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## Committee autonomy in parliamentary systems – coalition logic or congressional rationales?

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### ABSTRACT

Large-*n* comparative research on committee structures in legislatures is rare. This paper uses newly collected data to analyse committee structures across 30 legislatures of parliamentary systems which possess strong parliamentary party groups. It seeks to explain committee autonomy which reflects the degree to which committees are able to carry out their tasks independently. The variation in autonomy is accounted for by contrasting the ‘keeping tabs on coalition partners’ perspective with the congressional theories of legislative organisation (referred to as distributional, informational, and partisan theories). The results support the informational and the keeping tabs perspective. More autonomous committees tend to be found in legislatures with a relatively high workload and frequent coalition governments. For the ongoing discussion about the applicability of the congressional theories outside the US, this study provides support for the usefulness of the US theories in parliamentary systems of government.

**KEYWORDS** Committees structures; informational theory; distributive theory; partisan theory; ‘keeping tabs on coalition partners’

### Committees in parliaments

Parliaments around the world rely on committees in their daily operation to allow for an efficient policy-making process. These deliberative assemblies established by, embedded within, and linked to the larger deliberative body consist of a subgroup of legislators across parliamentary party groups. They are the prime organisational structures for the preparation of plenary sessions and documents: ‘all parliaments work to a greater extent or lesser extent through committees’ (Laundy, 1989, p. 96). Committees are purposefully established creatures of parliaments which are formally appointed to consider and satisfy a defined organisational need. They are mandated and restricted by the power assigned to them by the plenum. Together with parliamentary party

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groups, committees are ‘the most important component of legislative organization and preference aggregation’ (Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014, p. 372) within legislatures. Traditionally, these two institutions were seen as mutually exclusive: strong committees were associated with legislatures which have weak parliamentary party groups (such as the US Congress), while legislatures with strong parliamentary party groups (like those found in parliamentary systems of government) were linked to weak committees. However, since the beginning of the 1970s reforms within legislatures of parliamentary systems induced a ‘trend away from *ad hoc* arrangements and towards parliamentary committee systems that are specialised and permanent and replicate executive departments’ (Shaw, 1998, p. 230, italics in original). Nowadays, a large variation in committee systems exists, with some legislatures relying on highly comprehensive and effective committees (Strøm, 1998), even though they are characterised by the existence of strong parliamentary party groups.

This begs the question: ‘what factors account for the variation in formal committee structures across legislatures with strong parliamentary party groups?’ Despite a heightened interest in committees in recent decades, only a few researchers have turned their attention to analysing the factors which determine this variation across legislatures. The formal structures of the committee system need to be taken into account when giving a complete picture on how parliamentary work is organised in committees. The committee system and its characteristic features determine the ‘playing field’ for legislators and are not randomly chosen, but purposefully determined. By studying the formal arrangements we can reach a deeper understanding of decision-making processes within legislatures.

### Theories on legislative organisation – congressional perspectives and coalition logic

In order to analyse committee structures, we can turn to theories of legislative organisation. Within this process ‘resources and parliamentary rights [are assigned] to individual legislators or groups of legislators’ (Krehbiel, 1992, p. 2). Theories on legislative organisation – of which committees are a central feature – are mainly developed for the US Congress. The main theory to explain how parliaments outside the US are organised is proposed by Martin and Vanberg (2011). The central argument of their theory is that the organisation of a legislature follows the formation of governments and is, in particular, influenced by a frequent formation of coalition governments. Their argument builds on the tension that exists between coalition partners who are forced to govern jointly, but are held accountable *separately* at the next election. To minimise the risk of being ‘overly accommodating in their dealings with their coalition partners’ (Martin & Vanberg, 2011, p. 3), parties monitor, or ‘keep tabs’ on, their coalition partners. This has important

ramifications for the organisation of parliaments. The legislative committee system is the most important institution in this regard as it serves to acquire information and solve delegation and intra-coalition problems. The contribution of Martin and Vanberg is a major breakthrough in terms of an independently developed, cohesive theoretical framework to understand parliaments outside the US. However, the focus of the theory limits its applicability. The scope of this theory is on coalition governments, which are a common occurrence in countries outside the US. It is silent about the organisation of legislatures in countries which experience other governments such as majority or minority single-party governments and how they influence the organisation of a parliament. Additionally, the reasoning is based entirely on the type of government and does not relate the organisation of a legislature to other institutional and political factors. This justifies broadening our view to other theories.

The first ones that scholars usually turn to are the ‘congressional’ theories – commonly referred to as the distributive, informational and partisan perspective on legislative organisation. Although they were developed for analysing the US Congress, these theories are the main perspectives on how committees work. The long-standing research tradition on the US Congress and US state legislatures needs to be taken into consideration when trying to understand other cases as well.

The distributive theory (Shepsle, 1978; Weingast, 1979) views legislatures as decentralised institutions. Legislators are dominated by geographical concerns and are ultimately interested in securing their own re-election. Committees are primarily arranged to meet these electoral needs and provide legislators with the means for the distribution of particularistic benefits to their constituents.

The informational theory (Gilligan & Krehbiel, 1990; Krehbiel, 1990, 1992) departs from the assumption that all policies need to be enacted through the consent of the majority of members, but there is ‘substantial uncertainty about consequences [of policies] upon implementation’ (Gilligan & Krehbiel, 1990, p. 533). This uncertainty has important ramifications for the internal organisation of legislatures. According to this perspective committees emerge to make legislative specialisation possible. This minimises the occurrence of unintended effects. Committees are merely agents of the plenum and purely instrumental.

Both theoretical perspectives assume the absence of partisan organisation as a major force in the organisation of the US Congress. The partisan theory, which consists of the partisan procedural cartel theory (Cox & McCubbins, 1993) and the theory of conditional party government (Aldrich & Rohde, 1998), argues that legislative institutions like committees and the rules which guide the decision-making process are an extension of the majority parliamentary party group. The majority parliamentary party group is the primary principal of committees to secure its own agenda.

