Government and Opposition (2023), **58**, 661–681
doi:10.1017/gov.2021.58

Government & Opposition

ARTICLE

The Interview Method in Comparative Politics: The Process of Interviewing Far-Right Actors

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(Received 4 July 2021; revised 11 October 2021; accepted 15 October 2021;
first published online 17 December 2021)

Abstract

Interviews have been the basis for some of the greatest insights in many disciplines but have largely been on the backstage of comparative political inquiry. I first rely on bibliometric data to show the limited use of interviews in research published by major journals in the past 30 years. I then focus on how interviews are used to study a hard-to-reach population: far-right actors. Using the extant literature and reflecting on my field experience with far-right leaders and functionaries, I examine in detail how interviews help investigate this phenomenon; I analyse challenges related to interview access, rapport, analysis and ethics and offer remedies. I argue that comparativists using interviews need to address these challenges by explicating and reflecting on the process through which they collect interview data rather than solely focusing on the data itself.

Keywords: interview method; far right; comparative politics; interview process

Interviews have been the basis for some of the greatest insights in the humanities and the social sciences but have largely been on the backstage of political scientific inquiry. Thucydides talked with Athenians and Peloponnesians to provide an account of the Peloponnesian Wars (Hammond and Rhodes 2009); Sigmund Freud conducted therapeutic interviews with his patients to develop his psychoanalytic theory; and Jean Piaget conversed with children to advance his theory of child development (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 9). But in political science, interviews have a secondary status in research and lack the autonomy awarded to other methods of social scientific inquiry. Even during the major pushback of qualitative methodology to quantitative research (Brady and Collier 2004; George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2007; Mahoney 2010), the interview method remained on the sidelines of methodological debates. This is not because interview-based research is rare but it is mostly because many of those who use it focus more on the output and less on the process of the interview method.

The secondary status of interview-based research cuts across political science subfields but is most surprising in comparative politics, where one would expect interviews to be valued the most. The seeming revival of single-country cases in comparative politics and the emphasis on theory generation and testing has not been accompanied by a renewed focus on the use of interviews in political research. Instead, a significant number of such studies rely on quantitative methods (Pepinsky 2019) and interviews are used sporadically, if at all. Graduate students in political science programmes are trained to use methods of collecting evidence that are depicted as more systematic and interviews are often used informally, in early stages of research, rather than as fully fledged methods for collecting and analysing evidence. The way political scientists approach interview-based research contrasts with that of anthropologists, sociologists, geographers or historians, who rely on, think about and reflect upon their interview inputs, outputs and processes (Gubrium et al. 2012; Skinner 2012). Despite important scholarly efforts to rejuvenate the interview method in political science (Mosley 2013), only a small fragment of the work published in major political science journals relies on in-depth or semi-structured interviews.

The main purpose of this article is to utilize insights from empirical research in comparative politics to highlight the value of interview-based research. To gain such insights, I first rely on bibliometric data to show the limited use of interviews in research published by major political science journals in the past 30 years. I then focus on how interviews are used to study far-right actors in Europe. Using the extant literature and original field notes from 58 interviews with far-right leaders and functionaries, I examine in detail how interviews have helped illuminate important aspects of this phenomenon, analyse challenges related to interview research and offer remedies. I argue that the study of the far right is particularly useful for the discussion of the interview method because far-right leaders and functionaries are a hard-to-reach population – they are generally stigmatized like white-collar criminals (Dodge and Geis 2006), terrorists and extremists (Harris et al. 2016; Khalil 2019) or AIDS patients (Ware et al. 2006); and they tend to be sceptical, wary and busy, like business and professional elites (Hertz and Imber 1995). As such, far-right actors accumulate and accentuate some of the intrinsic challenges of the interview method and, hence, make the proposed remedies generalizable to studies of hard-to-reach groups and, to a large extent, to broader populations. The article focuses on different types of in-person interviews that allow for guided and meaningful conversations with such 'hidden' populations (Noy 2008) and yield data subjected to qualitative analysis.

The article stresses the importance of finding a more meaningful balance between the interview *output* and the interview *process*. This balance requires reporting not only the interview data itself (e.g. quotes) but also explicating the process through which it was collected. A focus on this process requires the adoption of a holistic view of the interview endeavour to include thorough explication of, and reflection on, issues of access, rapport, analysis and ethics. Building on the experience and fieldnotes from interviews with far-right actors, the article argues that this more holistic approach to the interview process offers comparative political scientists the means to better evaluate and, ultimately, appreciate the net contribution of interview-based research.

Interviews in comparative politics

Some of the best-known works in comparative politics rely on interviews for at least part of the research (Wood 2009). For example, Alfred Stepan's analysis of civil–military relations in Latin America benefited from casual and formal conversations with hundreds of Brazilian military officers. His interviews with colonels, generals and officers provide a rare glimpse inside a 'semiclosed institution' (Stepan 1971: 272). In *Who Governs*, Robert Dahl relies on nearly 50 interviews with individuals who participated in city politics to analyse political life in New Haven. Among other things, his interviews allow him to reject as 'improbable' the widely held belief that 'a secret cabal of Notables dominates the public life of New Haven' (Dahl 1974: 185). In *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), James Scott discovered 'everyday resistance' through his interviews with the 'village poor' in 'Sedaka'. His extensive and repeated conversations with the Malaysian villagers allowed him to turn the Gramscian notion of hegemony on its head by showing how the subordinate defy the prevailing ideology.

