mixed-methods; presidential activism; Central Eastern Europe; Estonia; Hungary; Poland; Slovakia

Learning outcomes

By the end of this case you should

- Have a better understanding of the methodological challenges of integrating qualitative interviews into a mixed-methods framework
- Understand and address the interrelated problems associated with sampling and access to current and former elites
- Be able to anticipate general challenges posed by interviewing political elites and elite interviewing in Central and Eastern Europe in particular
- Be aware of the fact that a research project that relies on interviews will necessarily develop while you are in the field and my transform your perspectives on the research question.

Presidential activism in Central and Eastern Europe: Project overview

In most of the new democracies that were created in the transformation of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) after 1989, the office of the presidency quickly became a point of contention among political actors. Other than in Western Europe where monarchs and figurehead presidents had long dominated the ranks of the heads of state, presidents in CEE were often vested with more than just ceremonial powers. These developments, of course, also caught the attention of many political scientists who – based on the new institutional structures – revised typologies of political regimes and created schemes to measure presidential powers. When I started my PhD research in October 2010, I found that these works presented a valuable addition to the body of research on regime types. Nevertheless, there were only few scholars who analysed and compared how presidents actually used their ample constitutional prerogatives.

Mainly inspired by research on the use of presidential vetoes by American presidents and Margit Tavits' book Presidents and Prime Ministers: Do Direct Elections Matter? (one of the very few cross-national comparative studies of presidential activism), my interest was to explore and explain why and when presidents in CEE used their powers. As I felt that the proxy variables that had been used before to test hypotheses on presidential activism were not

precise enough and only covered presidents' interference in government formation, I decided to create a new data set on the use of presidential powers in the sphere of legislation. Eventually, my data set covered nine ‘new’ European Union member states in the time between 1990 and 2010. While this allowed me to test general hypotheses on presidential activism, I also wanted to gain deeper insights into the particular practices of presidential politics. Therefore, I chose to complement my quantitative analysis with semi-structured interviews with political elites in four countries.

The combination of regression analysis and qualitative interviews helped me to confirm my main hypotheses, namely that presidents' use of their powers is largely determined by so-called presidency-centred factors, that is, factors outside their sphere of influence (such as partisan composition of parliament and government), and that popularly elected presidents are in fact more active than their indirectly elected counterparts. My elite interviews thereby corroborated the results of my statistical analyses and allowed me to illustrate how presidential decision making worked in practice. Nevertheless, preparing the interviews based on regression results as well as sampling appropriate interview partners and arranging and conducting the elite interviews required much preparation and continuous adaption in the field. The interviews also opened up new perspectives on my research for me and were for this reason in particular a very worthwhile and productive method.

Research Design: Nested Analysis

Mixed-methods approaches offer a range of advantages to political scientists (and other researchers in the social sciences) as they combine the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study and can thus help to increase reliability and validity of findings. While there are certain technical pitfalls to its application, one of the best-developed approaches with regard to comparative cross-country research is Evan S. Lieberman's ‘nested-analysis’, on which I chose to base my study.

Lieberman's approach is a specific mixed-methods research strategy that allows for closely integrating the quantitative and qualitative analysis in a coherent research design. He suggests that a large-N statistical analysis is followed up by an in-depth (small-n) analysis of selected cases. If the statistical model is robust (exhibits a satisfactory goodness of fit) and the results confirm the initial hypotheses, the case studies are used for model testing, that is, to establish

whether the causal mechanisms assumed by the regression models also actually work this way in practice. If the results of the large-N statistical analysis are not satisfactory, the case studies are used for model building, for formulating new or improved hypotheses. The ultimate aim would then be to construct a new model and run another large-N statistical analysis.

In my case, I first analysed the use of presidents' legislative powers, focussing on the presidents' right to send legislation back to parliament (‘presidential veto’), and tested my hypotheses using both negative binomial regression models and event history analysis. As my hypotheses were generally confirmed, I selected 12 ‘episodes’ – periods of specific president–prime minister configurations – in four countries (three episodes per country; countries were selected to cover a variety of constitutional features) based on how accurately my model had predicted the actual number of presidential vetoes. These episodes then provided the focal points of my qualitative case studies of presidential activism. In accordance with the logic of the nested-analysis approach, my main aim was to validate the existence of general causal links between variables.

Perks and Perils of Elite Interviews

Much of the information that I needed for my case studies was not available in the literature or other sources. I was able to find some biographical accounts of presidents and their staff, yet these rarely touched on the mechanisms I was interested in. Therefore, I decided to conduct interviews with political elites, namely those people who were involved in or had witnessed the processes surrounding the use of presidential powers firsthand.

