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Not so random after all? – revisiting committee assignments in Dáil Éireann

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I analyse the allocation of legislators to specialised committees in Dáil Éireann. Committees are privileged decision-making arenas: Committee members have, once assigned, the right and duty to work on issues within their jurisdiction. It is, therefore, important to understand which factors influence the assignment process. In what has been the most thorough analysis hitherto, Hansen [(2011). A random process? Committee assignments in Dail Eireann. *Irish Political Studies*, 26(3), 345–360] has found very little patterns explaining this process in the Dáil. The study uses the congressional theories of legislative organisation as heuristic devices to deduce several rationales of the assignment process. The role of parliamentary party groups in the assignment process is highlighted. The hypotheses are tested by means of a multiple-membership multilevel model on committee assignments across multiple legislative periods (1992–2011). The results are backed up with evidence from 22 interviews I conducted with Irish legislators. Contradicting earlier assessments of the assignment process, several factors increase the likelihood of being assigned to a committee. There is strong evidence for a reassignment pattern. Additionally, a legislator's occupational background matters in the assignment process. For the ongoing discussion about the applicability of the congressional theories outside of the U.S., my study provides evidence for the usefulness of the U.S. theories.

KEYWORDS Legislative organisation; congressional theories; committee assignments; distributive theory; informational theory; partisan theory; Dáil Éireann

The significance of committees in parliaments

As most legislatures around the world, Dáil Éireann relies on a system of specialised committees to allow for an efficient policy-making process. Even though the importance of committees is widely recognised, we know relatively little about how legislative work is organised within committees, with the exception of the U.S. Congress and U.S. state legislatures. Not much

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literature is available on the functioning of committees in other national legislatures even though this provides important insight into decision-making processes and power relations within legislatures. In particular, understanding the 'process by which members are assigned to committees is of the greatest importance' (Rohde and Shepsle 1973: 889). For the Dáil, Hansen (2011) presents the hitherto most thorough analysis. First, Hansen analyses participation in committees (all committees pooled) in a period of 1982 and 2010. In a second part, the assignment to important committees is analysed in two multivariate models. Although some patterns are found, most notably with regard to sector knowledge (Hansen 2011: 354) the author concludes that 'the results point towards committee assignments in Dáil Éireann happening rather randomly' (Hansen 2011: 346).

To contribute to the debate 'how are members assigned to legislative committees in the Dáil and what criteria play a role in the assignment process?', I present an analysis of all committee assignments in the 27th to the 31st Dáil. My study differs from the analysis by Hansen (2011) in terms of analysed committees, the period of investigation and the data used for the analysis. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data is used to broaden our understanding of this issue. The results presented in this study indicate that assignment patterns in the Dáil are not so random after all, but can be described by a mixture of reoccurring and stable factors.

These results have wider theoretical implications. Scholars focusing on committee assignments outside of the U.S. usually build on 'imported' theories of legislative organisation which originate from the U.S. Congress (usually labelled distributive, informational and partisan theory which Hansen 2011 also applies). The question 'how well do the predictions of the congressional theories travel to legislatures outside the United States?' is as yet unanswered (see, e.g. Martin 2014a). The non-finding of Hansen's study leads him to question the usefulness of the congressional theories (see also Yordanova 2011). Contradicting these views, the evidence presented in this study indicates that the congressional theories are more useful to understand committees in legislatures with strong parliamentary party groups (such as the Dáil) than what is discussed in Hansen (2011) and Yordanova (2011).

Committees in Dáil Éireann

The Dáil relies on several committees of which Select Committees are the primary committees to subdivide jurisdictional policy areas. The committee stage is the third (of five) legislative stages and follows the debate stage in which the Bill is approved in principle (or not). During the committee stage, the draft legislation is debated line by line. Amendments can be proposed, but only the responsible minister decides to accept amendments or not. The bill is then reported back for the fourth stage (Report Stage). The fifth

stage (Final Stage) concludes with a vote on the passage of the bill. The fourth and fifth stages are usually only a formality.

In principle, each house has the ability to establish a committee to examine any matter or issue. However, in reality, the most influential variable to determine the committees' jurisdictions is the government formation and select committees tend to mirror one or several ministerial departments. There is little consistency regarding which committees are established from one general election to another. In the 30th Dáil (2007–2011) no less than 22 committees were established. The large number of committees relative to the number of legislators received criticism during the 2011 election campaign. The newly elected government addressed this by reducing the number of committees. In order to still be able to deal with the specific legislation for each department, the Dáil introduced select sub-committees which meet only to consider issues in accordance with the terms of reference that established them.

Each Dáil Select Committee and Select Committee appointed by the upper chamber, Seanad Éireann, form a Joint Committee to avoid duplication of oversight. The Joint Committee can consider and report on the need for legislation or expenditure and international agreements that do not involve a charge on the public purse. In case a charge on the public purse is involved, only the Dáil Select Committee can consider the proposals. Oireachtas committees also engage in issues they put on their own agenda. Some committees limit themselves mainly to their input during the committee stages of Bills, others try to have a more active role by holding discussions on particular topics and inviting stakeholders, e.g. non-governmental organisations. Table 1 shows the established specialised committees at the beginning of the 31st legislative period.

A review of theories and literature

Although a large body of relevant literature on legislative organisation is available, theories on legislative organisation – of which committees are a central feature – are mainly restricted to those developed for the analysis of the U.S. Congress. These are the theories that researchers first turn to: 'Analysing non-US legislative bodies without drawing extensively on the literature of the US Congress is nearly impossible' (Hansen 2011: 348).

Theories of legislative organisation: a congressional bias

The distributive theory of legislative organisation argues that committees are established to provide legislators with means to distribute particularistic benefits to their constituents. Two key assumptions are that legislatures are decentralised institutions which are dominated by geographical concerns

Table 1. Specialised Committees established at the beginning of the 31st Dáil (2011–2016).