Despite their contribution to comparative political research, interviews have not had a very prominent status in political science methods, even among qualitative methodologists (Tansey 2007). Many graduate students start their field research by 'just talking to people' (Mosley 2013: 1) but, at least in top political science, and even in comparative politics journals, interview-based research seems to be a 'neglected or mistrusted source of evidence in the investigation of political phenomena' (Bleich and Pekkanen 2013: 84). Bibliometric data based on all articles published in 11 major political science and comparative politics journals indicate the poor status of the interview method across time (Figure 1). According to the Web of Science database, out of the 11,295 abstracted articles published in these journals between 1992 and 2020, only 207 or 1.8% mention the use of interviews in their abstracts (Online Appendix 1). By means of an indicative comparison, surveys are mentioned in 1,446 abstracts or 12.8% of the total.

The examination of the 207 articles signalling the use of the interview method highlights a number of interesting patterns. First, interviews are rarely the only method used in journal articles. The vast majority (74.9%) of articles use interviews alongside other methods (Online Appendix 2). Second, interview-based studies tend to be geographically focused on a single case. Given the contextual knowledge, linguistic skills and complicated logistics required to conduct interviews, it should not be surprising that nearly three-quarters (72.5%) of all articles using interviews are analyses of a single case or country. Third, unlike sociologists (Ostrander 1993), political scientists tend to 'study up' and interview (usually male) elites. Nearly two-thirds of the articles rely partly or wholly on interviews with the powerful: politicians and bureaucrats (Online Appendix 2). Finally, the number of interviews conducted for an article signalling the use of this method varies, depending on who the interviewees are. Interviews with country presidents and prime ministers or 'regular interviews with a ruling monarch' (Jones 2015) are very rare and when this happens it tends also to be reflected in the limited number of interviews conducted. The majority of articles signalling the use of the interview method tend to rely on a few dozen interviews. Interestingly, a significant number of articles offer no details about the number of interviews (Online Appendix 2).

The secondary status of interviews in political research largely reflects the positivist emphasis of political science. Unlike interpretative approaches dominant in other fields, political science has a positivist epistemological bent. Political scientists are more interested in accumulating data to test their hypotheses instead of

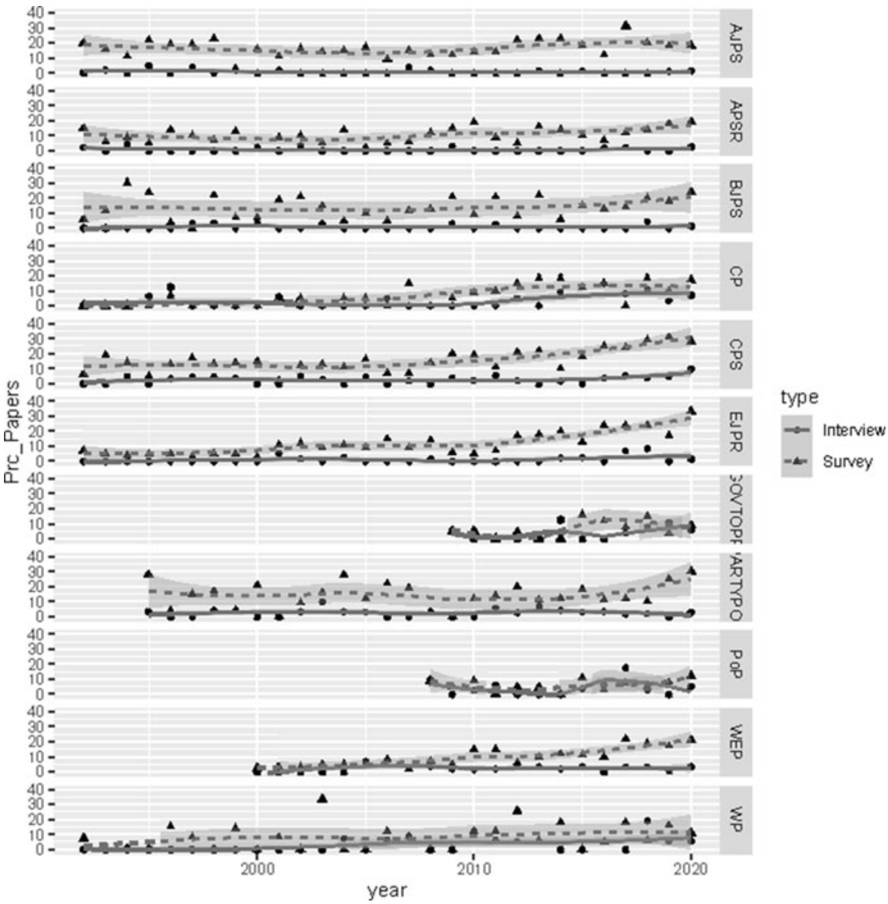

Figure 1. Percentage of Abstracted Articles Mentioning the Use of Interview and Survey Methods in 11 Major Political Science and Comparative Politics Journals
Note: Abbreviations for journal names are given in the Online Appendix.

acquiring 'understandings' or 'meanings' to interpret the world. Compared to other methods, interviews are not as effective a means to collect large amounts of data. Some of the best examples of interview-based research rely on hundreds or thousands of interviews over long periods of time, which most graduate students or, even, senior scholars cannot afford (Aberbach et al. 1981; Dexter and Kerle 1969; Hall 1998). Today few graduate programme directors would be comfortable supporting students to spend as much time as Stepan or Scott spent in the field.

The positivist focus of political science has meant that the few dozens of interviews that articles using interviews tend to rely on (Online Appendix 2, Table 4) cannot be granted the same research status as methods yielding measurable and quantifiable data. Not surprisingly, even those articles in comparative politics using single-country cases 'are much less likely to be exclusively qualitative today than they were in the 1970s or 1980s, and much more likely to be exclusively

https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.58 Published online by Cambridge University Press

quantitative' (Pepinsky 2019: 191). The decisive turn in comparative politics to quantitative methods has not only sidelined qualitative research but it has also encouraged a reflection on research transparency. Influenced by discussions regarding quantitative methodology, the quest for more transparency led to suggestions for data-sharing protocols similar to those that top journals have for original data sets. Largely as a reaction to this push for data sharing, which in the case of interviews would mean sharing transcripts (Moravcsik 2010), qualitative scholars have started turning more attention to the processes through which evidence is generated, analysed and interpreted (Jacobs et al. 2021).

