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17

Committees

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Abstract: Legislative committees are internal subunits of the legislature comprised of legislators and enjoying certain delegated authority. As a common form of legislative organization, committees play an important role in the functioning of the legislature, for example by influencing the content of legislation and holding the executive accountable. This chapter discusses the four most prominent theories that explain why committees are fundamental to the operation and everyday life of the US House of Representatives and the Senate: distributional theory, informational theory, cartel-party theory, and bicameral-rivalry theory. It also considers attempts to test empirically theories of committees in legislatures outside the United States and examines comparative theories of legislative organization.

Keywords: legislative committees, Parliamentary committees, House of Representatives, Senate, distributional theory, informational theory, cartel-party theory, bicameral-rivalry theory, legislatures, United States, legislative organization

17.1 Introduction

At least since Woodrow Wilson's canonical observation, "Congress in session is Congress on public exhibition, whilst Congress in its committee-rooms is Congress at work" (Wilson 1963 [1885], 69), legislative scholars have sought to understand the origins, design, role, and significance of legislative committees. Committees, defined as an internal subunit of the legislature comprised of legislators and enjoying certain delegated authority, are a common form of legislative organization. Indeed, virtually no democratic national legislature is without at least one committee. Today, the conventional notion is that a strong system of committees, however defined, is a necessary if not sufficient condition for the legislature to operate effectively, not least in terms of influencing the content of legislation and holding the executive accountable.

Although establishing a system of committees may seem like an obvious organizational choice to overcome the plenary bottleneck (Cox 2006), significant attention has focused on the exact reason for committees' popularity as a form of legislative organizations. Indeed arguably, legislative scholarship has experienced a "golden age" of committee research—with analysis of US Congressional committees influencing not just legislative studies but also the study of American politics and political institutions more generally (Diermeier, this volume). This chapter begins with a review of the four most prominent theories emerging from this golden era: the distributional theory, the informational theory, the cartel-party theory, and the bicameral-conflict theory. Each of these theories seeks to explain why committees are fundamental to the organization of the United States House of Representatives and the Senate.

Subsequently, Section threediscusses attempts to test empirically theories of committees in non-US legislatures. Comparative legislative research has the potential to provide an obvious laboratory for studying theories of committee organization. Despite the increasing tendency of Congressional research to influence comparative legislative research, the popularity of research on Congressional committees has not resulted in much cross-national research on such bodies. National legislatures vary in methods for organizing committees and their role in the process of decision-making. Yet, with notable execeptions, attempts to measure and explain such variation are largely absent.

Section Four reviews such exceptions. Examining committees in multiple systems represents an appropriate means to reinvigorate the Congressional and comparative study of legislative organization. If committees are really a necessary ingredient for modern parliaments to operate effectively and to achieve goals of both the collective organization and individual members, a greater understanding of committees is crucial to more fully understand the functioning of legislatures.

17.2 Explaining Congressional Committees

This section explores developments during the late 1970s through the 1990s which saw considerable attention paid to the issue of why committees appear so significant to the operation and everyday life of the US Congress. The era produced four significant and competing theories of legislative organization. Arguably, the level of theoretical and, to a lesser degree, empirical innovation and this literature's wider impact on the study of politics warrants identifying the period as a golden age of legislative research. The initial focus here is on these theories in the setting where they were first considered, namely the US Congress and especially the US House of Representatives.

17.2.1 Distributional Theory

The distributional theory gains its designation from the suggestion that committees exist to allow members to distribute particularistic benefits to their constituents. Benefits could include specific policies favored by voters in the member's district or so called pork-barrel projects, in legislative jargon, "fiscal legislative particularism," which refers to the practice of spending national tax revenues on economically inefficient, geographically targeted projects. A number of assumptions are key factors for understanding the distributional theory of legislative organizations; in particular, legislators' self-interest and motivations from the goal of re-election requires building personal reputations with constituents by providing vote-winning pork-barrel projects and aligning policy concerns with voters' salient issues (Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978). For example, voters in a Michigan district with or close to a car-manufacturing conglomerate may have different concerns for policies than voters in rural Kansas, who place salience on policies different from those of voters in New York City. While those constituents emphasize urban environment and public transport, Michigan voters' concerns may center on protecting domestic manufacturing industries from foreign competition. Rural voters may seek to promote agriculture, and in particular, assurance of continued flow of governmental subsidies to support farming. To be re-elected, incumbents must adopt policies most salient to their constituents, control public policy, and allocate scare resources to the sector that enhances credentials with voters.

