CHAPTER 6

Narrating the "Arab Spring": Where Expertise Meets Heuristics in Legislative Hearings

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Introduction

International reaction to the Arab Spring, explain Freund and Braga (2012, p. 131), "could be summarized by one word: surprise." This was the case for the vast majority of countries, including the United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (hereafter US). These countries, so often portrayed as close allies, encapsulated in the "special relationship" (or, as it has become today, the "essential relationship"), have long cooperated in foreign policy. There has been significant scholarly and journalistic interest in the reaction to the Arab Spring of the UK and US executive branches. Yet, in contrast, few scholarly works have compared and contrasted the foreign policy positions of the legislatures. In this chapter, we turn the spotlight that way and analyze the discursive responses of British and American legislators to the Arab Spring over a 13-month period from April 2011 to May 2012. Specifically, we compare hearings in the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs and the UK House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Our primary purpose is to understand how narratives were deployed, and to what effect. Given the role of experts in parliamentary hearings, we are also interested in how the participation of individuals with technical know-how and knowledge affects, and possibly corrects, the default (and often false) heuristics of politicians, or simply suggest different, more evidence-based story frames that, as shown by experiments, shape cognition (Jones and Song 2014).

Empirically, we draw on coding of the officially recorded minutes of three hearings of each committee, pertaining to the Arab Spring, using the narrative

policy framework (NPF) (Jones and McBeth 2010). In the remainder of the chapter we briefly introduce the context in which we use the NPF, and explain our design, expectations, and data. Then we present our empirical findings. In the conclusions, we explain why the experts' testimonies did not "fix" politicians' heuristics. We also discuss the differences between the UK and the US, and suggest implications for future research in this field.

Theoretically, this chapter contributes to the NPF in three ways. First, we consider the insights of cognitive and behavioral sciences—indeed, the field is moving in this direction, as shown by Chapter 1 of this volume. Second, we test expectations about the evolution of narratives in policy debates, in particular the expectation that experts correct the bias of elected policy makers. We do not find support for this expectation that is at the root of the system of experts' testimonies in parliamentary life, and suggest improvements. Third, we show how the NPF (a framework where studies tend to be quantitative) can perform equally well in "qualitative analysis mode".

The Arab Spring Reaches the US Congress and UK Parliament

There is general consensus that Tunisia was the site of the beginning of the series of popular uprisings that followed in the region. Situated in front of the municipal administrative building in the western Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, on December 17, 2010, 26-year-old fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in an act of political resistance that many have argued was "the spark that ignited the Arab Spring" (Willis 2012, p. 243), leading to the ousting of Tunisian president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. In the months that followed, and in the 13 months between April 2011 and May 2012 (the time-frame of this study), governments were toppled in Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, and with protests in Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Western Sahara, Morocco, and Bahrain. Table 6.1 provides a timeline of the main events. The underlying root causes of this movement are still not universally accepted or understood, and as such the attitudes of American and British legislators should be situated within this context.

Why examine the responses of representatives and, specifically, foreign affairs committees? In what ways do these actors matter? To start with, there are manifold formal and informal differences between the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs and the UK House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. Congressional committees, in the House of Representatives in particular, hold a great deal of sway as brokers in passing legislation and have even been labeled "mini legislatures in their own right" (Williams 1998, p. 102). With the direction of the Committee Chair, often referred to as a "legislative czar" (Storey 2010, p. 313) due to the power they hold, congressional committees enjoy the power to pass resolutions and send legislation to the Congress, and to formally challenge the powers of the executive branch. For example, in the 112th Congress, the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs passed H.R. 109, establishing a national commission to examine and limit presidential war powers. Their British parliamentary counterparts have

Table 6.1   Timeline to May 2012

December 2010	Protests sparked across Tunisia by self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid
January 2011	Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali flees to Saudi Arabia
January 2011	Mass demonstrations begin in Egypt, centered around Tahrir Square in the capital, Cairo
February 2011	Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak leaves office after 18 days of demonstrations
February 2011	Protests spread to Yemen, Bahrain, Western Sahara and, Libya
March 2011	Protests spread further to Syria, UN Security Council authorizes a no-fly zone over Libya, and NATO airstrikes begin
August 2011	Former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak goes on trial
October 2011	Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi is killed by a mob near his home town of Sirte, after rebels seize capital Tripoli in August
October 2011	Tunisia holds first-ever elections, with Islamist party Ennahda winning majority
January 2012	US NGO crisis in Egypt, where offices of organizations such as Freedom House and the International Republican Institute are raided and staff put on trial
February 2012	Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh official resigns
May 2012	First round of presidential election in Egypt, where Mohamed Morsi, eventual winner and representative of Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist party, challenges Ahmed Shafik

no such legislative power—rather, they produce reports and advice based on a series of hearings, but they have no ability to *force* the executive or even the House of Commons to respond to their findings. The House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs does not have the legal ability to subpoena any member of the executive, or even any single individual, to appear before them. This is true of all British Parliamentary Select Committees.

However, to merely examine the formal constitutional powers of the British and American parliamentary and congressional committee system is to ignore the informal influence and agenda-setting power that these bodies can wield. This is particularly the case for House of Commons Select Committees. Stapenhurst argues that since the establishment of select committees in 1979, the system "has been a success in providing independent scrutiny of the government" (2008, p. 88). Despite occasional criticism within Parliament of their role, the Hansard Society found, in 2001, that a resounding 84 percent of Members of Parliament (MPs) regarded select committee hearings as "effective in securing information and explanations from government" (Stapenhurst 2008, p. 88). Flinders also praises the "active role select committees play themselves in putting issues on the agenda and acting as a forum for public debate" (Flinders 2002, p. 28). Thus, while the British committee system may be endowed with comparatively less formal constitutional powers, these committees have wielded considerable "soft" power since their establishment.