With regards to interviews, the attempt to alleviate scholarly mistrust of qualitative evidence generated proposals about how interview data should be reported. This has turned attention to primarily measurable characteristics of interviews, such as the interviewee sample, response rate, interview length and recording method. One suggestion is to document these elements of the interview process in an appendix (Bleich and Pekkanen 2013). The emphasis on these static components of the interview process can go some way in enhancing the transparency of the interview method but risks turning attention away from some of the most dynamic, and ultimately, more important aspects of the process. Issues such as interview access, rapport, analysis and ethics are critical in understanding interview-based research and, hence, necessitate adequate documentation and reflection. Without adopting this more holistic view of the interview process to include those more dynamic aspects, it would be harder for others to best appreciate the interview process. This is especially the case for research with hard-to-reach populations, which accumulates and accentuates some of the challenges that make others sceptical of interview-based evidence.

The interview method and the study of far-right actors

To highlight the value and challenges of interview-based research, I focus on research on a relatively hard-to-reach population: far-right actors. There is by now a sizeable literature on the far right that partly relies on interviews. I examine this segment of the extant literature alongside original fieldnotes from 58 interviews with far-right leaders and functionaries across five European countries (Online Appendix 3) to reflect on the use of the interview method. The nature of the actors illuminates not only the utility but also the challenges of the interview method and allows a consideration of potential remedies. In other words, interviews with this hard-to-reach population showcase some of the difficulties facing interviewers and, hence, highlight how the remedies offered can be generalized to interview-based research.

The term 'far right' is a generic term used to describe a relatively wide array of political actors, ranging from high-profile party politicians, such as Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, to racist activists such as the Proud Boys and QAnon members who stormed the US Capitol in January 2021. Much of the comparative politics literature on the far right has primarily focused on political parties (Mudde 2007). As is the case in comparative politics more generally, the use of interviews to study the far right is not as prevalent as other methods. Although much of the qualitative literature relies on single-country or small-N studies, which provide a fertile research ground for the use of interviews, few of the known studies on the far right rely on interview data. This is especially the case with early writing on the far right, which primarily deals with parties that were somehow associated with interwar extremism (e.g. in Italy, Germany or Austria). In the 1980s and 1990s, few scholars, if any, saw much value in interviewing extremists to gain insights about the development of their parties. There was an implicit concern, evident also in media discourses about the far right, that conversations with extremists would help legitimize them. This started changing in the late 1990s and in the 2000s: the rise of a number of far-right parties in Europe turned attention to various aspects of their development that required in-depth understandings of their internal workings (Kitschelt and McGann 1995). To gain such insights, scholars accepted the need for face-to-face interaction with their subjects and started using interviews to collect data for their party cases (e.g. Art 2005; DeClair 1999).

Interview-based work on the far right has made a number of contributions, highlighting the utility of the method. Some of these contributions are generally in line with the broader use of interviews in comparative politics: scholars of far-right parties have interviewed far rightists 'to understand the internal processes of a group' (Wood 2009: 126) and to gain important causal insights (Mosley 2013) on how far-right parties evolve. In his analysis of far-right parties across Europe, David Art (2011) relies on 140 interviews with far-right activists to show how repressive sociopolitical environments restrict the type of activists these parties recruit and, subsequently, their development. In repressive environments, these parties recruit the more militant activists, which ultimately doom the electoral prospects of these parties. But, contrary to what their opponents might believe, interviews show that militant activists are unlikely to be deterred by a hostile sociopolitical environment. In fact, there is significant interview-based evidence showing why they stick around: 'stigmatization may deter people from activism, as suggested by our comparison of the relative strength of extreme right in the five countries, but once they are in it it becomes the cement that holds them together because of the feeling of injustice and discrimination it generates' (Klandermans and Mayer 2005: 273). Interviews with activists who feel socially stigmatized show that their organizational exit has a lot more to do with internal feuds and infights than with the complications the stigma generates in their private lives (Linden and Klandermans 2006).

Apart from this well-known use of interviews to trace political processes (Tansey 2007), interviews have also been used in two less obvious ways, for interpretation and observation. Interviews help interpret quantitative or qualitative evidence from other sources. In their research on far-right activism, Antonis Ellinas and Iasonas Lamprianou (2017) focus on events organized by the neo-Nazi Greek Golden Dawn across a number of years. They aggregate thousands of local activities reported on the party website and then break the events down to the local branches that organized them. Using this data set of events, they measure the frequency of local branch activism. The statistical analysis of the data reveals inexplicable patterns: in some settings, there are high and continuous levels of activism and in others there is a major interruption in reported activities. Their findings could potentially show intrinsic errors in data collection or, more interestingly, internal problems in the party. Interviews with 17 leaders and functionaries of the Golden Dawn point to the latter. At a time when the party projected an image of organizational resilience during a criminal investigation against it, the interviews showed significant internal problems that were partly associated with environmental hostility. In some, albeit not all settings, the neo-Nazis had to shut down their local offices and leave. Whereas most research on far-right parties considers them to be highly centralized organizations, the interviews allowed the authors to make sense of their quantitative data and question the conventional wisdom. Moreover, the interview data provided an opportunity to generate various hypotheses for local organizational failure, an aspect of party life that has not received as much attention in the broader literature on political parties (Tavits 2013).