Dáil Committee	Shadowed department(s)	TDs
Committee of Public Accounts	–	13
Communications, Natural Resources and Agriculture	Communications, Energy and Natural Resources	15
Environment, Transport, Culture and the Gaeltacht	Environment, Community and Local Government Transport, Tourism and Sport Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht	21
European Union Affairs	–	9
Foreign Affairs and Trade	Foreign Affairs and Trade	9
Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform	Finance Public Expenditure and Reform Department of the Taoiseach Agriculture, Food and Marine	21
Jobs, Social Protection and Education	Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation Social Protection Education and Skills	21
Justice, Defence and Equality	Justice and Equality Defence	9
Health and Children	Health Children and Youth Affairs	15
Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement	–	15
Investigations, Oversight and Petitions	–	15

Source: Own depiction. Due to intermediate changes in June 2012 which mostly refer to reshuffling and re-naming the committee system has been altered again. The Committee on Environment, Transport, Culture and the Gaeltacht while the relevant responsibilities of the Committee on Communications, Natural Resources and Agriculture' were assumed by either the newly established Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine or the Committee on Transport and Communications.

and that individual legislators are not heavily constrained by partisan forces within the legislature (Shepsle 1978). In order to facilitate their goal of re-election, legislators engage in logrolling, i.e. the mutually beneficial exchange of influence in issues of high salience for their own advantage (gains from trade). This, however, creates a dilemma as legislators fear prospective defection. The committee system is seen as the solution to this problem. By dividing policy areas, committees create a decentralised agenda control system that enables legislators to facilitate gains from trade and maintain their bargains. The composition of committees is predicted to be unrepresentative of their parent body: primarily those legislators join a committee who have a 'stake' in the committee's jurisdiction.

The informational theory of legislative organisation departs from different assumptions of the functioning of Congress: Policies are selected in the 'presence of substantial uncertainty about their consequences upon implementation' (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1990: 533) and policies cannot be enacted without the consent of the majority of the legislature's members. This perspective argues that legislative institutions (such as committees) make legislative specialisation possible and, therefore, help to reduce uncertainty. With regard to assignment patterns, the theory predicts that Congress uses the

'endogenously selected institutional devices and resources to exploit the special talents of its exogenously elected members' (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1990: 533).

Despite being contradictory in their predictions, the informational and distributive theories share one common assumption: The absence of partisan organisation as a major force in the organisation of the U.S. Congress. The partisan theory of legislative organisation contradicts this assumption and views parliamentary party groups as driving forces in Congress. Committees are agents of the majority parliamentary party group and become part of the reward system of the parliamentary party group leadership. Loyalty to the parliamentary party group becomes an important determinant of committee assignments: Especially in committees that have an effect on the national perception of the party the preferences of the committee members 'will tend to have contingents that are microcosms of their party caucus' (Cox and McCubbins 1993: 199).

The debate on committees

Some U.S. studies support the predictions of the distributive theory, especially when taking into consideration a legislator's constituency characteristics (e.g. Shepsle 1978; Adler and Lapinski 1997). Other studies found empirical support for the informational theory in Congress (e.g. Krehbiel 1992; Hamm *et al.* 2011). The role of parliamentary party groups has been highly disputed (e.g. Krehbiel 1993). Kanthak (2009), for example, concludes that loyalists are more likely to be assigned to desirable committees.

The study of committees outside of the U.S. did not gain momentum until the late 1990s. Initial research focused primarily on the European Parliament (e.g. Whitaker 2005; McElroy 2006; Yordanova 2009, 2011). National legislatures did not undergo similar systematic analyses for a long time. Some studies argued that committee assignments in national legislatures are affected by electoral rules or candidate selection procedures (Stratmann and Baur 2002; Crisp *et al.* 2009). More recent studies of national legislatures make explicit use of the congressional theories (e.g. Hansen 2010; Fujimura 2012; Mickler 2013; Raymond and Holt 2014), including a study on the Dáil (Hansen 2011). These studies have shown variation in assignment patterns but have, overall, indicated stable country-specific arrangements. The analysis by Hansen (2011) does not point towards similar patterns in Ireland. Hansen (2011: 358) concludes that 'it is not possible to explain with much success which TDs are assigned to which committees, at least not in terms of ranking', although sector knowledge seems to account for some committee assignments. This also lets him question the usefulness of the congressional theories for the study of national legislatures outside of the U.S.

Still, the congressional theories remain the dominant perspectives on how committees work and need to be taken into consideration, even within the European parliamentary context. However, in order to apply the congressional theories to this 'new' setting, a redefinition of the role of parliamentary party groups is necessary. The influence of partisan forces on individual legislators in the U.S. Congress has been a bone of contention, but in a European context 'no one would seriously consider any alternative to political parties as the most important political coordination mechanism' (Müller 2000: 316). Parliamentary party groups in these legislatures are 'powerful floor coalitions, capable of disciplining their members and passing their programs, [...] effectively dominating the legislative agenda and taking responsibility for the final legislative product' (Cox and McCubbins 1993: 5).

This is also true for the Dáil. However, this does not confirm the supremacy of the partisan theory by default. I argue that the informational and distributive perspectives are also applicable to legislatures with strong parliamentary party groups *if* we relax their (congressional) assumption of the weakness of parliamentary party groups. The main organisational implications by both theories present perfectly feasible strategies that parliamentary party groups can pursue. For example, parliamentary party groups can use the committee system primarily to facilitate the re-election chances of their MPs by offering them the possibility to cater to outside groups via their committee membership (as predicted by the distributive theory). Additionally, parliamentary party groups in all legislatures, including the Dáil, have to take decisions under uncertainty. Using the specialised committee system to facilitate the legislative process by 'tapping the talents' of their legislators is certainly a feasible strategy which parliamentary party groups can pursue.

To summarise, committees are either organised to offer particularistic benefits to groups outside parliament (distributive rationale), part of the reward system of parliamentary party groups to induce loyalty (partisan rationale) or provide means to deal with the workload of the parliamentary party group and improve efficiency (informational rationale). This framework has clear predictions for the institutional design and can be used to identify the different conditions which cause the prevalence of a theory in a given context.