While I would also use ample range of secondary materials and archival documents, elite interviews suggested themselves as the most effective way to gather the very specific information that I needed. They promised to give me access to information that was not available otherwise as well as unprecedented insights into the practice of presidential politics in CEE.

Political elites can generally be a very diverse respondent group in terms of age, education and social background. Yet, they share certain characteristics that set them apart from other interviewees and that pose particular challenges to researchers trying to interview them. First

and foremost, it is usually more difficult to arrange an interview with elites than with members of other respondent groups (this is an issue that I will return to when discussing sampling strategies). Elites are busier than others and if case researchers are granted interviews, the time for building rapport and asking their questions is very limited.

Elite interviewing is a double-edged sword in so far as respondents are used to being interviewed. While this can not only help novice researchers to quickly establish rapport, it comes at a price. Due to their practice, elites are also far more skilled at deflecting questions and can attempt to take control of the agenda. Elites may also more frequently have an interest in and be skilled at purposely misrepresenting their role in their own favour. Because the knowledge they possess is not otherwise available, it is also more difficult to assess the reliability of their answers. Last, elite respondents are more likely than others to object to closed questions and prefer question types that allow them to elaborate on their views in their own frames of reference. While this list is by no way exhaustive, these are the main challenges that I later found confirmed in my own interviews.

Preparation of Interviews: Interview Guide and Sampling Strategy

In preparing for my fieldwork, I focussed my attention on two main points: preparing an interview guide that took account of both the specifics of elites and the nested-analysis framework, and choosing a suitable sampling strategy.

Interview Guide and Question Types

Given the wide range of literature on the subject and availability of examples, the demands of interviewing political elites were relatively clear to me. However, I had to figure out how to tailor my questions to the demands of model-testing small-n analysis. My interviews had to be focussed mainly on collecting evidence that the results of my regression analysis were more than mere correlation and finding alternative explanations which left less room for flexibility. Other than in the majority of qualitative interview research, the main premise of my interviews was thus not to learn more about respondents' personal opinions but rather about respondents' specialist knowledge of facts and processes.

First, I had to decide on the type of interview that I would be conducting. Like many other researchers working with elites, I opted for semi-structured interviews. For me the most important factor in this decision was that they allow for flexibility in terms of question order and follow-up questions, while still providing a sufficiently focussed frame of reference for both interviewer and respondent. Furthermore, using an interview guide helps interviewers to retain control over the interview vis-à-vis well-versed elites and to obtain as much information as possible during a relatively short period of time (due to elites' busy schedule, follow-up interviews are only rarely possible).

When it came to questions types, it was clear that I had to use some sort of open-ended questions, not only to tailor my interviews to my respondent group but also to be able to discover eventual alternative explanations. Striking up the right balance between openness and focus in questions was difficult and I could only perfect my strategies in the field. Yet, in the preparation phase I already created several templates for questions that would allow respondents to answer freely but not evoke overly long narratives. In particular, I tied open-ended questions to a specific time frame (usually the time frame of one of my selected 'episodes') or prefixed my questions with references to respondents' involvement in previous events. I was wary not to influence respondents' answers, yet at the same time I also wanted to show unobtrusively that I had 'done my homework' and adequately prepared for the interview. Not only does this communicate appreciation of respondents' time but it also helps to reduce the imbalance of power typical for elite interview situations.

Given the fact that I planned to interview different groups of elites (see also subsection on sampling), I was not able to devise a general interview guide that could have been used for every respondent. I therefore created three different versions that accounted for the different levels of expertise and involvement in certain processes/decisions by the respective respondents. In anticipation of the short time frames that I would be granted to conduct my interviews, each template had only four blocks of questions surrounding issues of particular interest (e.g. the role of presidential advisors in decision making, president–government relations, contacts between parties and presidents). This allowed for asking all important questions within 20–30 minutes but also for following up on answers with probing questions should time and/or respondents' interest allow it.

Sampling Strategy and Respondents

As my main variables of interest were related to the decision-making within the presidential office as well as the relations between presidency, government and legislature, there were mainly two groups of political elites that could provide me with relevant insights. The first group comprised people who worked directly with the president, that is, presidential advisors or heads of department in the presidential administration. The second group were those who had been directly or indirectly affected by the use of presidents' formal powers (e.g. because a bill they had introduced was vetoed by the president). In particular, these were former cabinet members and members of parliament. In addition, I also decided to include experts (national-level journalists, academics with particular expertise and analysts) into my sampling frame to avoid a one-sided view and be able to gather more contextual information.