In addition, interviews provide opportunities for observational research. Although often dismissed as 'anecdotal evidence' and hence rarely used in subsequent analyses, observations are important in understanding the phenomena political scientists study. The collection of observational data comes at different stages of interview-based research. At earlier stages of research, the need to recruit interviewees might entail more than an email or phone call and could involve the attendance and observation of events (Dobratz and Waldner 2020). Party events furnish researchers with opportunities to get a closer and deeper understanding of internal party dynamics. In my own research, I observed dozens of events organized by the Golden Dawn and used them as an opportunity to establish contact with party functionaries. The observation of these events helped me understand the internal organizational problems of the party – evident in the decreasing number of activists in party events, and supporters attending them. In subsequent stages of research, on-site visits for interviews provide an opportunity to examine whether various elements of the interview environment correspond to the overall direction of the research (see also Woliver 2002). For example, my visits to many regional party cells across a number of European countries helped me gain a better understanding of the environment in which they operate. On some occasions, regional party offices were located in main city squares, right next to those of mainstream parties – an indication of a relatively 'accommodative' environment. On other occasions, they were in remote suburbs, away from prospective voters. A characteristic example is from the Golden Dawn, which relocated its main headquarters in an area that was thought to signal its purported attempt to become more moderate. Once I entered the building for an interview with one of its leaders, though, I quickly realized how far the party was from its proclaimed path to moderation. Instead of comfortable armchairs and conference rooms, the corridors of the party headquarters were lined with crash helmets, anti-riot shields and gas masks. These observations provided evidence that documented the resilient extremist nature of the party.

Challenges and remedies

Researchers who go into the field to interview a hard-to-reach population need to overcome a number of challenges. This section uses examples from interview-based work on the far right, my own field interviews with far-right actors as well as original fieldnotes to highlight some of the most important challenges and to offer potential remedies.

Access and rapport

The interview process involves two related challenges: access and rapport. Access is a general problem of interview research because it imposes important time constraints not only on the researcher but on the subject as well. Reflecting on 30 years of experience in interviewing politicians, Philip Cowley aptly describes the difficulty of the task at hand: 'You are asking them to do you a favour, in return for which they will likely get nothing. They don't have to do this; you're not a constituent. You're not part of their core business, or even their peripheral business. You almost certainly can't give them anything useful in return' (2021: 2). This problem is particularly acute for elite actors because they are usually surrounded and protected by 'organizational gatekeepers' (Hertz and Imber 1995: 1).

Far-right leaders and functionaries are a hard-to-reach population not only because, like Cowley's interviewees, they tend to be busy people but also because they are a stigmatized group and, relatedly, because they tend to view academics with suspicion or even as adversaries (Morris 2009). Due to the historical legacy of interwar extremism, most academic scholarship on the far right views it as a democratic pathology or, simply, as a democratic threat. Scholarly works apply a number of labels to describe these parties, from the more generic 'far right' or 'radical right' to the even less flattering 'extreme right', and avoid using the term 'nationalist', which these parties use to describe themselves. The way the far right is framed in the scholarly literature means that access is difficult not only to leaders and functionaries but also to simple members or supporters, who have a 'general suspicion of academics and journalists' (Mudde 2007: 267).

The second challenge is building rapport with the interviewees. The political or ideological 'distance' that usually exists between the researcher and the interviewee does not allow for the collaborative approach to interviewing favoured in other contexts (MacLean 2013). This is not a minor problem for, as Juan Linz points out, for a successful research endeavour 'there has to be some congruence between the person and the research' (Munck and Snyder 2007: 197). In disciplines more reliant on interviews, researchers overcome this problem through ethnographic work that allows them to establish the necessary level of rapport with their host communities (Boellstorff et al. 2012). The time spent for ethnographic work is often a stepping stone for meaningful interviews with key informants (Marcus 2012: xiv). In the case of comparative work on the far right, such levels of rapport are intrinsically harder to establish, both because of the normative distance between the researcher and the subjects but also because of the time needed to replicate the study of a single organization across geographical boundaries.

The challenge of building rapport exists in individual interview encounters as well as across encounters with members of a particular group, organization or community. And it ultimately affects access, as well. Access can be jeopardized during an interview, when the interaction inadvertently undermines the rapport established with key informants. For example, I once travelled to a European country to conduct an interview with the second-in-command of a well-known European far-right party. Despite having conducted at least a dozen interviews with other party leaders and functionaries and notwithstanding my long preparation for the interview, the interaction with this individual did not turn out the way I expected. After getting responses to less important warm-up questions, I asked him about some internal party issues: 'I have a special interest in your involvement in party activities in [name of city].' To my surprise, the question hit a raw nerve: 'Yes, but I do not', he replied, and shortly afterwards ended the interview. This single encounter jeopardized my access through the particular snowball path. In other words, a single interview not only cost me access to an important source but also undermined my access to the party more broadly. In the end, I was able to continue my research through different snowball paths but, after this particular incident, I had to avoid contact with other members of the organization for a few months to reduce the chances of entirely losing access.

The twin challenge of access and rapport is a major and continuous challenge when investigating organizations, as their examination requires conducting multiple interviews across time. This temporal dimension of the interview process is easily overlooked in methodological appendices that describe static elements of interview interactions. The challenge here is gaining and sustaining some level of rapport with multiple interviewees *throughout* this period. In my experience, I once carefully snowballed my way from the top to a closed and controversial national event of a far-right party. After building rapport with the organizers in interviews I had conducted in the previous months, I had agreed with them that this event would give me an opportunity for a number of additional interviews as well as observational data. A day before the event, my efforts were derailed when a local journalist I consulted for contacts took the liberty to refer to my presence in a newspaper article. He wrote in a front-page story that there was international interest for the antifascist mobilization against the event and that [my name] was in town to observe the antifascist mobilization. Not only was the report inaccurate but it also framed my research in a way that made my potential hosts very uncomfortable about my presence and put my initial contacts in a difficult position within their organization. I was eventually able to convince the leadership of the party to allow me to attend the event, but, apart from a few slurs thrown at me from various participants, nobody talked to me for more than a few minutes. The loss of access meant that my research on the party could not go as deep as I would have wanted and I eventually had to analyse it as a secondary case.