Hypotheses committee assignments: who gets what and why?

The distributive theory predicts committees to be used to serve interests outside parliament of individual MPs. Earlier studies (see Yordanova 2009) tested the effect of links to interest groups in the assignment process. However, after checking the annual reports from the website of the Oireachtas it was concluded that this variable is impossible to test in the Dáil. Almost no Teachta Dála (TD) has such external interests (constantly above 94 per cent

of legislators without any remunerated position, see [Appendix](#)). Due to the impossibility to include these external connections in the analysis, I test the distributive rationale by analysing whether individual legislators rely on the committee systems to serve their electorate and secure their re-election. A re-election principle in the assignment process suggests that those members of a parliamentary party group join the committees which correspond to an 'electoral demand' of a TD.

Hypothesis 1: TDs are more likely to serve on committees that correspond to their electoral link with constituencies.

The informational theory highlights the importance of specialised, efficiency improving committees. A 'rational legislature is one that efficiently taps the special talents of its legislators' (Krehbiel 1992: 136). Parliamentary party groups comprise legislators with various backgrounds. This makes the appointment of members who can specialise at low cost in a policy area to the corresponding committee a valid strategy.

Hypothesis 2: TDs are more likely to serve on committees in which they can specialise at low cost.

The partisan theory highlights the proactive role of the parliamentary party group leadership which 'reserves' seats on some committees for particular legislators. One factor that is predicted to structure this process is the number of legislative periods. Parliamentary party group leaders may prefer experienced legislators on committees whose policy-area concerns an important issue of the party and may withhold other from serving on them. This is done to increase the electoral success of the party at the next election.

Hypothesis 3: TDs who have served for more legislative periods are more likely to serve on committees whose jurisdiction concerns an important area of the party.

An additional hypothesis of the rationale tests the effect of individual legislators' loyalty to the likelihood of being assigned to important committees. Following the same reasoning as Hypothesis 3, legislators who are ideologically closer to the parliamentary party group are expected to be rewarded by the parliamentary party group leadership.

Hypothesis 4: TDs who are closer to the ideological mean of the parliamentary party group are more likely to serve on committees whose jurisdiction concerns an important area of the party.

Method of the study

This analysis makes use of a mixed method approach. Committee assignments are first analysed by means of a statistical analysis to find patterns in the assignment process and to understand which selection criteria explain why legislators serve on a particular committee. Given the particular data characteristics (1. All legislators are assigned to at least one committee.¹; 2. Some legislators are assigned to multiple committees; 3. Committees differ with regard to their importance to parliamentary party groups), a multiple membership multilevel model is applied to the data.² In multiple membership models, lower level units are nested within multiple higher level units from the same classification (Browne *et al.* 2001). This makes them appropriate choices for the data structure in which TDs are not 'neatly' clustered within one higher level group (committees).

However, solely focusing on quantitative methods makes null-findings very likely. To validate the statistical analysis and to provide further insight into the initial results, the results are cross-checked with evidence from semi-structured interviews with 22 legislators. As the study of committee assignments in national parliaments outside of the U.S. Congress is still in its infancy (Hansen 2011), using qualitative evidence to evaluate parts of the committee assignments is worthwhile to broaden our understanding of the processes and gains new insights (see also Settembri and Neuhold 2009; Mickler 2013).

The interviews were conducted by the author in December 2014 in Dublin and focused on the formal allocation of members and the criteria in the assignment process. It should be noted that the interviews were conducted with current incumbents which puts certain limitations on their ability to evaluate committee assignments prior to their election. Legislators from every parliamentary party group were interviewed, including independent legislators who formed the Technical Group (TG) as an independent alliance.³

Data set: measuring committee membership and operationalising the variables

The dependent variable: Assignments and transfers to specialised committees: The dependent variable measures the membership to specialised committees, i.e. those that are devoted to specific policy areas and exert both the control function and the scrutiny of bills. The analysed legislative periods comprise the 27th Dáil (1992 election) until the 31st Dáil (2011 election). An analysis across several legislative periods prevents the overestimation of outliers which might occur in single legislative periods. The 1992 legislative period marks the starting point of a new committee system after reforms restructured the number of committees, their jurisdictions and the referral of bills.

The transition to the new committee system made mid-term in July 1995, allowed the committee system to leap 'into life again' (Gallagher 2005). Detailed lists on committee memberships (with transfers) are available online for the 30th Dáil as well as the 31st Dáil (Houses of the Oireachtas 2011). Committee membership lists for the 26th⁴ – 29th legislative period were obtained from the Journals Office of the Oireachtas. The data were coded to establish a complete 'committee life cycle' of each legislator and reflects founding members (assigned at the beginning of the legislative period) and transfers. For the 31st Dáil, the data include the assignments at the beginning of the legislative period but not the transfers.

Advantages in knowledge concerning a committees' subject matter: The informational rationale predicts that members are assigned to committees who can specialise at low cost in a given policy area. A TDs prior education and occupation are valuable assets in this regard. Information on the educational and occupational background was obtained by coding TDs' biographies using the information provided in *Nealon's Guide* (Nealon 1992, 1997; Kennedy and Nealon 2002; Collins and Nealon 2007; Collins 2011). Missing information was obtained by consulting parliamentary party group or personal homepages. The job descriptions were summarised in more than 50 general categories (lawyers, banking industry, civil servant, etc.) and then assigned to each committee. This demanded a clear cut-off point when a prior education and occupation allow a legislator to specialise 'at low cost'. The guiding principle was whether a prior education / occupation would give a TD a relative advantage compared to a TD who did not have such a training.