## An overview of empirical committee research

The most widely studied aspect of legislative organisation is committee member selection. A rich body of literature is available on the US Congress and US state legislatures (see, e.g. Hall & Grofman, 1990; Hamm, Hedlund, & Post, 2011; Krehbiel, 1993; Overby & Kazee, 2000; Shepsle & Weingast, 1981). Research on committee assignments outside the US initially focused primarily on the European Parliament (e.g. McElroy, 2006; Whitaker, 2005; Yordanova, 2009) and relied heavily on the congressional framework. With regard to national parliaments, a number of empirical studies argued that committee assignments are based on electoral rules or candidate selection procedures (Crisp, Escobar-Lemmon, Jones, Jones, & Taylor-Robinson, 2009; Stratmann & Baur, 2002). More recent studies on committee assignments in national legislatures make explicit use of the congressional theories (e.g. Fujimura, 2012; Hansen, 2010, 2011; Mickler, 2013; Raymond & Holt, 2014).

Although this ‘initial focus on policy preferences and the composition of standing committees was, in fact, the most logical step in any attempt to disentangle these three theories’ (Martorano, 2006, p. 207) only a few studies have gone beyond committee assignments. Large-*n* comparative studies of formal committee characteristics are scarce. A study on 24 US state legislative lower houses was provided by Martorano (2006), who applied the predictions of distributive, informational and partisan theories to the study of formal committee characteristics. Her analysis of committee autonomy provides support for the informational perspective. When policy complexity increases, committee autonomy increases as well.

Outside the US, Mattson and Strøm (1995) conducted one of the first truly comparative analyses of committee systems in 18 legislatures (see also Strøm, 1998). The authors also draw on the congressional theories of legislative organisation. This study is extended by Yläoutinen and Hallerberg (2008) to include parliaments in Eastern Europe. A more recent analysis by Martin (2011) argues that committees ‘tend to be stronger where the electoral system provides incentives for personal vote gathering, but only when fiscal particularism is the [mechanism to cultivate a personal vote]’ (Martin, 2011, p. 357). Martin and Vanberg (2011) demonstrated that committees with a strong policing authority can be found in those countries with frequent coalition situations.

## Hypotheses on committee structures: what explains structural variation?

Similar to Martorano (2006), this study analyses committee systems using the concept of committee autonomy. This concept has been used in studies of the US Congress and state legislatures (Deering, 1982; Martorano, 2006) and parliaments outside the US (Atkinson & Nossal, 1980). Committee autonomy

refers to the degree to which decision-making in committees is influenced by members and outsiders (Fenno, 1966). It is assumed that committee strength depends directly on the degree to which they are able to conduct their own affairs (Atkinson & Nossal, 1980, p. 290).

In order to deduce testable hypotheses on factors which may go together with particular structures a theoretical framework is developed in the next section. A general notion needs to be made with regard to the nature of the argument of this analysis. It is not possible to infer causality regarding why variation of committee autonomy occurs based on my analysis. This is due to the nature of the committee systems that are studied, the data that is available and the variables that are used. The data relies on a 'snapshot' of committee structures in 2013 (more information below). The variation in committee autonomy is mostly accounted for by institutional variables which are slow-moving and, therefore, may not lead to rapid changes. I shall use averages over an extended period to prevent the possibility that outliers may bias the results. Instead (and given these limitations), this analysis seeks to establish correlation. It is assumed that over time a match will be established between the political situation and a parliament.

The partisan theory highlights the role of the majority parliamentary party group in structuring committees: 'the extent to which committees are autonomous actors in the legislative process depends on the extent of control the majority [parliamentary party group] wields in the chamber' (Martorano, 2006, p. 209). Martorano argues that the smaller the difference between the majority and minority parliamentary party groups, the more likely it is that the majority parliamentary party group will exert control. However, outside the special US case, the relationship between the size of governing party and committee autonomy might be reversed. Sieberer and Müller (2015), for example, show in their study that governing parties have an incentive to control the legislative structures to prevent the opposition from using them for obstruction. A governing party with a higher vote share is better able to seek legislative reforms to control committee deliberations. Because of the different institutional setting from the US, this expectation is followed.

Additionally, contrary to the US, coalitions between parliamentary party groups are common. In order to account for this it is expected that the larger the seat share of the governing parliamentary party group or coalition is, the more autonomy will be granted. A general caveat needs to be made with regard to the usage of 'fixed' scores of several independent variables. Committee structures are less volatile than election results. To account for this, averages over a longer period of time are used.

Hypothesis 1: A structurally larger relative seat share of the governing parliamentary party group or coalition (across multiple legislative periods) is negatively related to the autonomy of the committee system.

The distributive theory argues that committees serve the re-election goal of individual legislators. Committees are opportunity structures which assist members to achieve successfully their own re-election goals by engaging in advertising, credit claiming and position taking (see, e.g. Fenno, 1973). It follows that more autonomous committees are expected in legislatures where members of parliament (MPs) can rely more strongly on 'personal votes'. In other electoral systems, the necessity for highly autonomous committees is not present.

Hypothesis 2: Electoral systems which allow individual legislators to rely on a 'personal vote' are positively related to the autonomy of the committee system.

An additional distributive hypothesis takes the district link of individual MPs into consideration. Committees are expected to present such incentive structures in those countries in which individual MPs have a relatively closer connection to a district. The reliance on a 'personal vote' is related, but not the same as the relationship with individual districts. Some electoral systems allow for a certain degree of personal vote, even though they might lack a connection to districts (see the Dutch Tweede Kamer, which is elected nationwide, but uses an electoral system allowing for personal votes).

Hypothesis 3: A stronger connection between individual MPs and districts is positively related to the autonomy of the committee system.

An adapted reading of the distributional theory highlights outside interests, other than 'geographic' interests, which committees may serve. Committees are prime organisations to facilitate a communication channel between members of parliament and external organisations such as interest groups and their participation in the policy-making process (Helboe Pedersen, Halpin, & Rasmussen, 2015). Such an 'institutionalised pattern of policy-formation ... in the shaping of economic policy' (Lehmbruch, 1979, p. 150) is usually described under the term corporatism. Higher levels of corporatism are expected to lead to the establishment of more autonomous committees to facilitate these negotiations (or at least consultations) between the state and interest organisations during the policy-making process.

Hypothesis 4: Higher levels of corporatism of a country are positively related to the autonomy of the committee system.