My in-depth case studies were focussed on the time frames provided by the 'episodes' of president–prime minister configuration that I had selected based on my regression results (ranging between 14 and 31 months in length). I thus needed to primarily select elites who had occupied relevant political positions at these times. Due to the overall small number of relevant political elites, I concluded that random sampling would not be feasible (in fact, in some cases my sample eventually encompassed all possible interviewees). Therefore, I decided to use purposive sampling in the first stage of the sampling process and complement it by snowball sampling while in the field. Purposive sampling allowed me to reach a sample that was balanced across party lines and respondent groups, while snowball sampling gave me the chance to find other relevant interviewees that I – given the language barrier and uneven availability of relevant documentation – might have overlooked. My initial respondent sample then consisted of around a hundred potential respondents who I had selected based on thorough background research in staff lists, news archives and parliamentary data bases.

Entering the Field: Research Practicalities

My fieldwork took place between March and September 2012, whereby I spent between four and five and a half weeks in each of the four countries. My project was registered with University College London (UCL) Data Protection but due to the fact that my respondents were elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office and because the way

I recorded, stored and used my interviews guaranteed that respondents could not be identified, it was exempt from ethics approval (see also section on specifics of elites in CEE).

Contact

Most of my respondents were still active in politics, business or academia so that I could contact them or their offices via email and telephone. In a few cases, my personal contacts in the case study countries or other respondents (see also next section) helped me to arrange interviews.

Interview Length and Location

As suggested by Robert Peabody and his co-authors, I asked my respondents for 20–30 minutes of their time. In the majority of cases, this resulted in interviews lasting between 35 minutes and 90 minutes (50 minutes on average). Knowing the busy schedule of elites, I gave my respondents free choice in suggesting a convenient location which was usually their office or workplace, in fewer cases cafés or restaurants. Being based in the respective capital during my fieldwork, I occasionally also travelled across the country to meet elites. Except for one telephone interview, I conducted all interviews in person.

Language

I conducted my interviews in Poland in Polish and in English and German in the other countries. If respondents did not know technical terms or specific turns of phrase, I encouraged them to give the answer in their own or another foreign language and looked up the translation later (I had also familiarised myself with the most important terms in each language so that this was not always necessary). Nevertheless, two interviews in Hungary as well as one in Slovakia were conducted with the help of interpreters or language mediators that my respondents had invited.

Learning by Doing: Additional Sampling, Adapting Questions and Elites in CEE

It is rarely possible to prepare for all eventualities of interview-based research in advance, and novice researchers in particular will need to adapt their strategies to what they find in the field. Interview experiences can be quite person-specific and the variety of articles by authors reflecting on their personal experiences in elite interviewing shows that there are still lessons to be learned even by experienced researchers. In this section, I want to show how I had to adapt my own strategies and reflect on what I believe is specific about interviewing elites in CEE.

Non-Response and Additional Snowball Sampling

My initial plan was to use snowball sampling to merely 'fill in' the gaps in my initial respondent sample. However, it turned out that I also had to use it for two less anticipated reasons. On the one hand, there were cases in which I only found out in the field that some former elites were already at an age or in a physical condition that would not have allowed for conducting interviews. As Daren Lilleker points out, interviewing former elites in general creates access issues and the longer time frame of my research question (1990–2010) generally exacerbated these. Here, I tried to use snowball sampling to at least talk to a former deputy or (younger) colleague, but given the staffing issues in CEE presidential offices in the early 1990s, this was only possible on two occasions.

Notwithstanding the particular problem of ageing respondents, my response rate was also otherwise lower than I had initially expected. This was partly due to the relatively short period that I could stay in each country. Elites often have unexpected breaks in their schedule and are then willing to fit researchers in at a moment's notice, yet my ability to be 'on-hold' for interview opportunities was relatively limited. On the other hand, non-response (or not receiving a definite response) was also determined by more recent events or ran among political lines. In Poland, the crash of the presidential aircraft in April 2010 (causing the death of the presidential couple together with several high-ranking politicians) and the controversies surrounding its aftermath had made elites associated with the late president understandably more wary of giving interviews on the subject of his presidency. In Hungary, on the other hand, the resignation of the current president during my stay in the country and the widespread foreign criticism of the government led by Viktor Órban at the time made it

difficult to arrange interviews with respondents from that side of the political spectrum.