Constituency demands: The concept of district demand is impossible to test in the statistical analysis. Scholars in the U.S. are able to define relatively clear district types with their highest electoral need. This proved to be highly difficult for my analysis. For several committees, good indicators for constituency demand were entirely absent. An obvious example is not only committees dealing with European Affairs, but also committees dealing with issues concerning women and family are difficult to match to certain constituency characteristics without over-stretching the concept. The issue of constituency characteristics is, therefore, addressed in the interviews with TDs.

Parliamentary seniority: To measure parliamentary seniority the number of legislative periods was counted via *Nealon's Guide* and the homepage of the Dáil.

Legislators' ideological distance to the parliamentary party group mean: To test whether legislators who are ideologically closer to the parliamentary party group mean are disproportionally assigned to more important committees, fine-grained data on individual legislators is needed. Obtaining such data are a central problem of legislative research (Loewenberg 2008: 488). Debus (2009) distinguishes three alternative methods for estimating programmatic positions of political actors: voting behaviour of politicians, surveys on an

elite or legislators' level, or identifying the ideological position of relevant actors via (hand-coded or automatic) content analysis of relevant documents. In this study, ideological positions were estimated using the Wordscores technique (Laver *et al.* 2003), a computer-assisted content analysis method.

Wordscores was chosen because it has been successfully applied to estimate policy positions based on legislators' speeches in the Dáil⁵, but it also suits the research goal conceptually. The aim is to position individual legislators *with regard to their proximity relative to their parliamentary party group*. Wordscores compares text pattern in two sets of texts (called 'reference' and 'virgin' texts). By assigning scores to 'reference' documents which, in this study, indicate the 'ideal score' of the parliamentary party group, Wordscores makes this inference on relative proximity possible. This makes it different from other approaches, such as the Wordfish technique, which infers scores based on the data. In this study, the party manifestos for the respective elections are used as reference texts. The manifestos were obtained from the Irish Election Manifesto Archive (Pidgeon 2017).⁶ The party manifestos (i.e. the reference texts) were scored using the party position scores of the Manifesto Research Group/Comparative Manifestos Project (Volkens *et al.* 2014). Each legislator was compared to the reference file of the respective parliamentary party group. All speeches and questions given during the legislative period were used for the analysis. Table 2 lists the number of analysed legislative speeches.

The final score for each legislator was calculated as the absolute value of the difference of each legislator's score to his/her parliamentary party group's mean. A higher value implicates a TD who is further away from his/her parliamentary party group mean and is expected to be less likely to be allocated to a more important committee.⁷ The application of Wordscores made a calculation possible for all legislators.

There are some limitations to this approach. The amount of speeches and written questions across TDs varies. Additionally, Wordscores as a technique 'makes no assumptions about syntax but treats any text as a simple bag of words' (Scharkow 2011: 5). On a general level, one might question whether it

Table 2. Number of analysed plenary documents, speeches and personal statements.

Country	Plenary sessions	No analysed speeches and questions
Dáil Éireann		
27th (1992–1997)	435	191843
28th (1997–2002)	422	226100
29th (2002–2007)	555	296515
30th (2007–2011)	348	245980
31st (2011–March 2015)	503	297769

Source: Own data set. The data contain all speeches, questions asked during Question Time on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays as well as all written questions addressed to ministers for written reply. During question time, each TD is allowed to ask the Minister only two questions. There is no limit to the number of written questions. In 2010, Ministers answered over 35,000 written questions. The end point of the 31st Dáil was March 2015.

is possible to infer relative ideological distance based on word choices. While these considerations cannot be ruled out entirely, the approach suits the research goal. Those TDs who highlight similar issues in their contributions will be closer associated than TDs who emphasise different issues. Before running the analysis, a validity test was carried out. It would be possible that the speeches of all TDs in a committee would revolve around the topics covered in this committee and, subsequently, those TDs would have similar word frequencies. In this case, committee membership would trump parliamentary party group membership. For the interpretation of scores, this would be highly problematic. However, this is not the case. Across all legislatures and all parliamentary party groups, legislators from one parliamentary party group are more closely associated with each other than the committee members.⁸

Measuring the Relative Importance of Committee: Several hypotheses relate an effect of factors to the importance of committees. Hansen (2011) ranks all committees based on the importance of ministerial portfolios. While it is clear that some committees are more important than others, there is little added value to account for minor differences between *all* committees.⁹ It is only necessary to understand which committees are of central importance compared to others. Instead, this study relies on the dichotomous distinction between high-importance and low-importance committees in terms of *issue saliency*. The distinction into high or low importance committees is based on the interviews. Legislators were asked which committees they see as important for their parliamentary party group. The saliency of committees is generally shared across parties. In the Dáil, the *Public Accounts Committee* was unequivocally listed as the most important committee. Committees dealing with financial issues and the economy are, across all parties, very salient and thus ranked as those of high importance.¹⁰

Committee experience: One control variable is added to the model. Earlier studies in other legislatures have found patterns of a continuation of committee membership (see Mickler 2013). Committee experience was measured by pooling the membership to committees from one immediate prior legislative period to the next. Aggregating committee memberships across more than one legislative period would mean an inflation of positive codes. In case committees were merged legislators of both committees are treated as having committee experience for the new committee. When committees were split up, legislators who served on it are coded to have experience for both of the new committees.

Analysis committee assignment: 'self-selection' or leadership-dominated?

The question arises to what extent the parliamentary party group leadership autonomously decides on the assignment. In the German Bundestag,

committee preferences are evaluated via surveys or personal talks. Assignments follow a discussion with the parliamentary party group leadership (see Mickler 2013). As regards the Irish case, only the legislators of Fine Gael mentioned being asked about their preferences (Interview Dáil, 141203C). Fianna Fáil legislators stated that in previous legislative periods (when numbers were larger), they would ‘tell the whip which committees [they] would like to be on and the whip would draw up a list’ (Interview Dáil, 141203E; also 141202C). Members of other parliamentary party groups indicated that they never gave any preferences for committees. The procedure in the Technical Group is special in this regard: legislators wrote their preferences on a piece of paper in their first meeting. In case only one member wanted a committee (s)he automatically got it (Interview Dáil, 141201A).