Why the Narrative Policy Framework? Research Design, Expectations, and Data

The NPF (see Introduction to the volume; Jones and McBeth 2010) is a theoretical framework in the field of public policy analysis. At the outset, the NPF observes that policy controversies have a narrative structure and more generally narratives have an important role in how the policy agenda is set, decisions are made, and policies implemented (see the volume's Introduction).

Narratives operate at three levels: micro-individual, meso, and the macro level of culture and institutions (Shanahan et al. 2011, p. 540). In this chapter, we will look at the meso level. The meso level covers the policy subsystem and the groups and individuals within that system. Obviously we do not deal with the whole policy subsystem of foreign policy, but with one important issue (the so-called Arab Spring) within that system.

The NPF is grounded in three claims. One is that policy problems are socially constructed by categories and meanings (Shanahan et al. 2011). This is common to other narrative analysis approaches and the social construction of policy problems. In public policy processes, problems and issues like the Arab Spring are socially represented in public discourses and communication. In these social representations, facts are as important as emotions in the construction of a problem and the identification of the target populations involved in the design of policy (a point originally made by the literature on social constructions of target populations; see Ingram and Schneider 1993; see Introduction).

Linked to this concern with social representations, the second major claim of the NPF is that public policy making is grounded in narratives: by contrast, other theories of the policy process miss this important "class of variables" (Shanahan et al. 2013, p. 455). Or, when they refer to social representations, they point to "frames," " discourses," and "scripts"in general, without acknowledging the autonomous and specific functions played by narratives in public policy. A policy narrative is more structured than a frame (McBeth et al. 2010, p. 392). It is different from other texts because it contains a clear stance or judgment (on a policy-related behavior) and (at least one) categorization(s). The latter means that there is at least a "story character" who is cast as victim, hero, or villain (Shanahan et al. 2013, p. 457). To illustrate, a discourse theorist like Vivien Schmidt (2008) would analyze social representations on the basis of coordinative and communicative discourses. But, an NPF theorist would go deeper and ask questions about what is the narrative form in which a discourse is cast? Who are the heroes and villains? How does this narrative influence policy outcomes via its policy stance?

Narratives are therefore the main analytical focus in the NPF. And consequently, the NPF draws on pre-existing strands in policy research in arguing that actors involved in public policy making mobilize both evidence and emotional categories in order to persuade and influence decisions. Typically this is done by injecting elements of drama and by building doomsday scenarios for their audience—with the purpose of convincing them that a given course of action is necessary (see the original elaboration of this element in Roe 1994).

The third claim is that we can study the nature of narratives and their causal influence on public policy empirically. In the Introduction, the editors remark their difference with post-positivist scholars who argue that narratives are contingent on individual meanings assigned to text and words. There are more stable patterns generated by belief systems. The NPF is also different from ethnographic studies about how individuals provide narratives of their lives or organizations in which they work—in the NPF the focus is on public policy. We do not see the main difference between the NPF and post-positivist, interpretivist approaches as one of "scientific standards" versus "non-scientific standards." Rather, it is a different notion of the social sciences or ways of knowing (Moses and Knutsen 2012). For the NPF scholar, there are explicit, replicable, evidence-based standards. Socially constructed realities exist, but they can be studied with objective, transparent, and replicable methods that validate our inferences drawn from empirical observations. For an interpretivist, social science is about sense-making. Researchers can judge the quality of sense-making by using standards like reflexivity, trustworthiness, and explanatory coherence (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). The NPF, essentially, is a bridge (Shanahan et al. 2013) between those who believe that narratives matter in public policy making and those who believe in causality and the empirical nature of the social sciences (Maggetti et al. 2012). It argues that a social ontology can be known by adopting an objective epistemology (Radaelli et al. 2013).

This has two implications: first, it allows the NPF to be in conversation with—and contribute to—other theoretical lenses on the policy process that adopt a social ontology and an objective epistemology. Indeed, Radaelli (1999a), in one of the earliest studies inspired by the same assumptions that now we associate with the NPF, used narrative analysis to contribute to the development of the advocacy coalitions framework. Second, the core of the NPF is not whether the approach to evidence is qualitative or qualitative, but rather whether one believes that inferences from evidence should be drawn on the basis of objective standards like validity or reliability. Our chapter examines evidence qualitatively rather than using statistical analysis—and as such it illustrates this important point.

Specifically, in the chapter we examine six committee hearings by subscribing to the claims of the NPF. First, we need to present rival expectations. Foreign policy analysis points to a special relationship between the US and UK (Burk 2009). If this feature of foreign policy overwhelms the autonomous effects of narratives, we should find limited variation in narrative structures between the two sides of the Atlantic. There are many reasons why the narratives may be the same. One is that narratives are epiphenomena: they exist only to provide discursive fuel to the special relationship. To support the relationship coherently, they should not vary. In fact, what matters is the special relationship that binds the two countries: this deep structure of relations should generate more or less similar narratives of specific issues like the Arab Spring.

But, what are the expectations if narratives matter, instead? An expectation about the autonomous causal role of narrative on policy deliberations blends the NPF with the insights of cognitive and behavioral sciences. Drawing on a large

literature on the social psychology of experts (Tetlock 2005) and policy design (Schneider and Ingram 1988), we assume that committee members operate with cognitive heuristics, such as errors in probabilistic reasoning, false analogies, and distracting metaphors:

> [I]n making predictions and judgments under uncertainty, people do not appear to follow the calculus of chance or the statistical theory of prediction. Instead, they rely on a limited number of heuristics which sometimes yield reasonable judgments and sometimes lead to severe and systematic errors.
>
> (Kahneman and Tversky 1973, p. 237)

Given that experts are called in committee hearings to provide evidence, facts, and reasoned argumentation, we therefore expect their appearance will correct or, at least, limit the bias caused by these cognitive heuristics. Indeed, this hypothesis is the main rationale for bringing in experts' testimonies in parliamentary life. Empirically, it is borne out in the analysis of select committee hearings on the science-dense issue of bovine tuberculosis (BTB) management. In this case, Dunlop (2013) finds experts persistently challenge and correct misunderstandings or myths used by committee members. We call this expectation "narrative learning."