Despite the intrinsic challenges of gaining access and building rapport with far-right actors, scholarly works on hard-to-reach populations provide many clues in how to overcome potential problems. One remedy is to try to establish access through different routes. Like Betty Dobratz and Lisa Waldner (2020), who ended up interviewing white supremacists after attending Ku Klux Klan rallies, I found it useful to attend public events of far-right parties, both those inside party premises and also outdoor events. Before, during and after the events I tried to talk to people and, if they were responsive, I would mention my research. I would then try to convince them to take part in it or put me in touch with people who could.

Like Michael Useem (1995), who managed to interview busy corporate executives, I also relied on intermediaries to gain access to far-right leaders and functionaries. On some occasions, I needed to spend considerable time with intermediaries not only to gain their trust but also to make sure they framed my research in a way that was not threatening for the potential interviewees. Although I was generally transparent about my research undertaking (Online Appendix 3), I found that the way research is framed can make a difference for both access and rapport. It is one thing saying, 'I am studying right-wing extremists' and another stating 'I study nationalist, or as the literature calls them, far-right parties in Europe.' In the seven years of doing research on these organizations, I made a number of cold visits to party premises and events but I never made a cold call or sent an email to arrange an interview. Fearing that a cold call might catch people at the wrong time or that an email might make it easy for them to deny a meeting, I found that person-to-person contacts can go a long way to achieve access. Overall, my experience parallels that of other scholars in this field, who 'found no support for the common perception that radical right parties deny access' (Art 2011: 26). On the contrary, on a number of occasions, and mostly during an interview, I gained a sense similar to the one Rosanna Hertz and Jonathan Imber describe, that my interviewees might have had 'a vested interest in creating constituencies, including social-scientific ones' (1995: ix).

The tactics used to build rapport with interviewees are largely overlooked in descriptions of the interview process but they are important to help better appreciate the interview endeavour (see Online Appendix 3). Learning new information during an interview necessitates tactful and smooth shifts of the interviewer into more sensitive topics, which interviewees might not feel as comfortable answering. Although it is tempting to 'cut to the chase' due to time constraints, 'it is best to leave anything that might provoke a row towards the end – in case it results in the interview being terminated' (Cowley 2021: 11). And, as indicated in my example above, also knowing how to change course and resist the temptation of ever cutting to the chase when there is a lack of rapport may mean that access is lost more widely. The possibility of delving into more contentious topics depends on the level of trust established during the earlier stages of the interview. Earlier responses or even the body language of the interviewee might signal the prematurity of an attempt to enter into more delicate matters. In such a case, it might be best to never ask difficult questions and hope for a second or third interview instead of risking damage to a relationship with an informant. Even the most well-prepared interviewers need to improvise during the interview (Leech et al. 2013). 'The best interviewer is not the one who writes the best questions. Rather, excellent interviewers are excellent conversationalists. They make interviews seem like a good talk among old friends' (Berry 2002: 679). Facing prominent far-right actors might make it intrinsically difficult to adopt an 'old friend' approach but, at the very least, interviewers need to keep the discussion going until they extract the information they think exists and hope on stumbling on information they did not think existed. David Arter's six interviews (2016) with the leader of the True Finns demonstrate the value of skilful interviewing and the theoretical dividends that can be paid when interviewers manage to establish rapport.

Another remedy to the risk of losing access and rapport is being more open and reflective about it (Wedeen 2010). At one level, this requires an assessment of the quality of information extracted from the interviews. A wrong choice of words or a bad question during an interview might mean that the quality of the information extracted during the interview might not be very high. This necessitates acknowledging the relative quality of the interview exchange. Rather than mere numbers ('I interviewed 24 individuals in party X'), interview exchanges need to be noted for their quality, as well. The hours spent with an informant might serve as a proxy for this quality and they should be duly acknowledged for each interviewee (Bleich and Pekkanen 2013). But the quality of an interview goes well beyond its temporal confines and relates to the rapport the researcher was able to establish with the interviewee. The way interviewers establish rapport is key to assessing the quality of the information they extracted and should hence be duly explicated in interview-based analyses (in the methods section or an appendix). At a different level, the remedy for the high likelihood of losing valuable access because of inadequate rapport necessitates a reflection of what it might mean for the overall project. As the example above might suggest, a mistake that leads to the loss of access to an interviewee might mean that the information collected for an organization might be incomplete and might need to be supplemented with additional information from different sources. This is especially the case for organizations in which access was established through a single point of entry instead of through multiple snowballs. For interviews to have a net contribution to research findings, it is important not only to be transparent about lack of access or interview failure but also to duly reflect what they might imply for a study.