Regardless of whether preferences for committees are gathered or not, respondents highlighted that the ultimate decision is made by the parliamentary party group leader (Interview Dáil, 141204C; 141205A). Interviewees compared the role of the leader to that of a ‘football manager selecting his team’ (Interview Dáil, 141204C, 141202C). This proactive role of the parliamentary party group leadership in the assignment procedure fits the partisan rationale. This raises the question: What factors play a role in the assignment process?

Interpreting the models: what explains assignments to committees in the Dáil?

The main analysis tests the effect on the *membership of committees (including transfers during the legislative period)*. For each legislative period, two models were estimated: Model 1 without committee experience and Model 2 including committee experience.¹¹ A separate estimation allows for a clearer analysis of those factors that are linked to a particular theoretical rationale and remain stable, such as legislators’ prior education or occupation. Committee experience, on the other hand, is ‘acquired’ by legislators due to their committee membership in the prior legislative period. Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 3.

Two group effects are fitted by including varying intercepts for committees and individual TDs. It was refrained from nesting the observations per Dáil, i.e. including legislative periods as a part of the nested data structure. Analysing all legislative periods in one model would be interesting if the established committees would remain relatively stable across the analysed legislative terms. However, merging and splitting committees, as well as discontinuing and newly establishing committees, is very common in the Dáil. The detailed output for all parliamentary party groups is presented in Table 4. Below for each hypothesis the result from the analysis is presented, followed by statements from the interviews.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the data set on committee assignments.

Variable	<i>n</i>	nbr.null	Mean	SD	<i>n</i>	nbr.null	Mean	SD	<i>n</i>	nbr.null	Mean	SD
			27th Dáil				27th Dáil (post reform)				28th Dáil	
Prior education	124	43	0.65	0.48	127	45	0.65	0.48	133	40	0.70	0.46
Prior occupation	124	2	0.98	0.13	127	2	0.98	0.13	133	2	0.99	0.12
External interests	124	124	0	0	127	127	0	0	133	110	0.17	0.38
Committee experience	124	78	0.47	0.71	127	94	0.26	0.44	133	79	0.78	1.20
Ideological distance	124	1	8.96	7.41	127	2	9.27	7.50	133	5	5.41	5.41
Number LPs	124	29	2.97	2.75	127	30	3.17	2.96	133	35	2.76	2.60
			29th Dáil				30th Dáil				31st Dáil	
Prior education	132	41	0.69	0.47	140	48	0.66	0.48	119	37	0.70	0.47
Prior occupation	132	4	0.97	0.17	140	5	0.96	0.18	119	9	0.92	0.27
External interests	132	123	0.07	0.25	140	132	0.06	0.23	119	112	0.06	0.24
Committee experience	132	64	1.24	1.44	140	60	1.24	1.33	119	82	0.56	0.95
Ideological distance	132	2	4.96	4.47	140	1	2.61	2.37	119	3	3.31	2.97
Number LPs	132	37	2.36	2.58	140	40	2.41	2.59	119	68	1.01	1.68

Source: Own data set. nbr.null = number of 0's (zeros) in variable; There were zero missing values.

Table 4. Model summaries multiple-membership multilevel model of committee assignments in the Dáil (27th–31st legislative period).

	Dependent variable:											
	Committee membership including transfers (only TDs)											
	27th Dáil		27th Dáil		28th Dáil		29th Dáil		30th Dáil		31st Dáil	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Fixed effects:												
Prior education	0.420*	0.410	-0.130	-0.130	0.220	0.130	0.160	0.150	0.077	0.100	0.490*	0.490*
	(0.250)	(0.260)	(0.270)	(0.270)	(0.250)	(0.250)	(0.240)	(0.240)	(0.210)	(0.210)	(0.260)	(0.260)
Prior occupation	0.740***	0.690***	0.560**	0.550**	0.520**	0.560**	0.810***	0.780***	0.910***	0.840***	0.720***	0.690***
	(0.250)	(0.250)	(0.250)	(0.250)	(0.230)	(0.230)	(0.230)	(0.230)	(0.190)	(0.190)	(0.260)	(0.260)
Committee experience		1.500***		0.390		1.400***		0.910***		1.300***		1.400***
		(0.300)		(0.470)		(0.220)		(0.200)		(0.180)		(0.300)
High imp. com's	0.560	0.580	0.390	0.380	0.340	0.320	0.063	0.062	0.019	0.054	-0.370	-0.390
	(0.440)	(0.470)	(0.280)	(0.280)	(0.240)	(0.250)	(0.220)	(0.220)	(0.240)	(0.250)	(0.320)	(0.320)
Ideol. distance	0.019*	0.020**	0.002	0.002	0.003	0.010	0.015	0.016	-0.018	-0.015	0.008	0.016
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.026)	(0.027)	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.042)	(0.042)
Number LPs	-0.004	-0.006	-0.053	-0.053	-0.009	-0.020	-0.020	-0.033	-0.012	-0.016	-0.038	-0.091
	(0.039)	(0.040)	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.035)	(0.036)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.060)	(0.066)
Ideol. distance * HICs	-0.049***	-0.049***	-0.008	-0.008	-0.013	-0.021	-0.018	-0.022	0.037	0.034	0.025	0.023
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.043)	(0.044)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.041)	(0.042)	(0.070)	(0.071)
Number LPs * HICs	-0.031	-0.040	0.006	0.006	-0.088*	-0.090*	-0.026	-0.018	-0.018	-0.034	0.026	0.053
	(0.057)	(0.059)	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.050)	(0.051)	(0.059)	(0.061)	(0.049)	(0.051)	(0.098)	(0.100)
Constant	-2.000***	-2.100***	-1.900***	-1.900***	-1.900***	-1.900***	-2.200***	-2.200***	-2.100***	-2.200***	-2.100***	-2.200***
	(0.320)	(0.340)	(0.190)	(0.190)	(0.160)	(0.160)	(0.140)	(0.140)	(0.130)	(0.130)	(0.190)	(0.190)
Random effects:												
Individual legislators	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Committees	(0.549)	(0.601)	(0.229)	(0.235)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.038)	(0.054)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Observations	1,240	1,240	1,764	1,764	1,980	1,980	2,112	2,112	2,898	2,898	1,309	1,309
Log likelihood	-545.000	-533.000	-698.000	-697.000	-806.000	-787.000	-746.000	-737.000	-1,039.000	-1,015.000	-458.000	-449.000
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,110.000	1,088.000	1,415.000	1,416.000	1,632.000	1,596.000	1,512.000	1,496.000	2,098.000	2,053.000	936.000	920.000
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	1,161.000	1,144.000	1,470.000	1,477.000	1,687.000	1,658.000	1,568.000	1,558.000	2,158.000	2,119.000	988.000	977.000

