

The cohesion of committees is key in determining their legislative effectiveness

 [democraticaudit.com /2015/01/13/the-cohesion-of-committees-is-key-in-determining-their-legislative-effectiveness/](https://democraticaudit.com/2015/01/13/the-cohesion-of-committees-is-key-in-determining-their-legislative-effectiveness/)

By Democratic Audit UK

2015-1-13

*The role played by legislative committees in parliamentary democracies is a rather underestimated topic. After all, legislative standing committees exist in almost all parliamentary democracies. Still, they can have an impact on our understanding of how a democracy works. **Luigi Curini** explains what exactly it encompasses, and argues that the similarity of committee members' preferences represents the most important factor in deciding the effectiveness of committee work.*



Credit: [IAEA Imagebank](#), CC BY ND 2.0

The committees system is not a very popular topic among scholars (let alone the general public) who investigate the workings of parliamentary democracies, particularly when compared with parties and cabinets, which continue to take up the lion's share of of attention. Such a circumstance depends (primarily) on two factors: on the one hand, in parliamentary democracies, party membership appears to almost always be an excellent predictor of behaviour of MPs; on the other hand, government membership appears to almost always be an excellent predictor of party strategies. This manner of thinking is generally supported by [data](#), but it is nonetheless somewhat misleading.

Before coming to the floor to be voted, a bill must survive a filtering process. As a result, the set of visible decisions that appear to be openly affected by parties and governments concern only a small fraction of the bulk of issues that MPs could handle *a priori*, therefore providing us with only part of the story. Indeed, in several countries, many bills (or potential bills) are selected at the committee level. As a result, the distribution of preferences within committees, as well as the committee's institutional environment, are decisive, as they are not perfect replicas of floor preferences and floor rules, respectively. In summary, even if it is difficult to evaluate a role that is based primarily on unobservable non-decisions, legislative committees in parliamentary democracy nevertheless matter, although not necessarily in the same way across differing contexts.

Cohesion, namely the similarity of committee members' preferences, represents the most important non-institutional

feature that affects committee work. Even if we believe that any type of conflict among opposite views and preferences can be continually resolved via a simple majority exercise, the relative level of cohesion always influences committee efficiency in the decision-making process. Indeed, the more heterogeneous preferences are, the more strongly minorities will attempt to delay any possible decision. In this sense, a divided committee loses authority and credibility in front of the floor, and its proposals are more likely to be profoundly changed.

So what does affect the committee system's relative degree of preference homogeneity? Here, and not surprisingly, institutional details matter. In the literature, there is a large consensus on that fact that MPs are expected to gravitate towards committees whose jurisdictions are of primary interest to their [respective constituents](#), i.e., whose policy domain is more "congruent" with the interests rooted in their constituency. As a result, we should expect committees to be highly homogenous on average, given that all those congressmen who are interested in re-election and represent similar interests find it electorally convenient to self-select into the same committee. Still, such a propensity also depends on institutional factors that allow committee *policy domain congruency* with constituency interests to be useful with regard to MPs' goals. To name just two among the most important of such institutional factors: first, committee membership should make the difference for anyone who wants to promote her constituency interests. In other terms, committees must enjoy some degree of agenda-setting power to be of any interest to a MP, and this usually happens when the government agenda-setting power is weak.

Second, and crucially, MPs should anticipate that their behaviour within the committee could be selectively rewarded or punished by the electorate. This happens normally with candidate-centred electoral systems such as a plurality with single member districts, or proportional with an open list, in which candidates compete for a personal vote, paying therefore attention not only to the demands of their party bosses but also to the [interests of their constituency](#). In contrast, in all those situations in which the candidate's chances of (re)election depend primarily on her ability to move up the rank ordering on a party list (as it occurs under a proportional system with a closed list), voters and interests groups will have fewer incentives to follow the behaviour of people they cannot select and re-select, and MPs will have fewer incentives to please their constituency interests in the relevant committee.

By identifying the institutional variables that affect the level of committee cohesion, we can therefore better understand what differentiates the characteristics of the legislative process in various parliamentary democracies and what, despite the significant differences in the formal setting, makes them more similar to the American case, in which committees are strong and influential.

The broader implications of these findings cannot be underestimated. Legislative standing committees exist in almost all parliamentary democracies. Therefore, the presence of committees cannot by itself facilitate understanding of differing parliamentary functioning. On the contrary, committee cohesion level can and usually does change across contexts while representing a crucial variable that allows the members of a committee to [work together effectively as a unit](#). These aspects have a rather general effect on our understanding of how a democracy works. For example, committee cohesion level deeply affects how electoral results are translated in political decisions in Parliament, or in other words, how citizens' preferences are translated into policy output.

By taking advantage of their formal and informal gatekeeping power, cohesive committees can in fact effectively protect the status quo in their respective policy area that they previously helped to create, despite any (relevant) change in [citizens' political preferences](#). In this sense, a law-making process dominated by committees is likely to be *more* informed but *less* affected by public opinion and much more influenced by relatively small and powerful interest groups. Therefore, committees' strength, defined by not only rules but also by committee cohesion, also affects the prevailing content of the representative relationship between voters and elected officials, the identification of the parliament type (i.e., adversarial or polycentric), and consequently, the [democracy type](#) prevailing in different countries.

—

Note: This article is based on the scientific paper titled "The institutional foundations of committee cohesion in a

(changing) parliamentary democracy” written by Luigi Curini and Francesco Zucchini and published in [European Political Science Review](#). This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

—

Luigi Curini is Associate Professor of Political Science at Università degli Studi di Milano. He tweets [@Curini](#)