Nonetheless, studies that use elite interviews are more able than others to counter potential bias through non-response. As Kenneth Goldstein points out, the relatively large amount of information that is available on high-profile personalities allows for assessing in how far non-respondents differ from those successfully interviewed elites. In my case, I used mostly newspaper interviews given by non-responsive elites as well as my interviews with experts to ascertain that the results of my interviews were not subject to any systematic bias. Furthermore, the fact that several successfully interviewed elite respondents had served in relevant – albeit different – roles during several episodes of interest (e.g. one respondent had been presidential advisor, member of parliament (MP) and cabinet secretary throughout their political career) also helped me to make up for a lower response rate.

Interestingly, I could find some general differences between countries with regard to how likely respondents were to suggest other interviewees. In Poland and Estonia, respondents were generally most likely to suggest other potential interview partners – often even across party lines. They also provided me with contact details and in a few cases even spontaneously took it on themselves to arrange another interview on my behalf. In Hungary, respondents were slightly less inclined to suggest other potential interviewees and provided less specific contact information than my Polish and Estonian respondents. In a few cases – after having asked about my previous interviews – respondents also concluded that I already talked to all relevant people. Nevertheless, respondents were generally still helpful and the openness to requests for other interviewees was not associated with a respective respondent group. In Slovakia, however, it was mainly the national experts who were very helpful in referring me to their colleagues while 'political' respondents (with notable exceptions) showed less inclination to recommend other potential interview partners.

Despite all difficulties, I was eventually able to complete 65 elite interviews.

Adapting the Original Interview Guide

My original interview guide proved to be a very useful tool in conducting my interviews. Nevertheless, I also had to make several changes so that my interview guide continued to develop throughout my field research. Initially, my questions had been grouped into thematic

blocs relating to the different areas of a presidential activity. However, while this corresponded to my previous statistical analysis and mirrored the planned outline of my case studies, it also contained some content overlap. This issue had not come up when practising the interview before entering the field, but my first actual interviews immediately revealed that my interviewees felt that they were asked the same question over and over again. Therefore, I started to re-group my questions by time frames so that the conversation would revolve around the president's use of powers in a particular period of time. This not only contributed to an easier flow of conversation but talking about presidential activism during a particular period also frequently triggered respondents' memory of other relevant events. Furthermore, I was repeatedly able to use such memories to lead over the conversation to the next bloc of questions while remaining at the same 'depth' (i.e. I did not have to guide my respondents through a series of more general questions to the information most interesting to me). A further amendment to my original interview guide was that I started to adapt it not only to my respondent groups but also specifically to every individual respondent in order to achieve the best outcome. This 'tailoring' of the interview guide mostly consisted of introducing more specific references to respondents' activities or other relevant events. In the majority of cases, these references were enough to cue a relevant response from my respondents and helped to transform the interview in a real 'conversation with a purpose', as Walter Bingham and Victor Moore describe it.

As every interviewer, I was also faced with the question of truthfulness of my respondents' answers. As some of the questions I asked concerned events that had taken place more than 15 years ago, I was also concerned that respondents' memory of the time was simply not as reliable. After the interview, I was, of course, able to compare respondents' answers with secondary sources. Yet during the interview I was restricted to my memories of previous interviews and my own preparation which – irrespective of its thoroughness – could not always prepare me to immediately ascertain the credibility of an answer. While there was no easy solution for this problem, I found that preparing myself for politely challenging the answers of my respondents even if I only suspected contradictions was a useful strategy to increase response validity. Rather than probing further by asking for more details, I confronted respondents with another view or interpretation of a situation (e.g. by quoting what another respondent had said or by simply playing the role of the devil's advocate). This allowed respondents to potentially rephrase or qualify their previous answer and thereby increased response validity. I also felt that this made the interview situation much more

natural and enjoyable for my respondents (one of my most high-ranking interviewees even told me that he had rarely been asked such tough questions but that he had thoroughly enjoyed the sophisticated exchange).

Last, I adapted the convention to move from more general to more specific question for my purposes in that I usually started by asking about processes in general (e.g. how bills are processed in the presidential office before a veto decision is taken) before I asked about a respondent's particular role in them. This allowed me not only to gain a deeper understanding of the processes I was studying but to gauge how 'first hand' the answers were that I received.

Specifics of Elites in CEE

Reviewing the literature, I felt that there is a convergence of experiences by a variety of researchers when it comes to elite interviews. My experiences, too, can only corroborate the general advice given in the literature. Nevertheless, I still found that there are some country-specific issues that researchers should take into account when conducting similar research in the region.