Several studies (Hedlund, 1985; Polsby, 1968) have shown that an 'increased demand for public policy also resulted in an overall strengthening of committee systems in the legislative process' (Martorano, 2006, p. 211). This argument is used in this study to hypothesise a relationship between the workload of a legislature and more autonomous committees. To prevent an overload of bills, a legislature is expected to grant more autonomy to committees to solve inefficiencies in the legislative process.

Hypothesis 5: A higher workload of a parliament (over an extended period) is positively related to the autonomy of the committee system.

Following the ‘watchdog’ function of committees in the coalition logic perspective, a decisive argument for the establishment of autonomous committees is the occurrence of coalition governments. If this is the case, then committees are granted the necessary tools to fulfil this task. It is tested whether more autonomy is granted to committees when coalitions are frequently formed.

Hypothesis 6: Frequent coalition government is positively related to the autonomy of the committee system.

Likewise, the establishment of strong committees is predicted to be related to the ideological distance between coalition partners. When this difference is structurally greater (e.g. due to a frequent necessity to establish government coalitions between parliamentary party groups which differ in their ideological views), then committees should have more autonomy to offer possibilities to ‘control the bargain’. As ideological distances between coalition partners may shift after the formation of a new government an average over an extended period is used.

Hypothesis 7: The formation of coalition governments with greater ideological distances between the coalition partners on a regular basis (across multiple legislative periods) is positively related to the autonomy of the committee system.

Another argument relates the efficiency of monitoring the government to the frequency of minority governments. Strøm (1990) suggested that strong committees facilitate minority governments because strong committees grant the possibility for opposition parliamentary party groups to influence policies. This study builds on this argument. It is expected that committee autonomy will be larger in legislatures where parliamentary party groups are confronted with frequent minority governments.

Hypothesis 8: A higher frequency of minority governments across an extended period is positively related to the autonomy of the committee system.

## Method of the study

One of the primary goals of this study is to broaden our understanding of committee structures beyond the special case of the US Congress to cases which possess varying degrees of *strong parliamentary party groups*. The case selection therefore includes advanced democracies with a parliamentary system of government. The reason for the strong organisation of parliamentary party groups within these cases lies in the relationship that the legislature has with the executive branch. In such ‘fused power’ systems, the executive

flows from the legislature (usually from within its own ranks) and relies on the absence of a parliamentary majority against it in order to stay in power. The removal from office can occur at any time when the majority of legislators does not support the executive any more. Both branches of government are therefore highly dependent on each other. A resignation of the government usually means a fall of the legislature as well. Owing to this, parliamentary party groups within the legislature have an incentive to be strongly organised. A strong internal organisation and cohesiveness allows them collectively to support the government or bring it down. In order to count as an advanced democracy a standard measure was employed ( $> 0.8$  on the Human Development Index, see United Nations Development Programme (2015)). These cases do not just include Western countries but also post-communist countries that exhibit the hallmarks of economic development and democracy, and they include France, which is usually classified as semi-presidential. Altogether, 30 countries were analysed. In case of bicameral legislatures the data set comprises the popularly elected lower chambers.<sup>1</sup>

### *Operationalising committee autonomy*

In order to compare committee systems across multiple countries a meaningful indicator of committee structure is needed. Martorano (2006) operationalises the concept of committee autonomy by an additive index of 11 procedures. This is also taken into consideration in the study at hand. The data for this part builds on an original data set of formal committee structures. Data were collected on variables which provide detailed information on the size, jurisdiction and rights of the committee system in each legislature.

The primary sources for data acquisition were standing orders and rules of procedures of the respective parliaments, which were obtained via the parliamentary websites. For several indicators which are not based on standing orders (i.e. the number of staff) parliamentary websites were consulted. After completing the overview, country experts were asked via an online survey in late 2013, with single reminders in early 2014, to review the data, and to minimise any possible biases/misinterpretations of the rules.<sup>2</sup> In case the experts contradicted existing information expert judgement prevailed. If country experts of the same country contradicted each other, the information was checked again and a final decision was made by the author.

The index of 'committee autonomy' was constructed using this information.<sup>3</sup> Each of the 27 items included was first rank-ordered according to the lowest amount of autonomy granted to a committee to the highest level of autonomy. As an example, the item measuring whether simultaneous meetings with the plenum are allowed has three levels (0 = not possible at all, 1 = possible under certain circumstances with special permission (from the plenum, Speaker, etc.), 2 = always possible; with 0 being the lowest level of

autonomy). Another example would be whether committees are able to recruit their chairpersons from within the committee (0 = no, 1 = yes). More complex items have more levels, i.e. the control of a committee's timetable varies between the government setting out the deadline via a motion (ranked as '0', indicating the least amount of autonomy) to parliamentary actors which are not on the committee (Speaker, etc. = 1) to the chairperson of the committee (2) to the committee members themselves with no right of recall by the plenum (highest rank of autonomy = 3). Subsequently, each item was scaled to an interval between 0 and 1. The overall score of autonomy is the mean of the ranked score of all included items. Table 1 lists the items and how these indicators measure the autonomy of the committees.

The aggregate autonomy scores of each legislature are shown in Figure 1 (mean autonomy score = 0.58). The individual scores for each analysed legislature can be found in the Appendix. Looking at the individual country scores it is noticeable that they are somewhat clustered (ranging from 0.305 in the House of Commons of the United Kingdom to 0.748 in the Swedish Riksdag). This is due to the fact that no committee system of the analysed legislatures consistently scores low on all measured items or was assigned the maximum value on all measured items. To illustrate, we can turn to the Swedish Riksdag as an example. The committee system of this legislature scores with the maximum level of autonomy on numerous items: there are no multiple membership restrictions for committee members, chairs are selected by the committee itself, the same committees have been established in the last two legislative periods, committees have the right to initiate