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors in parentheses.

Source: Own data set. Model 1 excludes the variable 'committee experience'; Model 2 includes the variable 'committee experience'.

The Dáil frequently has small parliamentary party groups ('small' here refers to parliamentary party groups whose number of legislators is smaller than the number of specialised committees). To test for a possible bias a separate model was estimated including only large parliamentary party groups. It is expected that the effect is stronger when only larger parliamentary party groups are included. Small parliamentary party groups do not have similar possibilities to choose among their legislators but have to 'work with' what they have.¹²

The results of the multiple membership multilevel model show relatively stable effects across legislative periods. The strongest effect for all legislative periods relates to committee experience, suggesting that TDs who have been on a committee in the prior legislative period are likely to continue on the same committee. In order to estimate how much it 'matters' in terms of an increased likelihood of being assigned to a committee, predicted probabilities were calculated.¹³ The discussion is limited to calculations for the last 'complete' legislative period before I conducted my fieldwork (30th Dáil 2007–2011)¹⁴ In the 30th Dáil, the predicted probability of being re-assigned to a committee is 21,0 per cent.

The interviews underline the statistical finding. A TD argued that, if someone has served on the committee and preferred to stay on the committee, then 'efforts would be made to facilitate that' (Interview Dáil, 141202D). However, the main reason to be able to stay on a committee depends on whether somebody did a 'good' job. If this was the case then it is possible to continue. The presence of this pattern is interesting, as it was hitherto unconsidered in earlier studies and is present despite the fact that the leader decides with great autonomy.

The effect of 'advantages in knowledge' of legislators

The model summaries do not show any influence of prior education but suggest a relationship between prior occupation and committee membership (Hypothesis 2). Legislators with relevant knowledge to the subject area of a committee are more likely to be assigned to the corresponding committee. This finding ties in nicely with the earlier results by Hansen (2011) with regard to sector knowledge in high importance committees but extends it to all committees. The predicted probability indicates how much 'real' advantage a legislator has. In the 30th Dáil, the predicted probabilities to be assigned to a committee with matching prior occupation are 12.0 per cent (model 1) and 11.0 per cent (model 2), much higher than the predicted probabilities of prior education (non-existent in model 1 and only 1.2 per cent in model 2). These predicted probabilities remain virtually the same when only including large parliamentary party groups. The explanatory power of a TD's occupational background indicates that the process is not only a

top-down approach of parliamentary party group leaders dictating committee allocations without any consideration of the TD's background.

This result was backed up in the interviews. Most legislators indicated that they were assigned to topics resonating with their skills and strengths (see, e.g. Interview Dáil, 141202B; 141203A; 141204A; 141209A; 141211A). When asked whether it mattered that there is a link between the occupational background and the committee of the TD, one legislator answered: 'I would hope that this is the motivation behind it' (Interview Dáil, 141209A). Even if a legislator's personal occupational background did not explain their own assignment, legislators could give examples of their colleagues. Note that familiarity with a topic can also stem from other areas, e.g. experience gathered on the local level (e.g. Interview Dáil, 141209B). The occupational past may, however, in some cases be detrimental to the chances of being assigned to a committee, if someone was seen to be 'too' involved and may, therefore, have a lack of objectivity (Interview Dáil, 141203E). Despite these exceptions, there is a strong case to be made that the prediction of the informational rationale fits the committee assignments in the Dáil.

District characteristics and 'outlying' committees

A distributive rationale predicts assignments to be driven by district characteristics. As I was unable to statistically test this hypothesis, the evidence relies on the self-report of legislators during the interviews. Irish TDs are characterised by having a strong local focus which structures their work (Farrell *et al.* 2012). During the interviews, the constituency link indeed was a reoccurring factor. Constituency work is clearly reflected in the choice of committees; it is a TDs' 'job [...] to represent his or her constituency' (Interview Dáil, 141202A). Being on a committee that represents the interests of a constituency was characterised as 'very, very typical' (Interview Dáil, 141202A). TDs were able to point to links between constituency characteristics and a fitting committee, e.g. TDs from urban constituencies were seen to be more drawn to the urban planning and housing committee (Interview Dáil, 141203D) or the justice committee (Interview Dáil, 141204B) due to crime rates. TDs from inner city areas with a high unemployment rate would tend to the Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Interview Dáil, 141204C). This strengthens and extends the conclusion by Hansen (2011: 355) who argued that TDs elected to rural constituencies seek appointments to the committees that deal with issues of great relevance to the constituency. The presence of particular institutions was enough to 'qualify':

If [a TD] has, for example, Curragh Camp [the biggest army barracks in Ireland] in the middle of his constituency, then he might have an interest in it [the Defence Committee]. Because there are a lot of votes there and he represents them. [...]. Somebody from Mayo, where there are no army barracks within 100 miles, would not want to be on the Defence Committee. (Interview Dáil, 141202A)

The question arises how important committee work is for individual TDs in serving his or her constituency. According to the distributive theory, committee membership facilitates their re-election chances. Irish legislators, however, were sceptical about this. One respondent argued that committees 'have no value' for electoral success (Interview Dáil, 141205B). Committees deal with the nuts-and-bolts of policy-making in which voters are not particularly interested (Interview Dáil, 141205A) and '[...] people would not naturally gravitate towards you because of your committee membership' (Interview Dáil, 141204B). Although these self-reports should be interpreted with caution, the assessment was shared by multiple legislators.