Analysing interview data

Besides the issues of access and rapport, the analysis of interview data is also challenging and merits distinct attention in the description of the interview method. This description can take place either in the main text of a research output or in appendices. First, without proper description, the analysis of interview data runs the risk of giving the impression to reviewers and readers of making too much out of too little evidence. The search for and use of vivid quotes from an interview can help a researcher make an interesting point but cannot adequately substitute for the need to accumulate sufficient evidence before making broader claims. Take the example of the following response from the leader of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, who was asked about the organizational structure of his party: 'We have a military organisational model. We have a first, second, third and fourth office dealing with operations, personnel, etc., just like in the military' (Ellinas 2013: 553–554). This is arguably enough to confirm the general perception that the Golden Dawn is a neo-Nazi *Fuehrerpartei* with strong leadership that makes all the calls. Subsequent interviews with other party functionaries, though, reveal a much more complicated picture than the one the party leader describes. Instead of a party with strict military discipline and, as the quote describes, organizational differentiation, several party functionaries describe a 'charismatic party' with barely any discipline or structures (Ellinas 2020). This example shows the potential methodological pitfalls of overly relying on a few illustrative quotes to make analytical inferences. As convincing as they might be, interviews are, at best, vivid glimpses, not adequate reflections, of empirical reality. Or, as in the above example, they represent a model a leader has in his mind about how his party should work. This model does not necessarily correspond with reality. As important as elite interviews are in producing original material, they are not more than the version of reality of a single individual. Even if this individual is the leader of the party, the remarks made during an interview might not accurately capture what is happening on the ground (Mudde 2007: 37–38).

A related challenge in the analysis of interview data is avoiding the impression of 'cherry-picking' quotes. This is especially the case when interviews are mostly used for illustration purposes rather than as sources of evidence. 'When quoting an interviewee, researchers are particularly open to the charge that they have simply cherry-picked the most eye-catching statement without regard to its representativeness' (Bleich and Pekkanen 2013: 93). This critique of interview-based research is hard to ignore: interview analysis and reporting partly involve picking the textual information that has the highest informational value. This entails selecting a few sentences or paragraphs from hundreds of lines and dozens of pages of interview data. There are multiple problems in this selection process and they exist in both small- and large-N interview studies. One of the best-known interview-based studies on the far right, for example, accumulated 450 hours of audio recordings and 4,500 pages of transcripts. Given the vast amount of data the researchers ended up collecting, they conclude the study acknowledging that the interview data used are only a part of this data set (Klandermans and Mayer 2005: 275). In this sense, Linz is right when he advises prospective interviewers to 'take notes during interviews, because taping interviews and later transcribing them is an expensive and hopeless task. Taking notes also makes it easier to capture the gist of what the person says' (Munck and Snyder 2007: 197). But even when the interview data are smaller in size, the selection of textual information presents formidable challenges. The main problem revolves around transparency: since other researchers have no access to all the data from all the interviews, it is hard to know whether the text presented is representative of what the interviewees said. In the case of studies on the far right, transparency is further complicated by the fact that many informants agree to be interviewed – and, apparently, talk more openly – on the condition of anonymity or by 'guarantees of confidentiality' (Blee and Taylor 2002: 113). And, as those researching difficult topics attest, many interviewees feel more comfortable and talk more freely when there is no recording device – just note-taking (Reno 2013).

One proposed remedy to the intrinsic challenges of analysing interview data is more transparency. Pushed to its limits, this quest for transparency necessitates the publication of interview transcripts allowing reviewers and readers to evaluate the way interview data are analysed (Bleich and Pekkanen 2013; Moravcsik 2010). Arguably, the publication of interview transcripts would be equivalent to the expectation top political science journals now have that quantitative papers make their data sets available after provisional acceptance of the paper (Breuning and Ishiyama 2016). This suggestion is also in line with a more general push for transparency, and ultimately, replicability, evident in other fields, like management (e.g. Aguinis and Solarino 2019). But the proposal to publish interview transcripts comes with many problems, which qualitative researchers have carefully documented in the past years in the various scholarly exchanges over research transparency (Cramer 2015; Parkinson and Wood 2015; Yashar 2016). Such problems are particularly relevant to the study of the far right because the interviews involve sensitive topics and, sometimes, individuals who have been implicated in violent crimes. If pushed too far, the need for transparency comes at the cost of access, confidentiality and, in the end, originality (Jacobs et al. 2021; Monroe 2018).

A more preferable albeit general remedy to this problem comes from the subjects themselves. Unlike survey, experimental or archival data, published interview data are subject to the scrutiny of the subjects themselves. This is not only the case with eponymous elite interviews but it is also the case with anonymous non-elite interviews. Researchers who value continued access to their interviewees or communities put their professional reputation at stake when they publish excerpts from an interview. Many contact the interviewees and get their permission for attributed quotes they will use in published work. Although this does not suffice for full research transparency, it is a level of scrutiny that other types of research do not have. This level of scrutiny has increasingly more currency due to the advent of the social media and the ease with which subjects can use social media platforms to debunk problematic use of their interviews.