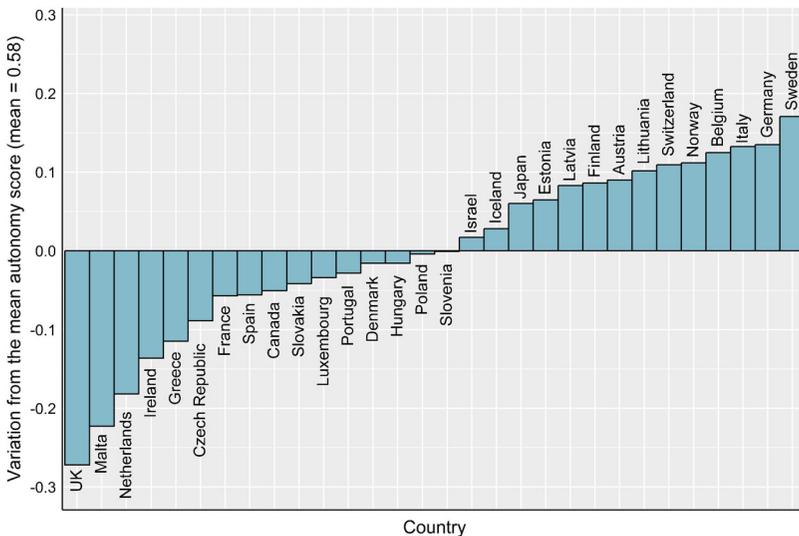


Figure 1. Committee autonomy scores in 30 legislatures.

**Table 1.** List of items measuring the formal structures and operationalisation of committee autonomy.

Question	Less autonomy ↔ More autonomy
Number permanent committees (legislative per function/specialised/non-legislative)?	<i>Not used for index</i>
Number ad hoc committees (no legislation/legislation)?	<i>Not used for index</i>
How many joint committees exist?	<i>Not used for index</i>
Does the Committee of the Whole House exist?	Yes ↔ No
Do restrictions exist with regard to the size of committees?	<i>Not used for index</i>
What is the min. and max. size of ad hoc committees?	<i>Not used for index</i>
What is the min. and max. size of permanent committees?	<i>Not used for index</i>
Are committees jurisdictional to ministerial portfolios?	Subject based, crude coverage ↔ Complete correspondence
Do multiple membership restrictions exist (limit)?	Yes ↔ No restrictions
Are substantive (non-procedural/administrative) sub-committees used? How many?	Not possible ↔ Possible
Which body is formally involved in the assignments of members to committees?	External group (e.g. whips) ↔ House
How are committee chairs formally selected?	Speaker ↔ Vote in committee
How are chairs allocated to the PPGs?	Only cabinet PPGs ↔ Proportional
Same committees established in the last 2 legislative periods?	Substantive changes ↔ Yes
Are committee meetings public or private?	Public ↔ Private
Are rights granted to publish minority reports?	No ↔ Yes, automatically
How are bills allocated to committees?	Minister, Speaker ↔ Board of Chairmen
When is the committee stage?	After plenary debate ↔ Before debate
Do committees have the right to initiate legislation?	Not possible ↔ Right exists
Can committees split or merge bills?	Not possible ↔ Right exists
Do committees have the right to redraft legislation or propose amendments?	No power to amend/redraft ↔ Extensive amendment power
Do committees have the right to kill a bill?	No ↔ Yes
Which document is considered by the plenum at the end result of committee negotiation?	Original bill with proposed amendments ↔ Redrafted 'clean' bill; resolution recommendation
Who controls the committee's timetable?	Meetings regulated ↔ Committee (no right to recall)
Is the committee able to appoint a rapporteur for a bill?	No ↔ Yes
Can sessions of the committees be scheduled simultaneously to plenary sessions?	No ↔ Yes
Do committees have their own staff?	No ↔ Yes
Number of supporting staff for each committee?	No support staff ↔ Highest number
Secretariat's functions: administrative/research/document preparation?	None ↔ Combination of all three
Do committees have the right to invite/compel witnesses? If so, who are they allowed to compel?	Invite but not compel ↔ Compel unrestricted
Are committee hearings public or private?	Public ↔ Private
Can committees demand documents from outside parliament? If so, from whom?	Not possible ↔ Yes, unrestricted

PPGs: parliamentary party groups.

legislation and they have extensive rights to redraft legislation. Furthermore, it allows for minority reports to be drafted. After the committee stage of bills, the document that is discussed is the bill including the considerations and changes of the committee. Additionally, the number of staff is relatively

high and the staff assists the committee in administrative tasks, research and the preparation of documents. However, even in this legislature, there are some limitations with regard to the analysed items: as an example, the committees' jurisdiction does not have complete correspondence with ministerial portfolios. Although there is broad coverage, most ministries are cross-covered. The committee system, therefore, scores lower on this item than legislatures in which complete correspondence is present. Committees in the Riksdag also do not have the right to 'kill a bill' and do not have complete control over their own timetable. The majority in the plenum has a right of recall (some legislatures allow for no right of recall at all). Although committee meetings can be scheduled simultaneously with the plenary session, they may only take place when the committee business is not part of the plenary discussion. Additionally, while some legislatures have extensive rights to ask for documents from all kinds of institutions, their right refers only to government institutions. These examples illustrate why the Riksdag, although scoring with the highest score in several items, does not achieve an overall score of '1'.

The placement of countries here resembles prior comparative studies (e.g. Martin, 2011, p. 353). Small differences can most likely be accounted for by the larger number of items considered in this study and by the method of calculating the index. There are some notable exceptions. The low score of the Dutch Tweede Kamer might be surprising as it contradicts the findings of Martin and Vanberg (2011, p. 50). Based on the formal characteristics the low score is, however, not surprising. Looking at the included items, the Dutch Tweede Kamer scores low on many included items. During the revision of laws committee meetings in the Tweede Kamer consist of written questions and answers, while no amendments can be proposed or included by the committee in a draft. Additionally, these committees do not possess any rights to initiate, split or merge bills. On the other side of the ranking, the committee system of the Swedish Riksdag consistently scores high on the included issues. Committees have excessive redrafting rights, can split and merge bills, have control over their own timetable and possess a high number of staff, etc.

### Operationalising the independent variables

*Hypothesis 1:* Using the ParlGov database (Döring & Manow, 2012), the average seat share of government/cabinet parliamentary party groups was calculated by aggregating the seat share of the governing parties (excluding caretakers) of a particular country across all legislative periods since 1990. Data for Israel were obtained from Carr (2014) and cross-checked with data from the Election Guide database (Election Guide Database, 2014).<sup>4</sup> The most recent governments included were those formed in January 2013.