There was very little evidence that TDs actively campaign with their committee membership. Only a few indicated that their membership to a committee is something that they advertise in their communication with their constituents (Interview Dáil, 141202B, also 141204C). Instead, most interviewed TDs highlighted the existence of two independent spheres (see also Farrell *et al.* 2012). Their task in the constituencies is very different from their task in the Dáil. One TD argued to do 'my best to keep it national when I am in the parliament and similarly to keep it local when I am back home' (Interview Dáil, 141204C). The workload was seen as very high (Interview Dáil, 141204C; 141203E) and the sometimes very technical content of committee work has little added value for a TD with regard to his or her constituents. It is hardly possible to work on a particular problem for a district in committee. Subsequently, committee work does not have a very high status and committee attendance is poor (Interview Dáil, 141204C; 141203E). One legislator was very blunt about this: 'Committee work is there and something you have to do, but in terms of priorities: I mean if the choice is between being at a committee meeting and your constituency, everybody would be in the constituencies' (Interview Dáil, 141204B).

Why would legislators join committees which resonate with the characteristics of their districts even though there is little electoral value? The answer to this question still lies in the interactions with constituents: Despite the fact that TDs are not able to work for the constituency via the committee system, committees are the primary source of actual information on an issue. Legislators seem to anticipate that, next to questions about actual affairs, they will receive questions on topics close to the committee's jurisdiction. TDs were able to recall instances in which they were approached by groups of constituents or individual constituents with requests which fitted with their committee membership (Interview Dáil, 141204A; 141204B).

Evidence of a leadership-controlled composition of committees?

Similar to the analysis by Hansen (2011) who tested the effect of seniority on the likelihood of being assigned to high-importance committees, the results

do not indicate a significant impact concerning the partisan variables. Neither the ideological distance between a legislator and the parliamentary party group, nor the number of legislative periods served have an effect on being assigned to important committees. Some outliers with regard to ideological distance can be found in the models of the 27th Dáil under the 'old' committee system, but even here the effect is weak. When excluding small parliamentary party groups there is no evidence that these variables predict membership of highly salient committees, either.

The interviews underline this finding. Legislators rather highlighted the occupational background as well as the constituency link. The only frequently mentioned factor in which seniority plays a role concerns the distribution of committee chairs (Interview Dáil, 141202B). It was argued to be 'very unusual' (Interview Dáil, 141203D) for a freshman to be assigned as chair. It became apparent from the interviews that the assignment follows a certain sequential pattern: First, ministers and junior ministers are appointed from the pool of TDs, followed by committee chairs and vice chairs.¹⁵ Only then 'regular' committee members are assigned (Interview Dáil, 141202B). The former two groups, (junior) ministers and (vice) chairs, are likely disproportionately stacked with more experienced legislators. This explains why the assignment of committee members is not particularly influenced by this factor anymore. Given the small size of the legislature (166 seats) a reduction of 30 TDs (i.e. 15 Ministers including Taoiseach and Tánaiste as well as 15 Ministers of State) does not leave much variation in the data. To put it bluntly, there are simply too few experienced TDs available to be assigned to committees.

'Beyond the theoretical framework': Dáil-specific influences

The interviews also aimed to discover more country-specific influences. Respondents pointed towards a 'tradition' (Interview Dáil, 141202A) that former ministers would not join the corresponding committee after their term is over. To do so is seen as 'bad style' since this would mean that one would control those with whom one has worked before (see Mickler 2013 for similar considerations by legislators in the German Bundestag). This ties in nicely with the non-finding regarding this variable of Hansen (2011).

Constituency factors were mentioned in a rather unexpected way during the interviews. Opposition parties sometimes seem to pursue a strategy to 'assign an individual with a personality to do the most damage to the minister [...] and it is quite effective when the minister and the opposition spokesperson share a constituency' (Interview Dáil, 141205B). Another legislator argued that the assignment to the preferred committee was based on the pragmatic reason to counter a disadvantage that the legislator would otherwise have in the upcoming election:

My constituency colleague in my parliamentary party group became a junior minister. And I made the point that I need to be given something in order to work on my profile and my knowledge. So I can be a better TD and this is the only way to do it. So he [the parliamentary party group leader] said OK. (Interview Dáil, 151203C)

Conclusion: specialisation and committee experience paired with country-specific patterns

Parliaments are complex institutions which work through various institutionalised sub-groups. Committees are of major importance in this regard. This makes it important to understand the assignment process of legislators to committees. In the most thorough analysis of this issue in the Dáil hitherto, Hansen (2011) focused primarily on participation in committees. His analysis of committee assignments did not find stable patterns, letting him conclude that the assignment happens rather randomly. This analysis builds up on the earlier study by focusing exclusively on assignments to all committees. Using a new data set and approach it was tested whether regularities and patterns can be determined. Although there is no single and general guideline for the allocation of committee seats, one fundamental conclusion of this paper is that committee assignments in the Dáil are not so random after all.

This study built on the congressional framework of distributive, informational and partisan theories of legislative organisation. There is not yet a 'home-grown' theoretical framework available for European parliamentary multi-party systems comparable to these U.S. theories. Some scholars have been sceptical about the merit of the congressional theories outside of the US. However, I concur with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe – *why look so far afield when there is so much close at hand?*¹⁶ Legislatures outside the U.S. provide an additional ground for testing predictions of the congressional theories. In order to account for the different institutional setting, the role of parliamentary party groups as central gatekeepers in the assignment process was acknowledged. The general concepts of the congressional theories functioned as heuristic devices to disentangle organisational rationales.

