

# **Political Studies Association Response to the Concordat on Open Research Data**

1. The Political Studies Association (PSA) is the leading organisation in the UK linking academics in political science and current affairs, theorists and practitioners, policy-makers, journalists, researchers and students in higher education.
2. Membership of the PSA is open to anyone interested in the study of politics. It spans academics in political science and current affairs, theorists and practitioners, policy-makers, journalists, researchers, politics teachers and students in Higher Education. Membership has grown steadily and now stands at over 1,900, making it the second largest such national association in the world.
3. The PSA has requested feedback about this Concordat from across its membership, to ensure that this response is as representative as possible for the needs of Politics researchers in the UK.

## **Summary of the PSA's position**

4. The PSA welcomes the creation of the Concordat as a means of ensuring that research data openness is achieved consistently. We welcome the Ten Principles and the objectives that they outline.
5. The PSA suggests that a number of minor but important changes might be made to the Concordat to enhance its relevance for the study of politics and for other disciplines.

## **Definition**

6. There are potential issues with the definition of research data as 'quantitative information or qualitative statements', since qualitative data may not necessarily comprise statements but can also be numerical.<sup>1</sup> We would suggest that Research Data might instead be defined as 'quantitative or qualitative findings'.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Qualitative Comparative Analysis codes qualitative data numerically, but remains qualitative in nature. See Ragin (1989). *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*. (London: University of California Press).

## Introduction

7. We suggest that the Ten Principles be listed within the Introduction, as headings. In doing so, the accessibility and readability of the Concordat would be improved, ensuring that it can be used more effectively by researchers on a day-to-day basis.
8. Within our membership, there was concern raised by researchers using interpretivist methods that analysis cannot be conducted using raw data alone. From this perspective, which is common in the study of politics, data are meaningless without the experiences of the individual researcher who collected the data. It would be beneficial to acknowledge this perspective within the Concordat, in order that the Concordat is applicable to all researchers.

## Principle #1

9. Early Career Researchers (ECRs) are less likely to have experience with analysing data or writing publications than more established academics. By making data open before an ECR has been able to fully make the use of their findings, an ECR may find themselves ‘scooped’ by other researchers using the ECR’s data. As such, we suggest that the statement “**Researchers** will make their research data open and usable within a short-well-defined period, which may vary by subject and disciplinary area” might be amended to “**Researchers** will make their research data open and usable within a short, well-defined period, which may vary by subject, *disciplinary area, and career level*”.
10. In the Humanities and Social Sciences, a significant number of researchers are not funded by research funding bodies. Moreover, some researchers, particularly ECRs, may not be employed. Such individuals may struggle to make their data open due to a lack of institutional support and infrastructure. As such, there might be consideration of revising the sentence “**Employers of Researchers** will seek to provide appropriate access to infrastructure systems and services to enable their researchers to make research data open and usable” in some way to reflect this reality.

## **Principle #5**

11. For those undertaking research in areas suffering from conflict, individual confidentiality is vital in order to protect interviewees' security. Those working in this field may feel particular concern about making open data, and may appreciate an explicit acknowledge of their position in the Concordat. The requirement that "Decisions on withholding data should not generally be made by individual researchers but rather through a verifiable and transparent process at an appropriate institutional level" would therefore benefit from additional emphasis of the potential extent of threats posed to research participants. The following amendment may reassure researchers that the importance of ensuring personal security when making data open is understood: "Decisions on withholding data should not generally be made by individual researchers but rather through a verifiable and transparent process at an appropriate institutional level, *subject to the sensitivity of the research material. Where the security of researchers or their research participants is threatened, extreme caution should be exercised when deciding whether data should be open and when making those data open.*"
12. It is important that when seeking to publish analyses in journals, researchers using restricted data are not hindered from publishing. To avoid such hindrance, it would be beneficial for research funders and journals to have specific exemptions in place as part of their replication policies. In these instances, for example, the replication code may still be required, for example, while the data are not.

## **Principle #6**

13. For the reasons outlined in Point 9, we suggest that the sentence "To prevent such negative outcomes, researchers who generate original data must have reasonable right of first use for a short and well-defined period, which may vary by subject and disciplinary area" might be amended to read: "To prevent such negative outcomes, researchers who generate original data must have reasonable right of first use for a short and well-defined period, which may vary by subject, *disciplinary area, and career level.*"

## Principle #7

14. All possible steps should be taken to ensure that data are not accessed without also obtaining the associated ethical guidelines. This requirement is of particular importance regarding research that draws from vulnerable people. As such, we suggest that the sentence “Research organisations bear the primary responsibility for enforcing ethical guidelines and it is therefore vital that such guidelines are amended as necessary to make clear the obligations that are inherent in the use of data gathered by other workers” might be followed by “*Any ethical guidelines associated with open research data should be featured within the data that are made available, or, alternatively, the collection of associated ethical guidelines should be a compulsory requirement for accessing open research data.*”
15. Increasingly, particularly in qualitative research, data are understood as being ‘owned’ by the individuals from whom the data are curated rather than the researcher who obtained the data. In the event that the context in which data was given changes significantly – an example, which may occur in the study of politics, would be where there is a change to those in power, meaning that previous statements made by interview participants become criticisms of an oppressive regime – there should be consideration given to including a right of retraction in order to ensure the security of the data-givers. As such, the following paragraph or similar might be included: “*In the event that an individual wishes to retract the data they have provided, particularly in a context that threatens the individual’s security, data must be updated to reflect this retraction. Bodies that store open data should be encouraged to facilitate mechanisms that ensure that recipients of open data are automatically contacted in the event of a change to the data.*”

## Principle #8

16. We agree that it is neither practical nor cost-effective to make all data open for an unlimited amount of time. However, the stipulation that data underlying publications should be retained for 10 years from collection, creation or generation of the research results (whichever is later) is arbitrary. For example, the half-life of publications in the humanities and social sciences is much longer than in STEM. As such, we suggest that the period of 10 years be replaced with “a finite time period that may vary by subject and disciplinary area”.

Dr. Paul Tobin, Helena Djurkovic and Professor Will Jennings, for and on behalf of the Political Studies Association.

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