*Hypothesis 2:* For the extent of personal vote incentives, rankings for all countries were obtained from the data set compiled by Johnson and Wallack (2012). Based on the four indicators<sup>5</sup> proposed by Carey and Shugart (1995), the data set ranks various institutional combinations according to the relative value to legislators of personal reputations versus party reputations.<sup>6</sup>

*Hypothesis 3:* The extent to which the electoral systems gives individual MPs a clear connection to individual districts is measured via a mean district magnitude score (number of seats in parliament divided by the number of electoral districts). If all legislators are elected via simple plurality in single-member districts, each legislator has a clear connection to a single district. On the other 'extreme' are countries with a single electoral district (such as the Israeli Knesset). Information on the number of districts per electoral system was collected directly from parliamentary websites. No distinction was made with regard to variation across districts. In the case of mixed-member proportional systems the divisor is the sum of the number of single-member districts and the number of districts in which members are distributed via party lists. The divided score is skewed and therefore was logged.

*Hypothesis 4:* A range of quantitative indicators of corporatism exists (for an extended overview, see Kenworthy, 2000). A recent index by Jahn (2016) covers all countries in my data set with the exception of Iceland. His corporatism score is the result of a factor analysis of eight items to measure the level of corporatism in a country (Jahn, 2016, p. 14). Owing to its coverage and the high match with the ranking by Siaroff (1999), arguably one of the most widely used measures of corporatism, the Jahn ranking was used for this analysis. Data for Iceland was compensated with its score in the Siaroff ranking.

*Hypothesis 5:* The number of bills per year was obtained through overview lists of bills or search engines on parliamentary websites. All bills which were introduced by legislators or groups of legislators (Private Member Bills), the government, and committees were counted. The number of plenary sessions per year was also gathered based on the information in parliamentary year-books or databases. The time frame of the analysis is 25 years (January 1990–January 2015) but varies across cases (on average over a period of 15 years). Using these two indicators the overall ratio on the average number of bills was calculated. The average number of bills varies considerably, from around 29 per year in Malta to over 3500 in Sweden. The number for Sweden seems extraordinarily high, but it is in line with earlier research (see, e.g. Bergman & Bolin, 2011, p. 268). In this particular case the number is inflated through the high number of Private Member Bills (Swedish: *motioner*). The analysis will control for any bias caused by the high number of bills in Sweden.

*Hypothesis 6:* The number of government parties for each cabinet between January 1990 (excluding supporting parties) until December 2012 was determined using the ParlGov database (Döring & Manow, 2012). Each cabinet was then classified as single-party or coalition government. The final score reflects the percentage of cabinets that were coalition cabinets.

*Hypothesis 7:* The ideological distances between coalition partners were calculated using the ParlGov database (Döring & Manow, 2012). Caretaker parties were excluded. The overall score is the mean between the difference of highest and lowest scores in the left–right, state–market, liberty–authority and the pro–anti EU dimensions across all governments that were established after elections in January 1990 and December 2012. Data for Israel were calculated based on the scores in Benoit and Laver (2006).

*Hypothesis 8:* Data on the frequency of minority governments until December 2012 were collected from the ParlGov database (Döring & Manow, 2012). Data for governments formed after 2012 were added by the author. For Israel, the data were obtained from the website of the Knesset (Knesset, 2015). The time frame of the analysis is 25 years (January 1990–January 2015). Each government formed within this period was coded with respect to it being supported by a minority of members in parliament or not.

Three control variables are used. The institutionalisation literature views autonomous committees as a sign of a fully institutionalised legislature. In their study on committees in post-communist parliaments, Olson and Crowther (2002) argue that committees in legislatures of developed democracies are ‘the prime organisational means by which parliaments act independently of the executive’ (p. 3). It is expected that the level of autonomy should be higher the more institutionalised a legislature is. The analysis tests the effect of the number of years the country is classified as a parliamentary democracy using information provided in the Polity IV Country Reports (Marshall & Gurr, 2010). An additional control variable was included to test the effect of bicameralism on the committee system. It is expected that a bicameral legislature establishes committees with less autonomy, as the upper chamber is already an additional controlling body. A third control variable relates to the size of a parliament. Larger legislatures offer more possibilities to relocate decisions from the plenary to committees and are therefore expected to grant more autonomy to committees for efficiency purposes. Information on the size of the legislatures was collected from the websites of each parliament. Table 2 contains descriptive statistics on each of the independent variables.

The analysis relies on a ‘snapshot’ of the dependent variable (the situation of committee systems in 2013). Several shortcomings of this approach need to be addressed. First of all, one might argue that committee systems evolve gradually and by analysing the specific configuration in a given year it is

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of the independent variables for the analysis of committee structures.

Variable	<i>n</i>	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Majority seat share	30	38.99	78.05	53.35	8.07
Reliance on 'personal vote'	30	1.00	10.33	4.14	3.16
Connection to districts (logged)	30	0.00	5.01	2.23	1.33
Corporatism	30	0	3.61	1.55	0.94
Rate bills/year	30	0.20	27.10	5.25	6.08
Percentage coalition cabinets	30	0.00	1.00	0.74	0.35
Ideology distance government parties	30	0.00	6.84	2.87	1.63
Frequency minority government	30	0.00	1.00	0.30	0.27
(log)Years parl. democracy	30	2.64	5.13	4.02	0.72
Bicameral	30	0	1	0.50	0.51
(log)Size	30	4.09	6.48	5.34	0.70

possible to overlook gradual changes leading to this set-up. Despite the reliance on averages over an extended period, a fundamental problem remains with regard to the gap in the time period between the dependent and the independent variables. It might very well be that committee structures were changed in the past based on a specific background situation that legislators in a parliament faced which go even further back than the averages used in this study. Such considerations cannot be ruled out and they do pose a problem with regard to the argument that is made in this analysis (despite it being phrased in terms of correlation). Ideally, data would be needed which lists when each committee feature was established and to use an independent variable to represent it in the relevant period. However, it is very difficult to trace back all of the 20+ indicators I use for each of the 30 countries of my study. Relying on a snapshot of committee systems in 2013 is, therefore, a pragmatic choice with limitations. The analysis rests on the assumption that, even though committee structures might have been changed based on the background situation of a period which exceeds the analysed period, this background situation has not changed drastically and can be analysed with averages since 1990.

