Perception and Knowledge of Political Institutions in Contemporary Democracies: An Archival Perspective on Bridging the Democracy Gap

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An Archival Perspective on Bridging the Democracy Gap

- Democracy is a complex word and it does not seem to have the same meaning at different times and in different places.

- “Power to the people”? Which power should people have in a contemporary democratic society and which power they effectively have?

- The broader is the reply to this question and the larger could be the gap between the two ends.
An Archival Perspective on Bridging the Democracy Gap

The evolution of democracies reveals a contradiction between values and practice:

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<th>Ancient democracies:</th>
<th>Modern democracies:</th>
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<td>based on direct participation, considered as stakeholders only a little, elitist part of a society based on slavery.</td>
<td>based on parliamentary representation, often end up giving people only few opportunities to have an effective impact on public power.</td>
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Which role may cultural Institutions – Archives, in particular – have in bridging this [true or potential] democracy gap?

1. What parliamentary and political parties Archives could do in order to prevent and, if detected, to bridge the democracy gap;

2. If what Archives are doing has proved to be effective to achieve that goal.
The first two questions concerned in particular the average perception and the average knowledge of political Institutions in the respective Countries and professional experiences of the survey respondents;

There was also a question on the impact of the Archival Institutions’ initiatives on the level of perception and knowledge of political Institutions;

Finally, the inquired colleagues were asked to prioritize, from the most effective (n.º 1) to the less effective (n.º 5), some of the most usual Archival initiatives: printed publications; printed or electronic inventories of holdings; web-based initiatives; exhibitions; conferences and seminars.
1. In your opinion, which is the average perception of political Institutions, based on experience in your Country/Institution?
2. In your opinion, which is the average level of knowledge of political Institutions, based on experience in your Country/Institution?
3. In your opinion, which kind of impact could initiatives by Archival Institutions have on the level of perception and knowledge of political Institutions, based on experience in your Country?
• Prevailing percentage of negative perception of political Institutions

• Low-medium or medium level of knowledge of their role and activity.

• Archives initiatives were recognized as having a high-medium or at least medium level of impact on the society.

• This lead to other questions, such as:
  
  • Which kind of initiatives are supposed to be more effective to that aim?
  
  • Do our current initiatives match the expectations of our public?
4. Would you please rank, according to your opinion, from the most effective (1) to the least effective (5 or 6) the following types of Archival initiatives:

- Web based Initiatives: 55%
- Exhibitions: 18%
- Print/Web Inventories: 7%
- Conferences/Seminars: 9%
- Printed publications: 11%
5. Would you please rank, according to your opinion, from the most frequent (1) to the least frequent (5 or 6) the following types of initiatives taken by your Archival Institution:

- Web based Initiatives: 54%
- Print/Web Inventories: 23%
- Printed publications: 9%
- Exhibitions: 9%
- Conferences/Seminars: 5%
NATIONAL EXPERIENCES

• Are the initiatives promoted by our Archives compliant with the expectations of our public?

• A short review of our most recent national experiences will try to answer this question.
In order to improve transparency and promote a deeper knowledge of the archival holdings, the Austrian Parliamentary Archives plan to take the following measures within the next two years:

• an improved web-site will give the interested public the opportunity to search the holdings online in an inventory. Moreover, it has been planned to present some of the records on the web;

• the Archives will play an important role in the exhibitions in the parliamentary building in providing several exhibits and data;

• starting in 2023, the Archives will organize regular talks for the scientific community. These presentations will primarily deal with parliamentary history.
In the case of the Portuguese Parliament Archives, the Web based initiatives, rated first (in 1st place), in the questionnaire, have known, since 2018, a boost through virtual exhibitions displayed in the parliament website.

One of the possible examples is the periodical virtual exhibition called “PERCURSOS” (“routes”), which intends to widely promote the historical archival collection of the Parliament, by, each year (usually aligned with the ICA International Archives Week), selecting a subject and related documents and, thus illustrating the changes and continuities of the Portuguese parliamentary activity. These periodical virtual exhibition targets all kinds of audience and a variety of subjects, such as:

- Portuguese Constitutions – since 1822 until the present moment;
- Epidemics and the Parliament (the parliamentary activity during the Covid-19 pandemic and its comparison with other past pandemics or epidemics);
- Empowering Archives – Collaboration and Networking in the Portuguese Parliament (exhibition on how the documentation held by the Archive is used in the daily work of the Parliament Communication Department);
- Archives are We – the stories the archive tells (a look on the photographic collection of the Parliamentary Archive and how it reflects the changes in the way the Parliament deals with the citizens and receives them – or not – in the formal spaces).
Also, the initiative which was rated second (in 2nd place) - the web inventories - is an ongoing project of the Archive, and it has already available the online publishing of the inventories of the major *Fonds regarding the Constitutional Monarchy period (1822-1910).*
PORTUGUESE PARLIAMENT HISTORICAL ARCHIVES