Yet, in a plenary-centered legislature where simple majorities can enact changes to policy, each legislator is equal in ability to influence all proposals. Thus, unless representatives from rural areas control a majority of the plenary, they cannot, clearly,

control and claim credit for agricultural policy. Complicating the situations is that the existence of multiple salient policy issues disallows the likelihood that any one interest can maintain a majority of the plenary. Social choice theory hypothesizes that political outcomes under such conditions, and assuming simple majority rules, are inherently unstable (Arrow 1951). The classic divide-the-dollar game illustrates the problem: in this game, three players must agree to divide a dollar. Under majority rules, any two can form a winning coalition to agree on the distribution of the 100 cents. Player A and Player B may agree to divide the dollar equally between them, leaving Player C with no money, thus "maximizing" the utility of A and B. However, Player C may offer a counter-proposal, perhaps by offering Player A 51 cents and retaining 49 cents, thus denying Player B any money and simultaneously improving Payer A's position (by one cent). And so the game continues. No obvious result is available and any counter decision can easily negate a previous one.

The divide-the-dollar game applies, substantively, to any legislative setting which allocates scarce resources. Distribution of funding in pork-barrel politics is a classic example—legislators must collectively agree the amount each member receives, but in a majority setting, any decision has the potential for alteration by a counter proposal, just as in the divide-the-dollar game. However, cycling can occur in less obvious ways: for simplicity, consider a House of Representatives divided three ways based on members' and their constituents' preferences for policies. The focus of one group of incumbents is domestic manufacturing, the second agriculture, and the third urban environment, with all three interests aiming for spending-sensitive policy changes. This situation characterizes a sequential game, which requires a coalition of two groups to institute change. The

domestic manufacturing and agricultural interests may coalesce with the agricultural group voting for the manufacturing group's interests with the agreement that the manufacturers will subsequently support agricultural interests at another time. But once the manufacturing bill gains approval, the manufacturers have no incentive not to renege on any promise made to their agricultural colleagues. Instead, the rational action for the manufacturers would be to seek to strike a new deal to secure an additional allocation of the remaining resources. Thus, cycling emerges, with always changing coalitions and no credible ability to commit to log-rolling—the sequential exchange of votes. The game, although simple, illustrates what social choice scholars typically refer to as the Condorcet cycle. In short, no decision is stable.

Shepsle and Weingast (1981) suggested that committees exist to break the chaos predicted by cycling by allowing for credible commitment in log-rolling, thus permitting members to distribute particularistic policies and spending to their constituents. Legislative chambers typically decide their internal organizations, and legislative chambers can constitute a system of committees to ensure that members with particular preferences for policies control those policy areas. Thus, representatives of agricultural interests seek establishment of an agricultural committee which has control of governmental policies and allocation of resources that concern the industry—effectively removing decisions from the plenary and providing power to members who have the most to gain or lose in that policy area. Put slightly differently, committees represent rules to prevent the breakdown of cooperation among groups with different priorities for policy and who cooperate to enact legislation (Weingast and Marshall 1988). Empirically, Katz and Sala (1996) noted the emergence of the candidate-center ballot

created the need for credit-claiming with constituents and associated this with the emergence of Congressional committees.

Such parsimonious, but nonetheless powerful, explanations of committees' distributional origin requires committees to have three characteristics. First, committees must have the ability to control the agenda and the outcome in the policy jurisdictions—commonly known as gatekeeping powers. The plenary, thus, must delegate significant authority to committees, making them veto-players in the legislative process. Consequently, any change in agricultural policy must require approval of the relevant agricultural committee. Second, members must be able to self-select into preferred committees (Shepsle 1978). Third, and relatedly, committees are composed of "policy-outliers" (Shepsle and Weingast 1987). In other words, committees should not be representative of the plenary (or the plenary median) but should include members with extreme preferences toward the committee's jurisdiction. Thus, to continue the example, an agricultural committee would consist of members strongly interested in and committed to that industry. As such, the committee would be unrepresentative of the chamber. Crucially, the policies emanating from the legislature are ultimately unrepresentative of the views of the majority in the plenary—exactly because the committee has the power to control the agenda in that policy area.

The suggestion of committees as institutional solutions to drive geographically focused particularistic distribution, and thus incumbents' re-elections, has had a profound effect on the study of social choice theory and American politics. Social choice scholars long suggested that cycling and chaos were the expectations in legislative settings and the reason for real-world legislatures not behaving in this way presented a puzzle. As Tullock

(1981) asked, "[s]o why so much stability?" The answer, proposed by scholars of congressional committees is that design of internal legislative institutions can avoid cycling, facilitate log-rolling, and stabilize decision-making. Thus, institutions can reshape decision-making—an important insight simultaneously reflecting and driving the growth of neo-institutional perspectives in political science. The best example is, perhaps, reflected in Shepsle's "structure induced equilibrium" (Shepsle 1979). At the heart of structure-induced equilibrium is the notion that institutional structures, such as decision rules, allocation of authority, and committees' agenda control can generate stable outcomes—in other words, an equilibrium induced by institutional structures. The suggestion is that we don't observe chaos in modern legislatures because internal legislative structures such as committees prevent cycling.