For an alternative expectation we enter politics. One can argue that committee hearings are not used to re-affirm the special relationship. Neither are they used to produce rational analysis and evidence-based judgment. In politics, hearings are yet another venue to mobilize political identities, attack the incumbent, and re-visit the balance of power between the legislative and the executive. They can also be used to test the balance of power between incumbent and the opposition, possibly with blame-shifting. One way to shift the blame is the "devil shift," originally exposed by Sabatier et al. (1987) and recently tested in the NPF as narrative device to overstate the power and competences of the "enemy" and understate the power of the narrator (Shanahan et al. 2013).

In short, policy narratives consist of beliefs, norms, and values as well as political narrative tactics (McBeth et al. 2010, pp. 394–395). This third expectation stresses the latter element. Instead of technicalizing politics—this expectation argues—the hearings facilitate the politicization of expertise. There is a long tradition of studies that suggests the many ways in which politics trumps technocracy (Radaelli 1999b). We call this expectation "narrative politics."

To summarize:

E1—*The narrative structure of committee hearings is the same in the US and the UK; narratives are determined by the special relationship. In order to be congruent with the special relationship, they should not vary in the two cases*

E2 *Narrative learning—Experts' narratives provide evidence that the hearings are used to correct bias and wrong heuristics*

E3 *Narrative politics—Actors deploy narratives in committee hearings to play power, identity politics, and devil-shift tactics*

To empirically appraise our three expectations, we need a consistent coding system to identify and compare narrative themes in the minutes from the committee hearings. To establish key criteria by which certain elements of discourse can be categorized, we draw on a previous coding frame developed in the study of European Union (EU) (Radaelli et al. 2013). Our coding frame is portrayed in table 6.2. Coding was carried out by the first author of the chapter and validated

Table 6.2 Coding framework

Identity	Official title or name of the committee hearing.
Lead discourse genre	What issue or theme does the committee hearing seek to address?
Type	What is the formal structure of the committee meeting? Are minutes taken, testimonies given, or evidence received?
Length	Word count transcribed in official minutes.
Initiator	Which specific actor called the specific hearing in question, and was charged with identifying and inviting the key witnesses?
Witnesses	Which individuals or organizations provide testimony to the committee as a witness, or invited expert?
Policy problem	What is the policy problem that the committee hearing seeks to address, or ultimately to remedy?
Terms of reference	Which terms are used to describe to the referent object or subject matter of the hearing in question? For example, the "Arab Spring" in this instance.
Self-identity	How do the committee, and the committee members, define their own role and identity?
Types of evidence	What is the form, nature, and basis of evidence provided?
Characters	Whom are the primary actors constructed through the narrative framework of the committee hearing?
Causal plot	What is the narrative arc(s) played out over the course of the committee hearing?
Heroes and villains	Which actors are constructed as "heroes" in a positive light, and which actors are constructed as "villains" in a negative light?
Metaphors	How are metaphors deployed to frame the policy problem or articulated solutions?
Conflict	To what extent do committee members, and witnesses, express contrasting or conflicting opinions or accounts?
Types of support for choice	How are proposed solutions to the policy problem justified or explained? What is the form of the supporting evidence presented?
Criteria	What criteria, if any, are utilized to judge the appropriateness of a policy response or solution?
Doomsday scenario	To what extent are "doomsday" narratives deployed to justify supporting a certain policy response or solution? To what degree is it stated that a "disaster" will befall a certain actor/actors if a certain policy response is not implemented?
Drama	To what degree is dramatic tension present in language deployed in the committee hearing?
Devil shift	Does the narrator underplay her power and overstate the power of the opponent to shift blame away?
Conclusion	What concluding remarks are offered to summarize the judgment of the committee?

Table 6.3   Minutes of committee hearings

Case ID	Committee ID	Title	Date
1	House of Reps Committee on Foreign Affairs	Shifting Sands in the Middle East	April 5, 2011
2	House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs	British Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring Part 1	November 29, 2011
3	House of Reps Committee on Foreign Affairs	Reflections on the Revolution in Egypt	February 5, 2012
4	House of Reps Committee on Foreign Affairs	Assessing US Foreign Policy Priorities and Needs Amidst Economic Challenges in the Middle East	May 9, 2012
5	House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs	British Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring Part 2	January 31, 2012
6	House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs	British Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring Part 3	April 18, 2012

by the second author in the spring of 2013. We reassembled all the empirical material used by the first author in the fall of 2013 to check on the robustness of the coding.

The coding criteria were applied to all six committee hearings, and were compiled into six different case records (one per committee), matching the minutes from the hearings (table 6.3) with the appropriate criteria, resulting in a set of codified data. The findings drawn from this codification have been split into thematic categories relevant for our expectations.

Findings

The Narrative Arc Over Time

At the outset, we describe briefly the different hearings over time, noting how the narrative changed over time. This gives us information on how the mood in the committees changed. The maturation or evolution of policy issues and controversies over time is a classic feature of the NPF (see McBeth et al. 2010 on evolution of wicked issues; see Radaelli et al. 2013 on narrative arcs): our time-frame is quite narrow and yet we do find narrative dynamics. We will then turn to the expectations with this contextual information in the background.