A more specific remedy to the challenges associated with the analysis of interview data is to triangulate the evidence (Natow 2020) and to duly explicate the triangulation process used. Implicit in most interview-based research, the triangulation process involves 'the use of multiple sources to cross-check the same information' (Solarino and Aguinis 2021: 664) and is particularly important when it comes to verifying sparse factual information (Davies 2001). Triangulation can take different forms – data, positional, geographical and temporal – and its explication helps avoid the analytical pitfalls described above. Data triangulation is probably the most common form of triangulation since it involves the accumulation of evidence from different sources to describe political processes. Many works on the internal dynamics of far-right parties inadvertently rely on newspaper archives and party documents to construct party trajectories. Elite interviews with party functionaries help verify this information (e.g. Declair 1999; Goodwin 2011). For example, in their analysis of the Hungarian Jobbik and Casa Pound Italia, Andrea Pirro and Pietro Castelli Gattinara (2018) use interviews with high-ranking officers of the two parties to verify information from other sources regarding their organizational structure, processes and mobilization. Positional triangulation is when the researcher interviews individuals in positions that would give a different or contrasting perspective to the issue at hand. In my research on the Golden Dawn, I interviewed a number of far-right functionaries who claimed that they gave up their involvement in particular localities due to strong societal resistance (Ellinas 2020). Since this contrasts with the evidence reported elsewhere (Klandermans and Mayer 2005; Linden and Klandermans 2006) and since it could indicate a typical case of 'self-victimization' (Reno 2013), I also relied on interviews with local antifascists to verify the information provided in the initial interviews. When the two narratives coincided, it was easier to consider their narratives as a close approximation of reality. Triangulation can also be geographical and it involves interviewing people in different geographical locations within a country. Due to the labour intensiveness of this data collection method, interview-based research primarily takes place in central country locations – mostly in capital cities. In his research on the British National Party (BNP), Matthew Goodwin conducted 49 interviews with 27 activists in both urban and rural settings and across both England and Wales. This limited the risk of over-relying on information from a particular faction of the party – a risk that is common when the sample is recruited through the 'snowball' method (Goodwin 2011). Temporal triangulation is when interview data are collected from the same individuals in different periods in time. By repeating interviews with BNP activists (and the leader, Nick Griffin), Goodwin was able to do what most anthropologists are expected to do: establish a rapport with his interviewees, elaborate on key and sensitive topics and verify some of the information collected earlier.

Ethical challenges

An important challenge of interview-based research relates to the ethical dilemmas generated during the interview process. Interview encounters 'involve a level of unpredictability' (Marzano 2012: 446) and create 'moment-to-moment ethical dilemmas' (Pierce 1995: 97) that cannot be easily anticipated by the interview protocols approved by review boards, and these compel researchers to make spontaneous decisions during the interview process. The decisions researchers make during the interview and the 'unexpected challenges' they encounter tend to remain unacknowledged by most (Aguinis and Solarino 2019). This is largely because researchers in comparative politics are more interested in the interview output (e.g. illustrative quotes) than in the interview process that produces it. Although some researchers publish methodological appendices detailing their interview schemes or protocols, there is usually limited information on the ethical challenges generated during the interview process.

The ethical dilemmas researchers confront and the way they resolve them is an important part of interview-based research that requires more attention because it helps highlight the dynamism, and ultimately, the value of the interview method. Take the example of research on parties that operate in 'repressive' contexts (Art 2011). Interviewees involved in such parties might be facing prosecution or litigation for their rhetoric or actions. Does the interviewer want interviewees to state things related to these judicial processes? The problem with interview research is that, even if the researchers want to avoid having to share their data with the police, it does not depend entirely on them. As the case of the 'Boston Tapes' of former Northern Irish paramilitaries suggests (Inckle 2015), the capacity of interviewers to successfully resolve the ethical dilemmas of interview-based research largely depends on what the interviewees say. In my experience, interviewees facing this predicament are well aware of the legal implications of their statements. And thus they avoid stating things that could get them in legal trouble. My experience is comparable to Katrine Fangen's: 'In conducting fieldwork among the far right, my standpoint was that if I had received concrete information about a person who was going to be killed or beaten up at a specific time, I would definitely have taken measures to prevent this from happening by contacting the police. On the other hand, I also knew that I would probably never hear such information' (2020: 250). Although far rightists are unlikely to share this kind of information, the deeper one delves into the research topic and the more people one interviews (especially in lower echelons of organizational hierarchy), the more likely it is to find individuals who are less aware of the risks associated with saying 'too much'. The ethical dilemma, then, ultimately becomes how much the researcher really wants to know.

Another ethical dilemma relates to what the researcher is willing to do to collect the interview data, especially when it comes to personal safety. This is not an issue when one interviews political actors who work within the institutional confines of the political system but it is a pressing concern when one seeks to access less conventional populations or people in organizations 'in the twilight zone between legal and illegal activities' (Klandermans and Mayer 2005: 52). Interviewees with a reputation for working outside the system and, in some cases, for being aggressive, raise safety concerns that, again, remain mostly unaddressed in research outputs based on interview data. These concerns are even larger when the interviews take place in unfamiliar settings, outside the 'comfort zone' of a conventional political environment. Dealing with some of these concerns is relatively easy. For example, researchers (and their ethics boards) having even the slightest concerns about safety might choose to avoid conducting the interviews or, at least, undertake them themselves instead of sending assistants or proxies (Cammett 2013). But some of the safety issues cannot be anticipated and need to be addressed on the spot. In my research, an 'ethically important moment' (Heggen and Guillemin 2012: 472) came up while interviewing legislators of a far-right party in Europe. At the very beginning of my visit, the interviewees insisted on giving me, first, a 'guided tour' of 'national problems' by driving a vehicle covered in party colours and logos through Roma-inhabited villages. When I asked about safety, they showed me a 'licensed' gun and told me that their 'opponents' did not have guns. Given the importance of these interviews for the rest of my study as well as the value of observational data (see earlier), the sight of a gun created an ethical dilemma of whether to continue or abandon my field trip. My contextual knowledge and background research suggested that, despite its radical positions, the party was not associated with criminal violence. I hence thought that the young legislators were just trying to impress me with their machismo and that there was no prior evidence indicating they would harm me, themselves or others. I chose to continue with the rest of the field trip and interview schedule as planned. Although the two-hour drive did not end up posing any safety issues for anyone, the pragmatic choice to ignore the sight of a gun highlights the ethical challenges interviewers might confront in unconventional settings. Collecting interview data in such environments raises questions about the ethical compromises made to achieve research goals.