The analysis relied on a fruitful combination of statistical analysis and interviews. The initial results from the statistical analysis laid the foundation for the interviews. Each respondent supported at least one of the rationales and the corresponding factors. In general, the decision on 'who gets what' is mostly taken directly by the leadership, but assignment patterns are recurring. This is visible in the results of the statistical analysis as well as the interviews. No legislator indicated that allocation patterns are random or change after every election.

With regard to the performance of the congressional theories, a mixed picture emerges from the analysis. There is no strong evidence for all organisational implications of the congressional theories. On the one hand, the

partisan theory did not help us to understand the committee assignment process in the Dáil. One possibility for this non-finding could be that the effect was tested in the 'wrong' place and that committees which have a higher internal prestige (i.e. the Foreign Affairs Committee) are structured according to partisan rationales. Another explanation would be that the amount of partisan 'stacking' is indeed limited. The interviews provided evidence that, in some cases, more experienced legislators have higher chances to be assigned to more 'central' committees, but there is no 'greasy pole'. This is an important finding. When transferring the congressional theories to countries with strong parliamentary party groups, the absence of a 'tight' grip of the parliamentary party group leadership is unexpected.

On the other hand, the informational rationale provided additional insight. Advantages in knowledge increase the likelihood of a legislator to be assigned to a corresponding committee. Parliamentary party group leaders try to 'tap the talents' of their legislators. Additionally, the interviews with legislators highlighted factors ascribed to the distributive rationale, at least when it comes to the assignments. Constituency characteristics can be linked to large portions of the assignment process in the Dáil. However, the rationale has its limitations in terms of whether it actually matters TDs' re-election chances. The electoral benefits of committee membership is a core part of the theory, but it does not seem to hold for the Irish case: Voters do not perceive committee work with a high importance and centrality. The impossibility to test the effect of external interests on committee assignments in the Dáil due to the low number of reported directorships, is an interesting finding in itself. If there are no data to support this claim, then such a rationale cannot be an important factor. The evidence presented here, therefore, does point toward the congressional theories being more useful than what is discussed in Hansen (2011). The analysis further provided evidence that committee experience weighs heavily into the assignment process.

The interviews showed some important additional informal rules which are more or less severe and restrict the number of possible assignments. The presence of several country-specific factors is an important revelation with implications for studies trying to broaden the evidence of this study towards workings of specialised committees in other legislatures. Although the eventual goal of our endeavour to study parliaments needs to be to generalise our findings on rules and proceedings, we need to leave some room for these distinct mechanisms as an addition to the general framework. Future research should also look more closely into differences between parliamentary party groups. In any case, the congressional theories will help to approach these cases.

Notes

1. Some MPs do not serve on a committee at all. Those legislators who are not on a committee are taken out of the data set and are not analysed. The 'non'-membership of not-assigned legislators is usually easy to explain, being mostly members of the executive or having other time-demanding positions within the parliamentary party group.
2. Multilevel modelling can be thought of a generalisation of linear regression, where intercepts and slopes are allowed to vary by group.
3. Fine Gael $n=6$ TDs, Labour $n=7$, TG $n=4$, Fianna Fáil $n=3$, Sinn Féin $n=2$.
4. Used for committee experience.
5. Laver and Benoit (2002) analyse speeches by Irish TDs during a debate of confidence in October 1991. Bernauer and Bräuninger (2009) applied Wordscores to speeches in the 15th German Bundestag and to estimate policy positions of legislators.
6. I was unable to obtain a copy of the manifestos of the Progressive Democrats ('A new hope') and for Fine Gael ('Securing a safer society') for the 1997 General Election. Both of these files were substituted with the manifestos of the 1992 General Election.
7. The word frequency matrix needed for the analysis was set up using the 'tm text mining package' in R (Feinerer and Hornik 2015). The computation of scores was done using the `austin` package (Lowe 2015).
8. This was tested by comparing the standard deviation of the rescaled Wordscores scores of members of one parliamentary party group to that of all members of a particular committee.
9. Assuming there are 20 committees, whether the 15th most important committee is slightly more important than the 16th is redundant information.
10. The ranking of committees for every parliamentary party group can be obtained from the author.
11. Committee experience, prior occupation, prior education and external interests (all corresponding to each committee, 0 = not present, 1 = present) and two cross-level interactions between a TD's loyalty and the number of legislative periods with committee importance per parliamentary party group. The main effects are not further discussed but need to be included in the model as it may otherwise lead to inferential errors, see Brambor *et al.* (2005). The models were, for testing purposes, also estimated using the Druckman and Warwick (2005) scores. In no instance this changed the significance levels of the models.
12. The results of this analysis are restricted to the discussion in text, the detailed output can be obtained from the author.
13. This was done using the `Zelig` package in R (Imai *et al.* 2008).
14. All predicted probabilities for all other legislative periods can be obtained from the author.
15. Martin (2014b) refers to positions such as (junior) ministers, committee (vice) chairs in Ireland as 'mega-seats' and shows that the mechanism for allocating these positions has a significant influence on the behaviour of legislators.
16. Translated from the German original phrase 'Warum in die Ferne schweifen? Sieh, das Gute liegt so nah'.

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Appendix

Table A1. Percentage of Members of Dáil Éireann declaring ‘Nil’ in occupational income, directorships and remunerated positions (1998–2010).

	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10
Occupational Income	45.4	46.1	46.0	46.4	43.4	43.9	47.2	48.5	38.7	45.7	44.9	49.4
Directorships	74.2	70.3	69.9	67.5	66.3	73.2	71.8	69.3	73.0	75.6	75.2	75.0
Remunerated Positions	95.7	95.8	96.9	94.0	96.4	97.0	100	99.4	100	97.0	97.6	97.0

Source: Own calculation, Register of Members' Interest obtained from <http://www.oireachtas.ie/viewdoc.asp?m=&DocID=-1&CatID=20>, access date: March 17, 2014.