In both the US and the UK, we found a shift from "contagious optimism" (Ramadan 2012, p. 53) to the belief that "the 'Arab Spring' may slip into an Arab Winter" (Noueihed and Warren 2012, p. 302). The narrative arc—that is, the arc between facts and their policy implications, as implied in a narrative—moved in synch in the US and the UK. The following terms were used to refer to

the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa in the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs assembled to take evidence on April 5, 2011. These were all positive terms of reference:

- "Unprecedented changes" (Case ID 1)
- "Shifting sands in the Middle East" (Case ID 1)
- "Transformative moment" (Case ID 1)
- "Indigenous democratic moment" (Case ID 1)

The first hearing that the House of Commons held in response to the protests came later on in the year, on November 29, 2011. Yet, it appears that at this stage, the sense of optimism witnessed in Washington, DC (hereafter Washington), in April about the future direction of the uprisings remained in place:

- "Democratic transition" (Case ID 2)
- "Liberation struggles" (Case ID 2)
- "Arab Spring" (Case ID 2)

Over the course of these two hearings, the term "Arab Spring" was in fact invoked 12 times by US Congressmen and eight times by British MPs. "Spring," of course, is a term that invokes positive connotations, associated with a renaissance of sorts, or a fresh beginning, in the natural world.

However, by the time the two committees reconvened to discuss ongoing events for a second time, the discursive parameters and terms of reference had changed dramatically to express increasing skepticism about the chances for democracy in these transitioning countries. By February 15, 2012, the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs did not invoke the phrase "Arab Spring" to refer to the protests on even one single occasion. Rather, the following terms were used:

- "Revolution" (Case ID 3)
- "Macro-level crisis" (Case ID 3)
- "Not on a path to democracy" (Case ID 3)

This trend extended from Washington to London, with the Select Committee meeting on January 31, 2012. This was the first sign of doubts about the future direction of the "Arab Spring" countries witnessed in the Select Committee. While the number of references to the term "Arab Spring" had in fact increased upon the previous hearing—up from eight to eleven—the term's invocation was consistently accompanied by a more negative qualification. For example, the following terms referred to by the MPs in question had not featured at the previous hearing in November:

- "Atrocities" (Case ID 5)
- "Seismic changes" (Case ID 5)
- "Incomplete revolution" (Case ID 5)

Another interesting feature in the British committee hearing was the use of metaphors, comparing the uprising in Egypt with the French revolution for example, whereby one Conservative MP said:

> [T]he people at the end of the French revolution were very different from the people who started it
>
> (Case ID 5)

By the final round of committee hearings, pessimism and fatalism about the future of the Middle East and North Africa was both clear and undivided. That skepticism is clearest in the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, where powerful negative language was dominant by May 9, 2012:

- "So-called Arab Spring" (Case ID 4)
- "Collapsing" (Case ID 4)
- "Political crisis" (Case ID 4)
- "The region is beset with change" (Case ID 4)

The use of the word "beset" is particularly interesting when juxtaposed with the term "unprecedented," with the former used in the final hearing and the latter used in the first hearing to refer to the abstract concept of "change" in the region. While the word "unprecedented" may not necessarily carry positive connotations, it is certainly more neutral than "to be beset by," which can be defined as "being troubled by something or someone persistently" (Concise Oxford English Dictionary 2008, p. 1103). Thus, the shift from what was perhaps naïve optimism early in the Arab Spring to very clear pessimism in the discourse of American politicians on the committee in question is clearly grounded in the empirical data presented above. The House of Commons shares this trend, with the prevailing discourse fixed around waiting for the time "when a real transition takes place . . ."—implying that the protests and upheavals seen in the region were not significant enough to trigger meaningful change.

The metaphors and similes turned pessimistic, for example: "Egypt is on its way to becoming another Iran" (Case ID 3); "[E]verything you just described could have been said in 1979 about Iran" (Case ID 3); "[O]ne of the things that struck me about Egypt when it was sort of hot and heavy there was the eerie resemblances to Iran in this respect" (Case ID 3). The use of this simile is a powerful discursive tool, and completes the construction of this narrative arc among members of the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs. The expression "eerie resemblance" also bears witness to the high degree of negativity in the language. While this particular linguistic device was not used explicitly by the British MPs, this shared optimism-to-pessimism over time is certainly also the defining narrative arc of the committee hearings.

(How) Do Narratives Vary?

We reject the expectation that only limited differences would be identified between the UK and US committees' discourse for the simple reason that the very essence of the transatlantic "special relationship" came under attack during the hearings in the UK. The hearings became a venue to rehearse the mounting skepticism in the UK of the benefits of a close allegiance with the US in foreign policy. We found critical opinions in all three hearings of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee. John Baron (a senior Conservative MP) made this criticism of the US clearest in asking the following question to the panel of witnesses on November 29, 2011:

> [T]o what extent do you think British *subservience* to US policy [in the Middle East and North Africa] is a hindrance rather than a help? In certain parts of the region . . . American foreign policy is not well appreciated.
>
> (Case ID 6)

Baron was not alone, with former Secretary of Defence, Rt Hon Bob Ainsworth MP and Rt Hon Sir Menzies Campbell, former Leader of the Liberal Democrat Party, making the following negative statements about the USA and its policies in the Middle East:

> The relationship with America [in the Middle East] has restricted our thinking' (Case ID 2) and 'The UK is attached to what is not an utterly becalmed US foreign policy, which is very disappointing
>
> (Case ID 6)

Such fiery rhetoric, decrying US foreign policy in the Middle East as essentially narrow-minded and reactionary, represents a radical discursive departure from the language used under previous governments and in previous parliamentary sessions. We may reasonably speculate that this is perhaps, in part, a backlash to the premiership of Tony Blair, where the value of a close alliance with the US was questioned by the general public, and in particular in the wake of the Iraq War. Suffice it to say that, this analysis has revealed that there is a good deal of skepticism among British political elites over the value of the special relationship.