• It is also a policy of the Portuguese Parliament the maintenance of open channels of communication with the citizens, through the website page (Citizenship and Participation), which includes the citizens’ mail, online submission of citizens’ petitions or requests for referendum;

• Communication with the citizens is actively promoted through social media (Facebook / Instagram);

• Also available for public access (there is a whole section called ATIVIDADE PARLAMENTAR in the Parliament website) are the current parliamentary activities (such as the agenda, voting, approved diplomas, law proposals and projects which are presented by the government or by the MPs and their respective processes, debates).
ITALIAN PARLIAMENT ARCHIVES

- A particular case is given by the **Italian experience**, where parliamentary Committees of inquiry conduct their investigations and examinations with the same powers and the same limitations as a judicial authority (article 82 of the Italian Constitution). As a result, parliamentary Archives play an autonomous role in preserving also classified records produced or received by Committees of inquiry.

- Since 2013 both Chambers of Parliament promoted a wide declassification activity on these particular holdings of their Archives. Hundreds of thousands of pages of documents concerning the most controversial and tragic periods of the history of the Italian Republic have been made searchable through particular links on the homepage of the websites of Parliamentary Historical Archives.
The Knesset Archives promote very hard the principles of transparency and accessibility to the public through the website, specially through a multi-year and comprehensive digitization program. All the minutes of the plenary debates and committee debates since the establishment of the Knesset (1948) until today are available to the public on the Knesset website.

The Knesset has established a National Legislative Database that makes accessible to the citizen all bills and laws submitted since 1948, linked to Plenum session protocols and committee discussions, and to the all the amendments of the initial law, in a free and user-friendly way.
ISRAEL PARLIAMENT ARCHIVES (THE KNESSET ARCHIVES)

• The digitization project also included all the classified materials of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. In the past year the Archives have hired a dedicated employee to declassify these materials in accordance with the provisions of the Archives Law and the Archives Regulations. The protocols of the first 30 years of the State have already been declassified.

• The archive has a page in the Knesset Website "Archives Treasures" that is updated several times a year to present to the public interesting documents, pictures and video items regarding a specific subject like pandemics across the history or unpublished pictures from the days after Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin assassination in the Knesset building. In collaboration with the Press Department, the Archives makes interesting stories accessible to the public through written and electronic media.
The Archiv der Sozialen Democratie is working on several archival projects aiming to enhance the insight on democracy and its processes and mechanisms, promote archival holdings and enable scientific studies.

Accessibility, transparency and sustainability play a significant role within the project of digitization of central debate protocols of Social Democratic Party of Germany as well as of essential national labour union organizations. Such records visualize the process of shaping and formulating options and opinions in a political party and by that contribute to a better comprehension of democracy. The digitized records will be presented as digital source editions.
Currently the Archives are planning to implement a digital reading room to enable an extensive search online in all archival holdings.

The Archiv der Sozialen Democratie is engaged in the digital archiving of websites and social media of relevant movements and persons within the spectrum of social democracy in Germany. The Archives’ website publishes on a regular basis blog texts that among other things deal with historical events or present archival objects. Additionally, the Archiv maintains its own Twitter account and by that interacts with interested citizens.
CONGRESS OF DEPUTIES ARCHIVES, SPAIN

• In relation to Spain, the questionnaire received replies from many information professionals from different parliamentary archives. It must be remembered that Spain has the Cortes Generales, formed by the Congress of Deputies and the Senate, but we also have 17 regional parliaments.

• The data related to the answers obtained by the staff of the parliamentary archives of Spain reflect that the perception of the political institutions in this country is negative - being the most frequent result obtained - and then neutral. In relation to the level of knowledge of political institutions, the highest result of the survey has been low medium - the most answered - followed by medium.
As to the question regarding the impact that archive initiatives can have on the perception of political institutions, the highest result is for a medium impact followed by high-medium.

In this regard, web based archival initiatives have been considered the most effective, followed by exhibitions whereas printed publications resulted the worst valued. Several colleagues from regional parliaments replied that they find also guided tours particularly effective.
The results concerning the most frequent initiatives in the Archives of the parliaments of Spain coincide with those that are considered most effective from the replies to the questionnaire, being web based initiatives first, followed by exhibitions and, finally, printed publications, considered less effective.

Many additional comments to the questionnaire highlighted ideas like the possibility of more university internships or organized visits from schools to the parliamentary Archives in order to better understand this Institution from an early age. Another comment stressed that “transparency” will remain unreal as long as access to documents remains closed: “Archives in the darkness, political Institutions without light”.
CONCLUSIONS

• Parliamentary and Political Parties Archives have, indeed, promoted the culture of democracy by making more and more use of both new technologies and traditional archival tools.

• The expected impact of these initiatives has been high and demonstrate the significant and effective contribution of the Archives in bridging the gap of democracy.

“Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit”
“Perhaps even these things will be good to remember one day”