Second, by using several static variables it is possible to 'miss' the actual relationship and make inferences with variables which do not have a connection to the establishment of the particular committee system. This is taken into account by relying on averages over a longer period of time as much as possible. As was argued above, the argument that is made in this paper rests on the assumption that over time a match will be established between the political situation and a parliament's structure. Rather than assuming causation, the analysis is based on the correlation between these factors and committee autonomy by looking at average scores over a prolonged period of time. This prevents outliers in a period biasing the result. By using averages over several years, the independent variables capture a dynamic process in a single static value.

## Results: what explains the variation in committee structures?

For a first impression of the effect of the variables, bivariate models were run and the data were plotted.<sup>7</sup> Several predictor variables indicate a significant effect. These relate to the average number of bills per plenary session (Hypothesis 5 – informational), the level of corporatism (Hypothesis 4 – distributive) and the percentage of the coalition cabinets as well as the ideological distance between government parties (Hypotheses 6 and 7 – coalition logic). The other variables do not reach common significance levels.

For the main analysis, a multivariate linear regression model was fitted to the data. The data structure allows for fitting an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression as the general requirements for a linear regression model are met by logging the skewed variables and testing for multicollinearity (which is addressed further below). A problem occurs, however, on a more general level: the number of hypotheses and predictors (nine variables) is high in relation to the number of cases (30 cases). This is due to the theoretical framework, which comprises four distinct theories, and the limited number of available cases. In statistical terms, trying to estimate too many parameters from a sample that is too small is referred to as ‘overfitting’. Doing so can pose a real problem with regard to the inferences drawn from the models (see Babyak, 2004).

In order to test the robustness of the results of the OLS regression, stepwise selection of variables and lasso regression (an example of shrinkage models) were used in this study (Hastie, Tibshirani, & Friedman, 2009).<sup>8</sup> These additional tests largely confirmed the outcome of the OLS regression (which will be discussed below). This increases the confidence in the robustness of the findings of the OLS model. The results of the multivariate OLS models are presented in Table 3. The value of Cohen’s  $f^2$  (1.0 in Model 1) shows a large effect of the independent variables.

The output of the OLS model which includes all variables and all 30 cases (denoted as Model 1 in Table 3) indicates support for the ‘workload’ hypothesis: legislatures with a higher workload establish committee systems with greater autonomy. Even though the lasso regression hinted at an effect of the level of corporatism (Hypothesis 4), the variable does not reach common significance levels in the OLS model. This is also reflected in the substantive effect of the variable which is negligible. The difference between the committee autonomy score of countries with the lowest score of corporatism and the highest level of corporatism is 0.025 (0.582 for the least corporatist countries and 0.607 for the most corporatist countries). There is no evidence that variation in the connection between individual legislators and constituencies (Hypothesis 3) is positively related to the level of committee autonomy. Although the coefficient is in the expected direction, the effect is not significant. The results further show no sign of support for the argument that

**Table 3.** Results of the analysis of committee autonomy scores (upper table: bivariate linear regression; lower table: multiple linear regression models).

Variable	Results of bivariate linear regression model for committee autonomy scores			
	Dependent variable: committee autonomy			
	Constant	SD	Coefficient	SD
Majority seat share	0.545***	(0.137)	0.001	(0.003)
Reliance on 'personal vote'	0.612***	(0.033)	-0.008	(0.006)
Connection to districts (logged)	0.552***	(0.039)	0.013	(0.020)
Corporatism	0.512***	(0.036)	0.044**	(0.020)
Rate bills/year	0.533***	(0.023)	0.009***	(0.003)
Percentage coalition cabinets	0.486***	(0.043)	0.127**	(0.052)
Ideology distance of government PPGs	0.478***	(0.035)	0.036***	(0.011)
Frequency minority government	0.567***	(0.030)	0.045	(0.074)

	Results of multiple linear regression model for committee autonomy scores				
	Dependent variable: committee autonomy				
	Model 1	Model 1A	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Majority seat share	-0.000 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.003)	0.001 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.004)	0.001 (0.003)
Personal vote	-0.007 (0.006)	-0.008 (0.007)	-0.008 (0.008)	-0.008 (0.007)	-0.007 (0.007)
(log)Connection to districts	-0.018 (0.016)	-0.018 (0.026)	-0.013 (0.020)	-0.016 (0.016)	-0.013 (0.016)
Level of corporatism	0.009 (0.023)	0.009 (0.026)	0.020 (0.033)	0.011 (0.025)	0.006 (0.024)
Rate bills/year	0.007** (0.003)	0.007* (0.004)	0.008* (0.004)	0.007* (0.003)	0.009** (0.003)
Vote share governing party/coalition	0.039 (0.074)	0.046 (0.109)	0.033 (0.130)		0.104* (0.060)
Ideology distance of government PPGs	0.023 (0.017)	0.025 (0.019)	0.021 (0.022)	0.026 (0.017)	
Frequency of minority governments	0.027 (0.093)	-0.020 (0.113)	0.069 (0.124)	-0.018 (0.110)	0.048 (0.094)
Years democracy(logged)			-0.040 (0.124)		
Bicameral			0.015 (0.058)		
Size(logged)			0.010 (0.037)		
Constant	0.494** (0.200)	0.560** (0.230)	0.514** (0.359)	0.516** (0.209)	0.439** (0.200)
Observations	30	26	26	26	30
R <sup>2</sup>	0.500	0.406	0.465	0.399	0.452
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.310	0.126	0.044	0.166	0.278
Residual standard error	0.090	0.096	0.101	0.094	0.092
F Statistic	2.63	1.45	1.83	1.71	2.59
df	21	17	14	18	22

Note: Standard deviation in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

PPGs: parliamentary party groups.

electoral rules which allow legislators to rely more on 'personal votes' (Hypothesis 2) are positively related to the autonomy of committee systems. The variable which is associated with a partisan rationale indicates

an even weaker effect. Autonomous committees can be found in legislatures with both a large and a small average seat share of the majority parliamentary party group or coalition. Surprisingly, the two variables related to the coalition logic do not significantly predict committee autonomy in the full model, either. An additional model (Model 1A) was run with all variables but excluding those cases which have experienced only single-party governments in the period of examination (Canada, Greece, Malta, and Spain). This was done to check whether the variable regarding the ideological distance between the governing parties (which was scored with a zero in these cases) biases the result. This new analysis does not change the significance of any of the variables. Rate of bills remains the only statistically significant variable ( $p = .055$ ). The effect of this variable is substantial. The country with the lowest rate of bills has a predicted committee autonomy of 0.579; the highest rate of bills predicts a committee autonomy score of 0.7252.