Narrative Learning

We have already encountered a few cognitive shortcuts, comparing the uprisings in Egypt with both the French Revolution of 1789 and the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Recall that heuristics are "judgmental short-cuts, efficient ways to organise and simplify political choices" (Bowler 2003, p. 30) often via such a case of association or comparison. Apart from the Egypt–Iran analogy, we found that dramatic cognitive shortcuts were invoked increasingly often, and ultimately contributed to a highly sensationalist, negative, and uninformed policy discussion. The question arises: did the witnesses counter this trend by injecting evidence and knowledge into the hearings?

As mentioned, the US and UK committees have different powers to call witnesses to provide evidence before them. While the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs has the ability to subpoena individuals, its British counterpart in the House of Commons does not enjoy such powers. Regardless, for both of these bodies, the evidence of witnesses is crucial to their findings and essentially serves as the knowledge base. In a series of hearings on the Arab Spring, one would expect such a balanced array of individuals and backgrounds to provide a nuanced ~~and balanced~~ picture of the situation. However, the evidence and witness base was drastically narrow in terms of experience, nationality, location, and profession. Table 6.4 provides biographical detail of the individuals who provided evidence to the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs at the three hearings.

All the "experts" were based in the US, and almost all were official representatives of the US government—for example, through the US Department of State. The single hearing at which NGO experts were invited to provide testimony came at a similar time to the US NGO crisis in Egypt, which may, in part, explain their

Table 6.4 Witnesses appearing before the US House of Representatives Committee on F foreign affairs

Name	Position	Organization	Governmental	US-based
Michael H. Posner	Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Democracy	US Department of State	Yes	Yes
Tamara Wittes	Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs	US Department of State	Yes	Yes
Robert Kagan	Senior Fellow	Brookings Institute	No	Yes
Michele Dunne	Director, Middle East Center	Atlantic Council	No	Yes
Eric Trager	Fellow	Washington Institute for Near East Policy	No	Yes
Jeffrey Feltman	Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs	US Department of State	Yes	Yes
Mara Rudman	Assistant Administrator for Middle East Bureau	US Agency for International Development	Yes	Yes
Mark Ward	Deputy Special Coordinator for Middle East Transitions	US Department of State	Yes	Yes

Table 6.5 Witnesses Appearing before the UK House of Commons Select Committee on foreign affairs

Name	Position	Organization	Governmental	UK-based
Intissar Kherigi	Daughter of Rachid Ghannouchi, (leader of Tunisian Ennahda party)	Non-affiliated	No	No (occasionally)
Dr Eugene Rogan	Director, Middle East Centre	St Antony's College, University of Oxford	No	Yes
Rt Hon Lord Malloch-Brown	Chairman of Europe, Middle East and Africa	FTI Consulting	No	Yes
Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Middle East and North Africa	Foreign & Commonwealth Office	Yes	Yes
Jon Davies	Director of MENA Directorate	Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)	Yes	Yes

invitation. Legislative committee members' knowledge came almost exclusively from the executive branch of the US government.

In the committee on the other side of the Atlantic, we have a similar overwhelming reliance on UK-based sources (table 6.5). While only one of the hearings features any governmental figures, there is also only one hearing that features a foreign national.

However, the main problem relating to the nature of the evidence, testimony, and witnesses pertains to the relationship between the politicians on one hand, and the witnesses on the other. As discussed, the policy discussion here is highly unstable, with policy positions fluctuating rapidly. It is clear that the witnesses examined by the committees contributed to this instability; they failed to employ their experience and knowledge to challenge uninformed policy positions. Writing about Congressional committees over five decades ago, Maslow argues that "while occasionally [the witnesses] may be questioned sharply, they are almost never cross-examined" (1957, p. 12). In this instance, however, the tables are turned and the "relaxed environment" of which Maslow is so critical is actually enjoyed by the committee members themselves. When a certain MP or Congressman draws upon an ill-founded cognitive shortcut, for example, the witnesses who enjoy a degree of expertise on the subject were clearly *not* correcting the committee members. Indeed, they consistently expressed simple agreement with uninformed policy positions. The following excerpt, in table 6.6, from the

Table 6.6 Congressional Uncorrected Cognitive Shortcut

Rep. Connolly: Just an observation, Dr. Wittes. *Everything you just described could have been said in 1979 about Iran.* What you said—I was on the Hill in those days [in 1979]—was eerily reminiscent of things one could have heard back in 1979 . . . I mean, putting aside all other considerations, I just wonder if you might comment on that, because, you know, just as they have domestic politics, so do we, and there is a limit to what we can explain to our constituents.

Dr. Wittes: *It is an excellent question,* Congressman . . . I think where we are with the Egyptian military right now is they think our relationship with them is so vital that they can do this, and at the end of the day we still won't cut off the aid.

February 2012 hearing of the US Committee (Case ID 3), is indicative of such uncritical interaction.

Despite Dr Wittes' academic and policy expertise on the Middle East, as Deputy Secretary of State, she does not correct the cognitive shortcut made by Representative Connolly in the use of a simile between the 1979 Iran Revolution and the future trajectory of Egypt. The Iranian state is inherently religious. The Muslim Brotherhood is committed to the implementation of Islamist policies, but through the vehicle of a civil state authority. This stands in stark contrast to Iran—and highlights the inherent flaw in suggesting that Egypt is on its way to becoming "another Iran." While Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood are Sunni, Iran is Shi'a. This is a difference between Egypt and Iran that any expert on the region should have instantly identified and been in a position to correct.