The usual remedy to the ethical issues that come up during the interview process is to be more explicit about them and about the way they are resolved. This requires more reflection on the interview process than that afforded by the description of various static elements of interview-based research. Reflecting on the interview process does not mean abandoning the idea that social reality has some degree of independence from those who research it (Aguinis and Solarino 2019: 1292). The call for more reflection about the interview *process* need not come at the expense of the interview *product* (Mosley 2013) – it is not an appeal for an interpretative rather than a positivist emphasis on how interviews are used. It is, rather, a call for more attention to the ethical dilemmas generated by the relative uncertainty and unpredictability of the interview process. Other disciplines accustomed to doing research in unconventional settings highlight the importance of reflecting on the ethical conundrums of field research. Anthropologists who had to gain the trust of migrant smugglers in Mexico (De León 2018) or who witnessed peasant massacre in El Salvador (Bourgois 2007) provide telling evidence of the unpredictability of the research terrain and of the ethical issues fieldwork involves. Reflection on such issues does not entail 'endless reflexivity' or 'radical skepticism' about the interview data but an appreciation of the interview process as a 'complex social event' that necessitates better explication (Alvesson 2003: 14).

In political science, the systematic attention to the ethical conundrums facing researchers of sensitive topics means that they might have to report them by devoting a part of the study to detail them (e.g. in a methods section or an appendix similar to Online Appendix 3). Such attention to the ethical compromises of an interview process does not need to overshadow the interview data itself. But the explication of these ethical dilemmas might further highlight the added value of research in such settings and the net gain from collecting interview instead of other data. Being more explicit about the interview process can help other researchers reflect on their own research plans and better anticipate and resolve some of these dilemmas. It might also help ethics boards better appreciate the difficulty of fully regulating research that often leads to uncharted research terrain.

Striking a better balance between output and process

Interviews are a key part of field research but they rarely get the attention they deserve – often, not even by those who use them. Graduate students frequently start their fieldwork with interviews but by the time they come back from the field, their interviewees take the back seat in their publications, overshadowed by the more quantifiable part of their research. Even those who signal the use of interviews in their research do not always provide enough details about their method. Some manage to get access to key informants and rely on them for important insights but tend to avoid the critical reflection necessary to better understand the added value of their interview data. The main purpose of this article has been to use the extant literature as well as field experiences and original fieldnotes from research on a hard-to-reach population – far-right leaders and functionaries – as a way of showcasing the utility of the interview method, analysing its challenges and offering potential remedies. The main contribution of the article is in highlighting the need to pay closer attention to the interview *process*. Instead of solely treating interviews as data, interviewers will be better served by more carefully documenting and reflecting on the process that produced this data.

There are intrinsic difficulties in researching far-right actors through interviews. Despite the particularities of the research terrain, the scholarship on this phenomenon has helped highlight its added value. At a time when right-wing extremism is more relevant than ever, interviews have helped fill evidential gaps in causal theories and provided key pieces of information to trace developmental processes. Without interviews, it would be impossible to accurately interpret evidence from other sources or make important field observations.

Despite their added value, interviews pose significant challenges, especially for researchers seeking immediate results or research outputs. Interviewers need to gain and sustain precious access across time both with particular individuals and with the community they are researching. While in the field and during their interviews, they need to build a rapport with their subjects and resolve important ethical dilemmas. The challenges interviewers of far-right actors face are not unique but they are more accentuated here than in many other areas of study because far-right actors are often stigmatized by others and because they are generally unsympathetic to researchers. The main claim of this article is that, to the extent that researchers of a hard-to-reach population like the one examined here can overcome the challenges posed by the interview method, then the remedies offered can apply more generally.

Comparativists using interviews, then, can address these challenges by being more explicit and reflective about the process through which they collect interview data. Researchers using interviews in their fieldwork should be more explicit about the use of the method by providing enough detail about the way they went about establishing access with their subjects, building rapport, analysing the interview data and overcoming ethical challenges. They can devote part of their article or an appendix (e.g. see Online Appendix 3) to detail the process of collecting interview data. Research results that only use interview quotes without detailing the challenging process through which they were generated miss an opportunity to fully capture the dynamic nature and, hence, to showcase the value of the interview method. Without detailing this process, researchers will have a harder time convincing others about the intrinsic value of the interview method, thus perpetuating a vicious circle of underestimating, under-representing and under-utilizing interviews in political research.

Interviewers need to be not only more explicit but also more reflective about their method. The positivist bent in comparative politics has encouraged detailed discussions about the output of the interview process and less about the process itself. As research in other disciplines using interviews attests (e.g. Alvesson 2003; Dodge and Geis 2006; Ostrander 1993), a more reflective appraisal of the process can help to better highlight the strengths of the interview method. The examination of research with a hard-to-reach population showcased the intrinsic challenges of interviewing individuals with whom most researchers cannot establish adequate access or rapport to extract novel or hidden information. It highlighted risks associated with the analysis of this information and pointed to some of the ethical dilemmas that might surface during the interview process. The ethical boundaries of interview-based research cannot always be set a priori. One of the major strengths of interviews is that they can be used to discover new research terrain. But the effective exploration of this terrain might be filled with challenges that researchers and their regulators cannot always foresee. Being more reflective about the interview process can help explicate and acknowledge the difficulties researchers face and make others more appreciative of their endeavour.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.58.

Acknowledgments. I am thankful to Tim Bale and Vasiliki Georgiadou for the original encouragement to write about field interviews with far-right actors and to the A.G. Leventis Foundation for funding this research. I am grateful to Nancy Bermeo, Iosif Kovras, Iasonas Lamprianou and the Princeton Hellenic Studies 'Social Science' Research Community for comments on drafts and presentations. Iasonas Lamprianou helped me analyse the bibliometric data and Olga Demetriou read and commented on many drafts.

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Cite this article: Ellinas AA (2023). The Interview Method in Comparative Politics: The Process of Interviewing Far-Right Actors. *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics* **58**, 661–681. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.58