The results for the coalition logic variables in the complete models are striking, given their initial predictive power in the bivariate models. After looking more closely at the inter-correlations between predictor variables, the presence of coalitions and the ideological distance between governing parties appear highly correlated (Pearson's  $r = .726$ ). In order to account for this, two additional models were run. These are listed as Models 3 and 4 in [Table 3](#).

When excluding the variable measuring the vote share of coalitions (Model 3), the variable concerning the ideological distance still fails to pass common significance levels ( $p = .152$ ). However, when excluding the ideological distance (Model 4) the variable concerning coalitions reaches the 10 per cent significance level ( $p = .095$ ). The rate of bills remains significant ( $p = .053$ , Model 3;  $p = .011$ , Model 4). These extra checks provide support for the 'keeping tabs on coalition partners' function of committees that was proposed by Martin and Vanberg (2011). With regard to the substantial effect, in countries which experience coalitions in every legislative period under investigation the committee autonomy is, holding all other factors constant, predicted to be 10 per cent higher than in countries where no coalition government is formed. The predicted value increases from 0.503 (no coalitions formed) to 0.607 (coalitions formed in all legislative periods).

Unsurprisingly, a high correlation is also visible between the variables measuring the frequency of minority governments and the percentage of coalition governments (Pearson's  $r = .71$ ). However, additional models excluding one of these variables did not lead to significant results of the remaining variable.

Regarding the control variables (see Model 2 in [Table 3](#)), committee autonomy does not vary systematically with the number of years since transition to democratic rule. There is little evidence to assume, based on this analysis, that committee systems in parliaments by nature have little

autonomy in the beginning. Committee systems in more recent democracies vary with regard to their autonomy as much as they do in established democracies. It can rather be argued that legislatures in new democracies ‘copy’ structures of established legislatures when setting up their formal rules. Similarly, bicameralism does not prove to be a predictor of higher levels of committee autonomy. The size of a legislature is not connected to committee autonomy, either.

When inspecting the model the influence of the number of bills per plenary session is striking. Several additional tests were conducted to check whether Sweden ‘drives’ the results. First, the variable measuring the rate of bills was logged. This does not change the significance levels of the model. The rate of bills per plenary session still remains significant ( $p = .009$  in the model including all theory-related variables and  $p = .012$  in the model including the control variables). As a further check Sweden was excluded from the analysis. When excluding Sweden (again also excluding the countries which have experienced single-party governments in all legislative periods under investigation) the variable measuring the ideological distance does not pass common significant levels ( $p = .162$ ), while the logged rate of bills remains significant ( $p = .064$ ). Similarly, when the percentage of coalitions is entered as the only coalition-logic-related variable, it fails to pass significance levels (logged rate of bills  $p = .063$ ). Further excluding the variable measuring the rate of minority government does not change the outcome. Even with the exclusion of Sweden, the substantial effect of the variable measuring the rate of bills is sizeable. The predicted committee autonomy score for countries which face a very low workload is 0.513, while those parliaments with the highest workload are predicted to have a committee autonomy score of 0.667.

### Conclusion: informational gains and coalition logic

Strong committees have traditionally been associated more with legislatures which have weak parliamentary party groups (such as the US Congress), rather than with legislatures of parliamentary systems. This view misses, however, the more nuanced picture. Almost all legislatures around the world rely on committees in their daily operation. There is great variation with regard to the internal organisation across legislatures. Several legislatures outside the US have established highly comprehensive and effective committee systems. This provides us with the possibility to analyse the underlying rationale of why legislatures are organised in the way they are. Using this as a starting point, the article has addressed the main research question: ‘what factors account for the variation in formal committee structures?’

The study has analysed the committee systems of 30 legislatures which have varying degrees of strong parliamentary party groups using the central hypotheses of the ‘keeping tabs on coalition partners’ logic of committees

proposed by Martin and Vanberg (2011) and the congressional theories. Research on legislative organisation outside the US is still in the early stages of development, which is why it is important to take the long-standing theoretical debate in the US into consideration when conducting our analyses.

The analysis has summarised formal committee structures under the concept of committee autonomy, measured by a multi-item index based on an original data set. No distinction was made with regard to the importance of the different items. One might not agree with the choice to treat all items in this way and argue that some features weigh in heavier, i.e. an existing right to initiate legislation. Committee autonomy is a multi-faceted concept and the measured items are underlying dimensions of it. The literature itself also did not provide a clear indication on how to weigh the individual elements. Future research should build on this issue and provide additional analyses. The data set built up in this study provides a starting point to construct other measurements, for example by focusing on the two dimensions distinguished by Mattson and Strøm (1995) (drafting authority and agenda control). The data were analysed by fitting an OLS regression model. The problem regarding the relatively low number of cases and the high number of variables was addressed by robustness checks (stepwise selection and lasso regression) and analyses under different circumstances. Both show that the results are relatively robust. This increases the confidence in the results of the models, despite the relatively low number of cases.

The results indicate support for two theoretical perspectives. The data supports one of the hypotheses deduced from the coalition logic perspective. When the government consists of multiple parties on a regular basis (Hypothesis 6), the committee system tends to be more autonomous. The workload of a parliament (deduced from the informational theory, Hypothesis 5) is the best predictor to account for the variation in committee autonomy. A higher workload that a parliament faces is positively related to a more autonomous committee system.