The same trend, whereby expert witnesses are not using their expertise to correct the cognitive shortcuts of the committee members, is also found in the House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. The quote in table 6.7 is typical of the politician–witness interaction (Case ID 6).

There are a number of fundamental differences between the French Revolution and the protests in Egypt. First, the French Revolution overthrew a monarch—Louis XVI—through a public uprising. President Hosni Mubarak was a former military leader. Religion played different roles in the two uprisings. The French Revolution was guided by Enlightenment ideals, and advocated for

Table 6.7 Parliamentary Uncorrected Cognitive Shortcut

Mike Gapes MP: Since [the demonstrations in Tahrir Square] the dynamics in Egypt have very much changed. The Muslim Brotherhood were not in the lead in that but now they are the dominant force in the new Parliament, so clearly things have moved in the last year. *All revolutions are a process, and the people at the end of the French revolution were very different from the people who started it.*

Rt Hon Lord Malloch-Brown: *You are completely right.* The attack on the Israeli embassy [in Cairo] and the dramatic evacuation of the ambassador and his staff shows that the trend is not good at the moment.

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a diminished role of Catholicism and religion in public life. While Egypt was not a secular state under the rule of Hosni Mubarak, prior to the Revolution, political Islam was certainly repressed. The Muslim Brotherhood were banned, and pushed underground, for much of Mubarak's tenure as president. Thus, in contrast to the French Revolution, the Egyptian Revolution and the Muslim Brotherhood sought to bring religion back to the political sphere and national policy. This highlights the empirical flaw comparing the Egyptian Revolution and the French Revolution, and once again this could easily have been corrected by an expert.

Overall, the extent to which the witnesses support and endorse the uninformed cognitive shortcuts of the politicians in question is a problem in both London and Washington. This is in spite of the clear constitutional differences in formal power between the two committees, and suggests that the nature of the problem is more "informal." Throughout all six committee hearings, witnesses express not only profound gratitude for having been invited to appear as a witness, but also agreement with the policy positions of the committee members. The knowledge and expertise of witnesses invited to provide testimony was not exploited.

Political Narratives

Evidence for this expectation comes in different forms. One is, obviously, partisanship and blame-shifting. Consider these dramatic quotes:

> [H]ow many more people have to die before the President acts?
>
> (Case ID 1)

> [T]he Obama Administration actually was late, I think very late, reading the writing on the wall in Egypt
>
> (Case ID 3)

> [T]he Obama Administration's response to the brutal crackdown in Syria has been, in many people's view, tepid and disappointing
>
> (Case ID 4)

However, as faith in the Arab Spring evaporated over time, Congressmen shifted the blame away from President Obama. There was a shift in "villainization" away from the president toward various other actors in the Middle East. There is no similar trend in Britain, with only one explicit attack made upon the policies or decisions of the British government.

Another form of politicization revolves around the use of drama and doomsday scenarios. These scenarios are powerful discursive tools deployed to justify exceptional policies. While doomsday scenarios were nonexistent in the hearings held in London, they were employed several times in Washington, in different guises, such as the potential increase in terrorist attacks and the destruction of Israel, designed to goad President Obama into action.

Interestingly, the former (i.e., terrorism) appeared on the agenda only in the last of the three hearings under scrutiny here, on May 9, 2012 when, as previously explained, attitudes toward the "Arab Spring" had faded from optimism to universal pessimism. Both Republicans and Democrats drew a causal link between the "upheaval" in the region and a potential surge in terrorist attacks:

> [C]ombating terrorism still remains a critical priority. Collectively, the current situation [post-Arab Spring] poses one of the most serious challenges in the Middle East that the US has faced in decades . . . Egypt, Libya Tunisia and Yemen are all struggling to steady themselves . . . radical, violent Islamists are seeking to exploit the chaos while ever seeking new havens from which they can plan attacks including attacks on the United States
>
> (Case ID 4)

In terms of political implications, this scenario appeared in the narratives in May 2012—the same month where debates over the State Department's Foreign Assistance Budget began in Congress. Arguably, committee members were positioning themselves to justify certain changes in aid policy as a consequence of this doomsday scenario. Indeed, in his opening statement, Congressman Chabot foregrounded the economic dimension:

> [I]f the current trajectory of the region continues unchanged, our assistance programs to many of the countries in question will have to be re-evaluated
>
> (Case ID 4)

The second doomsday scenario invoked in the hearings of the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs on the topic of the Arab Spring pertains to the supposed possibility of the destruction of the State of Israel. Over the course of the six hearings, Israel was mentioned a remarkable 89 times by members of the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, and a mere nine times by members of the UK House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. Israel was continually constructed as a "friend" throughout the hearings with the discussion of Israel's destruction present even as early as April 2011.

For example, Representative Ann-Marie Buerkle denounced the Muslim Brotherhood for supposedly welcoming hard-line Islamists into the party ranks, who she describes as "vicious terrorists who continue to deny the very right of the State of Israel to exist." (Case ID 1). By the final hearing, Representative Jeff Fortenberry argued that in the wake of the Arab Spring, Israel was threatened by "apocalyptic threats levied against its very existence [by Islamists]" (Case ID 4).

This observation about Israel brings us to heroes and villains. There are significant differences in terms of which external actors are construed as playing a "positive" role, and others that played a more "negative" role. The Congressmen and MPs were united in voicing their praise of the protestors of the Arab Spring.

In particular the youth are singled out, with one US Representative exclaiming that the young Egyptian protestors who filled Tahrir Square to demand Mubarak leave office are "are bright, young, educated people with passion who are trying to remake Egypt into a much more inclusive and participatory kind of society" (Case ID 3).