Contacting Elites

I contacted most of my respondents by email and had the impression that this was the preferred and most effective method of contact in all countries. Contact by telephone, however, worked well only in Poland where I was able to speak the local language, or when telephonic contact had previously been agreed by email in the remaining countries. Some researchers still advise to send formal letters to arrange interviews, yet while waiting in front of respondents' offices and talking to their staff, it seemed to me that this was contradictory to stressing the fact that elites are particularly busy. My interview partners would rarely have time to read longer descriptions and go through credentials themselves and neither did their staff. I therefore kept my requests relatively short but always included a link to my personal website and departmental profile in my email signature. This way, respondents could verify my institutional affiliation and access more information about me and my research if they

required it (it should be noted that my website statistics showed that only about a third of my respondents made use of this possibility). Furthermore, I felt that the quicker and gradually less formal exchange through email (often directly with elites themselves) helped to establish a certain degree of trust and familiarity even before the interview that formal letters could not have conveyed.

Recording and Attribution

The question of whether to tape-record interviews is a topic of fierce debate in the literature. While some argue that interviews should always be tape-recorded for the sake of accuracy, others point to the fact that it may hinder the establishment of trust and good rapport. In my case, I eventually chose to take notes by hand and only tape-recorded interviews when respondents actively suggested it themselves. The reason for this was that during the post-transition period, scandals involving – albeit secret – tape recordings of politicians had rocked many Central and Eastern European democracies, including all of my case study countries. Furthermore, my interviews were largely aimed at gaining very personal insights in decision-making mechanisms that do not take place in the public eye. While any informal mechanisms that evolved over time in this respect were far from unlawful, taken out of context respondents' answers could still be misconstrued and could have harmed their reputation. Therefore, I also chose to guarantee my interviewees' confidentiality in so far as to not attribute any quotes or information specifically to them. This way I was able to gain their consent for their names to appear in my list of respondents, while still enjoying the advantages of confidentiality in terms of trust-building and increased rapport.

Language

While Central and Eastern European elites are also generally more likely to speak a foreign language, there were certain country differences other researchers might want to take into account. I had the least problems in Estonia and Hungary, where the majority of elites spoke fluent English or German. Most respondent in Estonia would also have been able to answer my questions in fluent Russian. In Slovakia, language was a bigger problem – from information gained in my successful interviews, I could, for instance, ascertain that several of

my interview requests to former elites had likely remained unanswered due to a lack of sufficient fluency in English or German (I always sent request in both languages at the same time). In Poland, too, only few of my respondents would have been capable of conducting the entire interview in a foreign language. As mentioned above, my knowledge of multiple other languages could at least partly mediate this problem.

Conclusion: Qualitative Interviews in a Nested-Analysis Design

When I began my field research, I was still very much influenced by the extensive training in quantitative methods I had received throughout my studies. As such, my perception of the research problem was rather in quantitative terms of ‘explaining’ rather than ‘understanding’. The nested-analysis framework helped me to transition from a purely quantitative point of view to embracing the true character of qualitative research. The approach generally stressed the connection between my large-N statistical analysis and the qualitative in-depth case studies and was thus – despite all difficulties – a great help in developing my first version of the interview guide. The selection of cases based on model predictions does not come without methodological problems. Yet, it was a valuable aid in focussing the attention of my research and drawing up a suitable respondent sample. While I was in the field, the resulting interview strategies not only proved flexible enough to find out whether my theoretical assumptions worked in practice but also naturally led me to discover alternative and additional explanations. Especially the latter eventually transformed my perspective on my research project and helped me to arrive at a much more nuanced explanation and better understanding of presidential activism.

Every researcher needs to be fully aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their approach. Mixing quantitative and qualitative methods has the potential to provide a very solid foundation to reach valid and credible conclusion. Nonetheless, its implementation is only successful when the relation between the different methodologies is clearly specified from the start. Furthermore, researchers have to embrace the particular ontological and epistemological assumptions that are associated with each methodological strand. Only when both approaches are recognised as equally contributing to the result can the advantages of using a mixed-methods approach properly unfold.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

• 1. In how far does the nested-analysis framework limit the possibilities to completely understand a phenomenon rather than explaining it?

• 2. In how far can we trust elites' accounts of events? Should we always mistrust them?

• 3. How can a researcher using a mixed-methods framework ensure that qualitative findings are on par with the validity and reliability of statistical models? Can you think of specific quality measures for interview-based research?

• 4. In my research, I moved to a more confrontational strategy in interviews to achieve higher response validity. What could be the pitfalls of such an approach? Could it be used with other respondent groups?

• 5. Irrespective of the fact that many PhD projects would not allow it to hire interpreters due to budget constraints, would their use be a good way of dealing with language barriers in elite interviews?

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Contributor biography

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