The bivariate models, the lasso regression as well as the stepwise selection hinted at a correlation between the level of autonomy of a legislature's committee system and how corporatist a country is as well as the ideological difference between coalition partners, but the OLS regression did not show this effect. Variables which tested a distributional and partisan rationale (district magnitude score and the majority parliamentary party group(s) seat share) did not have a significant effect on committee autonomy. The effect of (at least one of) the congressional rationales has important theoretical implications. Some scholars argued that the study of committees needs to evolve from relying too much on the congressional theories (Hansen, 2011; Yordanova, 2011). It is certainly true that the coalition logic perspective by Martin and Vanberg should be a central building block in our endeavour to understand better how legislatures organise their work. Two of the

congressional theories did not help us to understand the formal committee structures. Nevertheless, for this analysis, the informational theory provided additional insight. By focusing solely on the government formation-driven argument proposed by the model of Martin and Vanberg, we might overlook important structural and political features. The informational theory highlighted an important factor which would otherwise have been neglected and was a valuable addition to the framework.

The study is limited due to the restriction to formal committee characteristics. By focusing only on the structural features little can be said about the daily operations and workings of committees in the legislatures and the level of autonomy of individual legislators. Next to factors such as particular legislative–executive relationships, parliamentary party groups in the analysed legislatures are gatekeepers and put powerful constraints on their members. Actual committee members’ autonomy is never entirely free of other considerations. However, no good estimates are available to measure autonomy during the decision-making processes, while formal committee structures can be measured. Future studies need to give more insight into the restrictions of parliamentary party group organisations on individual legislators in committees and the relationship between committee members and parliamentary party groups.

## Notes

1. The following cases are included (LH = Lower House in the case of bicameral legislatures): *Austria*: Nationalrat<sup>LH</sup>; *Belgium*: Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers<sup>LH</sup>; *Canada*: House of Commons<sup>LH</sup>; *Czech Republic*: Poslanecká sněmovna<sup>LH</sup>; *Denmark*: Folketing; *Estonia*: Riigikogu; *Finland*: Eduskunta; *France*: Assemblée Nationale<sup>LH</sup>; *Germany*: Bundestag<sup>LH</sup>; *Greece*: Vouli ton Ellinon; *Hungary*: Országház; *Iceland*: Althing; *Ireland*: (Dáil Éireann)<sup>LH</sup>; *Israel*: Knesset; *Italy*: Camera dei Deputati<sup>LH</sup>; *Japan*: Shūgiin<sup>LH</sup>; *Latvia*: Saeima; *Lithuania*: Seimas; *Luxembourg*: Chambre des Députés; *Malta*: House of Representatives; *The Netherlands*: Tweede Kamer<sup>LH</sup>; *Norway*: Storting; *Poland*: Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej<sup>LH</sup>; *Portugal*: Assembleia da República; *Slovakia*: Národná rada; *Slovenia*: Državni zbor<sup>LH</sup>; *Spain*: Congreso de los Diputados<sup>LH</sup>; *Sweden*: Riksdag; *Switzerland*: Nationalrat<sup>LH</sup>; *United Kingdom*: House of Commons<sup>LH</sup>.

Initially, data were also gathered for *Australia*: House of Representatives<sup>LH</sup>, *Croatia*: Hrvatski sabor and *New Zealand*: House of Representatives. Unfortunately, country experts have been unable to check the data for these legislatures yet. These three countries therefore had to be excluded from the analysis.

2. For checking the individual country data I am deeply indebted to Wolfgang C. Müller, Sam Depauw, Christopher D. Raymond, Zdenka Mansfeldová, Martin Ejnar Hansen, Vello Pettai, Mihkel Solvak, Matti Wiberg, Olivier Costa, Theodore Chatzipantelis, Gabriella Ilonszki, Shane Martin, Reuven Hazan, Marco Giuliani, Naofumi Fujimura, Janis Ikstens, Alvidas Lukošaitis, Cynthia van Vonno, Knut Heidar, Agnieszka Dudzińska, Ana Belchior,

Marek Rybář, Miro Haček, Magnus Hagevi, Juan Rodríguez Teruel, Adrian Vatter, and Phil Larkin (order of names based on alphabetical order of countries).

3. Initially the data were analysed in order to extract multiple dimensions by means of a principal component analysis, but the results did not indicate any meaningful unobserved factors.
4. The status as coalition-PPG was only given in case parliamentary party groups joined the coalition right after the election.
5. (1) The degree of control parliamentary party group leaders exercise over ballot rank in list systems, (2) whether votes cast in the general election are pooled across entire parties, (3) the number and types of votes cast and (4) district magnitude.
6. The results presented in this paper use the rank of the tier with the greatest incentives to cultivate a personal vote (denoted PERS\_RANK). Models with the other ranking which ranks countries according to their most populous tier (DOM\_RANK) presented similar results.
7. Plots for these variables can be obtained from the author on request.
8. The output can be obtained from the author.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Committee autonomy scores of each analysed legislature.

Country	Legislature	Committee autonomy score
Austria	Nationalrat	0.667
Belgium	Kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers	0.702
Canada	House of Commons	0.527
Czech Republic	Poslanecká sněmovna Parlamentu České republiky	0.488
Denmark	Folketing	0.562
Estonia	Riigikogu	0.642
Finland	Eduskunta	0.663
France	Assemblée nationale	0.521
Germany	Bundestag	0.712
Greece	Vouli ton Ellinon	0.463
Hungary	Országgyűlés	0.562
Iceland	Alþingi	0.605
Ireland	Dáil Éireann	0.441
Israel	Knesset	0.594
Italy	Camera dei deputati	0.710
Japan	Shūgiin	0.637
Latvia	Saeima	0.660
Lithuania	Seimas	0.679
Luxembourg	Chambre des Députés	0.543
Malta	House of Representatives	0.355
Netherlands	Tweede Kamer	0.396
Norway	Storting	0.689
Poland	Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej	0.573
Portugal	Assembleia da República	0.549
Slovakia	Národná rada	0.536
Slovenia	Državni zbor	0.577
Spain	Congreso de los Diputados	0.522
Sweden	Riksdag	0.748
Switzerland	Nationalrat	0.687
United Kingdom	House of Commons of the United Kingdom	0.305