Express commitments to support this new generation of democracy-supporters were made by members of the US Committee, claiming that the "young people . . . are desperate and frustrated beyond belief at what they see as a totally autocratic, despotic government. They will continue to push, and we will continue to help them" (Case ID 1). Thus, the young protestors are described, in a narrative sense, as a positive influence and "heroes" of the Arab Spring that the US will seek to support. Such language is not often invoked to describe protestors, who Fleras argues are "often reduced to dangerous militants or irrational ideologues" (2011, p. 218). The very notion of protesting is constructed as positive and pro-democracy, flying in the face of the common wisdom regarding political elites' view of protesting as a form of resistance, challenging the status quo and promoting instability.

Such praise for the protestors of the Arab Spring can also be found in Britain. However, their focus is more on female participants in the uprisings than young people *per se*: Rt Hon Ann Clwyd MP praises women for "the very important role they played in promoting a democratic transition in Tunisia" (Case ID 6). Furthermore, women are described as "heroic activists" (case ID 5), and most significantly the "extreme circumstances" against which a hero must triumph are also present in the narrative. It is argued that the heroism of the women protestors in question is all the more significant given how "frustrated and marginalised" (Case ID 5) the female populations of the Middle East and North Africa are, with detailed information about women's confinement to the private realm of the Tunisian economy also provided in the very first hearing under examination here (Case ID 2). This empirical discovery is also significant for it challenges the notion that, in such political discourse, the "heroes" are more commonly male, while women are cast as suffering and supposedly in need of protection from said heroic men. Jackson argues that

> . . . the hero narrative is also highly gendered; it evokes the popular entertainment images of the lone "man's man" who has to use his masculine qualities to save innocent women and children from harm. *Women are always cast in the role of potential victims [in political dialogue] and almost never in the role of hero . . .*
>
> (2005, p. 79, emphasis added)

In the wake of the Arab Spring, Islamist parties assumed power in Tunisia and Egypt—Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood, respectively. Moghadam argues that "thus far, even moderate Islamist parties appear wanting in a commitment to human rights and women's equality" (2013, p. 204), and protests in Egypt in particular against the Muslim Brotherhood appear to be gathering pace. Yet, in

our hearings there appears to be a great level of confidence and optimism among British MPs about the capacity of these Islamist parties to govern. Labour MP Rt Hon Bob Ainsworth asks witness Dr Eugene Rogan,

> [D]o you think we should be a bit more relaxed about Islamists and sharia law?
>
> (Case ID 5)

Here Ainsworth expresses skepticism over widespread reactions to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. His premise stems from the claim that the secular governments overthrown by protestors in the Arab Spring failed to incorporate cultural and religious factions into government, in turn failing to meet the demands of the population and proving unsustainable for the regime. Ainsworth is not alone in his praise of Islamist parties in the Middle East and North Africa, with influential chair of the committee Richard Ottaway MP expressing his "personal opinion [that] the Muslim Brotherhood were people with whom we could do business, and that there is nothing to be frightened about" (Case ID 6). Therefore, while Islamists are not necessarily constructed as true "heroes" in the traditional definition of the term, positive language is certainly used by politicians on the UK's Committee on Foreign Affairs, with general optimism expressed by very senior members of the Committee about the potential for Islamist parties to govern the countries involved in the Arab Spring.

By contrast, Islamist parties are very clearly discursively constructed as the "villains" in the US, with widespread fear and pessimism about the post–Arab Spring direction of Egypt in particular under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. Frequently described as a "concern" (Case ID 3), or as a "threat" (Case ID 3), the Muslim Brotherhood is posited as potentially "turning the Arab Spring into an Islamist Winter" (Case ID 4). Indeed, there is no single comment expressing the possibility of productive relations between the US and the Muslim Brotherhood. The rationale for this opposition is two-fold, the first being that "many question the Muslim Brotherhood's attitude to democracy" (Case ID 3). The second relates back to the frequent use of dramatic tension and the doomsday scenario in the US hearings, where a link between the rise of the Islamist parties and terror attacks on the US is drawn: ". . . violent Islamists are seeking to exploit the chaos while ever-seeking new havens from which they can plan attacks, including attacks on the US" (Case ID 4). And so, a narrative is developed whereby Islamist parties pose both a threat to the democratic transitions of the Arab Spring states, but also to the national security of the US itself by virtue of terrorism. Islamist parties clearly are "villainized" therefore, by Congressmen on the House Committee on Foreign Affairs whereas they are portrayed as partners in democracy by the British politicians in question.

Turning to identity politics, the US committee sees itself as a foreign policy actor whereas the British committee constructs its own role as significantly more limited. The House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs makes ~~limited~~ references to itself, and discursively frames the hearings as an "academic" exercise in investigating the underlying root causes of the Arab Spring. Thus, the

Committee does not see itself as a foreign policy actor, in and of itself. There is one occasion when the Committee begins to assert its own role and identity, although this is very much limited to the domestic policy making sphere in the United Kingdom. John Baron MP makes the following statement, which reveals a significant amount about the Committee's self-identification:

> [W]hat will be important going forward is winning of the story as much as the winning of the conflict. Looking at our track record as a country in [the Middle East and North Africa], particularly the announcement of recent [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] cuts, *although we as a Committee have played a rearguard action in trying to reverse those and with some success*, what is your view on whether we should be doing more in this regard?
>
> <div align="right">(Case ID 6, emphasis added)</div>

The use of "we as a Committee" provides the linguistic space in which to articulate the Committee's conception and definition of its own role, and the level of success it has had in this role. Thus, the Committee is defined as opposing cuts in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) budget—in this instance, cuts to public diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa in the wake of the Arab Spring. There is no reference to an external role of the Committee throughout the hearings. Rather, it assumes this domestic role not in the formulation of policy itself, but in applying pressure upon the executive branch of government in how best to spend the national budget in foreign affairs. It is asserted that the Committee has been successful in this endeavor. This role is not enshrined in any codified body of legislation or law, but the Committee has assumed this mantle of ensuring, behind the scenes, that the British government remains diplomatically engaged with the wider world.

The US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs ascribes for itself a much more assertive and internationally oriented role in the hearings on the Arab Spring. Of course, we noted earlier that US congressional committees enjoy significantly greater formal power than their British counterparts. However, the case will be made here that the Committee in question has begun to assert a role as an independent foreign policy actor extra-constitutionally.

Congressman Steve Chabot begins the very first committee hearing addressing the Arab Spring, entitled "Shifting Sands: Political Transitions in the Middle East," with a US-centric definition of human rights. Chabot claims that the activists in the Arab Spring were: ". . . protesting for their own God-given human and universal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Case ID 1). This definition of human rights can be conceptualized as US-centric since it makes very clear reference to the United States Declaration of Independence, which states that "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are *endowed by their creator* with certain unalienable Rights, that among those are *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness*" (US Declaration of Independence 1776: Section 1). The implicit idea is therefore raised that "human rights" are an American concept, and that they can be directly transposed from

the US to the Arab Spring countries. While this is revelatory of the Committee's conceptualization of the US on the whole, it does not touch upon our primary concern at this stage—namely, the Committee's definition of its *own* role in foreign affairs. Rep. Ted Deutsch proclaims the power of the Committee to further human rights internationally through its legislating abilities, highlighting that

> [*W*]e yesterday introduced bipartisan legislation to impose sanctions on those who aid in the abuses of the Iranian opposition movement and further human rights abuses [in wider the Middle East]
>
> (Case ID 4, emphasis added)

Narrative analysis draws attention to the use of "we" when referring to the Committee—constructing a unitary actor united under one common voice. Representative Deutsch believes that the Committee itself is to be praised for the role *it* will play in preventing human rights abuses in Iran, for example. The US Constitution confers no such power upon the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, and while not unconstitutional, these rhetorical claims certainly reveal that committee members themselves are convinced of the ability of the Committee to act as an assertive foreign policy actor, and promoter of a supposedly US-centric version of human rights. This is a significantly more influential role than the UK House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs affords itself, discursively.

So What?

Narratives provide meaning to an ambiguous reality, making uncertain circumstances amenable to policy intervention. But, actors involved in policy making manipulate narratives for their own political advantage. Cognitive shortcuts assist actors in the formulation of a narrative, but if they are not corrected they facilitate political manipulation. This chapter has yielded findings on the relationship between policy making and narratives by exploring the meso level. Our contribution to the NPF has been two-fold. On one hand, we have incorporated into the NPF some basic notions of how the mind works, using the concept of heuristics and bias of elected policy makers; a key issue in the current NPF agenda (Jones and Song 2013). The presence of bias is the main rationale for bringing experts into parliamentary life: the expectation is that they would inform parliamentary debates and generate learning, or at least reduce bias. On the other, we have contrasted this expectation of narrative learning with "political narratives": this is at the core of the NPF, which argues that narratives consist both of beliefs and political narratives tactics (McBeth et al. 2010).

On balance, we have found narratives matter but there is more support for expectations concerning "political narratives" and political manipulation than for "narrative learning" as defined above. The data suggest significant policy differences between the American and British cases, and a consequential redefinition

of the so-called "special relationship" in foreign policy ties between the two countries.

Methodologically, with our qualitative analysis we have shown that key to the NPF is a "way of knowing" socially constructed realities grounded in objective epistemology and social ontology—the key is not the adoption of quantitative research methods.

Finally, our study shows that the NPF can also be used to evaluate institutions and for making recommendations. A major theme throughout our analysis has been the use of experts in public policy. The findings suggest that, in the political venues we examined, the use of experts does not correct heuristics. The experts in our cases do not seem to make an effort to try to offer different story frames that shape cognition (Jones and Song 2013)—hence they couldn't possibly fix the heuristics of politicians. Heuristically misguided and objectively incorrect cognitive shortcuts are frequently invoked, drawing ill-founded similarities between very different events. The opinions of elected policy makers were highly fluctuating, and in the space of mere months changed from espousing unbridled and wild optimism to crushing pessimism about the future trajectory of the Arab revolutions. The evidence derived from witnesses is not leading to better informed or evidence-based discursive policy debate in Washington or London, in the way intended or expected.

This conclusion on expertise comes with a caveat—we have observed that the "experts" who provided evidence at the hearings up to a point at least, come from within the political world. As noted, previous research on the role of scientific experts in select committees suggests they can play a challenge function (Dunlop 2013). Future research could usefully apply NPF to a systematic analysis comparing science-based with more judgment-based issues such as those found in foreign policy.

In order to get expertise to correct false heuristics, we need to transform the foreign policy hearings into a less government-controlled environment. This implies a more diverse recruitment of the experts. And witnesses should feel free to criticize and disagree with committee members. We have seen that experts can be too deferent toward the conventional wisdom embraced by committee members. The current culture of the committee hearings means that open criticism and opposition to conventional heuristics is seldom voiced. This "soft" element of reform to the committee system in the US and UK may well be more challenging to implement than changes to formal powers. However, the evidence from this study suggests that this issue of witnesses not challenging the uninformed discursive positions of the politicians is not a remedy, but rather yet another source of the uninformed and uncertain nature of policy debate.

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Chapter 6

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AQ2	117	In the same quote, if the single quote mark before 'The UK is attached . . .' is necessary, please provide the closing quote mark. Else delete the opening quote mark.