17.2.2 Informational Theory

Whenever a theory approaches the status of settled conventional wisdom, as happened with the distributional theory, it is likely to be challenged by alternative perspectives. And so it was for the distributional theory. The informational theory of legislative organization emerged from the same paradigm as the distributional theory, namely the perspective of rational choice institutionalism. But the informational theory fundamentally challenges the orthodoxy that committees exist to aid distribution, and consequently, members' re-election needs.

The foundation of the informational perspective is the notion of imperfect information. Most models of rational choice political behavior assume perfect information, yet, in the real world, outcomes are uncertain and actors make choices with limited or imperfect information. Despite legislators' knowing their preferred policy

outcomes, the optimal route for achieving a policy outcome may be unclear. Policy-making is complex and perhaps even more challenging when the legislature confronts a better-resourced executive and bureaucracy. Creating subunits and delegating authority allows for the effective and efficient use of time. This organizational advantage of committees is not only characteristic of legislatures; any organization can benefit from creating a subunit in which members specialize. Consequently, almost immediately, the workload of the assembly can increase dramatically as the plenary bottleneck succumbs to committees working simultaneously, thereby exponentially increasing the possible workload and output of legislatures.

Importantly, the informational argument of Gilligan and Krehbiel (1987) moves beyond simple argument for organizational efficiency to suggest that the legislature is structured to maximizes members' acquisition and sharing of information. A series of articles (see, especially, Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987 and 1990) and a seminal monograph on Congressional organization (Krehbiel, 1991) suggested that committees provide a mechanism by which members of Congress can focus and specialize in particular policy areas. Therefore, committees do not just allow more work to be done, they allow members' specialization to accumulate informational advantages and tacit knowledge resulting in better legislative activities of benefit to the entire chamber. As such, members provide policy expertise as a collective public good and service to the chamber.

A more subtle aspect of the informational theory relates to the rationale for members' specialization. In the distributional perspective, members' incentives are clear: Membership on a committee delivers distributive benefits which aid re-election. In contrast, membership on committees, from the informational perspective, provides a

collective benefit. Members undertaking committee assignments must recognize the gain from contributions is respect and honor from the parent chamber. Thus, committees must have prerogatives, even if the parent chamber maintains a check on agendas.

The key element to ensuring ideological congruence between the committee's position and the chamber's position is the appointment process and selection criteria; committees should be a microcosm of the parent chamber. Appointment of members to committees should be not to facilitate constituents' particular interests but rather members' personal expertise and knowledge. This expectation of committee members as representatives of the floor is in sharp contrast to the distributional theory's suggestion that committees consist of "policy outliers." The difference in the expected characteristics of members provides an observable consequence and a potential opportunity to test which theory most correctly reflects the reality of congressional committees by empirically comparing the composition of committees to the composition of the chamber.

Krehbiel (1990) was among the first to test the committee composition hypotheses. Using interest-group ratings of members' perspectives, and data of the membership of committees, some evidence emerged countering the distributional perspective. Subsequent congressional research sought to investigate the committees' congruence with the parent chamber. Yet, no conclusive evidence appeared to support either the distributional or informational perspectives. For example, Groseclose (1994) found little evidence that committees consist of preference outliers or that committees are representative of the parent chamber. Adler and Lapinski (1997) reported evidence in favor of the distributional perspective, finding that committees disproportionately consist of legislators whose constituents have special interests in the committees' portfolios.

Ultimately, the informational perspective, along with the distributional perspective, represent stylized abstractions from reality with neither, alone, likely to fully explain legislative organization. For many, the informational perspective is a perfectly intuitive theory of organization and intra-institutional delegated authority. Yet, as Krehbiel (1990) appeared to acknowledge, explaining individual legislator's committing resources to building expertise for policy requires some payoff from committee work. Given the dominant motivation being re-election in the Congressional setting, Krehbiel (1991, 259) acknowledges that "the axiomatic foundation of informational theory has both informational and distributional components."

Meanwhile, scholars of comparative legislatures may well question the role the legislative party plays in theories of congressional politics. In part, both previous theories stress the individual legislator as the central unit of analysis and discount, if not entirely ignoring the role of political parties in Congress. In contrast, the third major theory of committee organizations places the legislative party at the center of explanation.

17.2.3 Party Cartel Theory

As previously discussed, two of the dominant theories of internal legislative organization (the distributional and informational theories) place emphasis on individual members' interests and abilities to shape the committee system. In a significant departure within the tradition of congressional rational choice, Cox and McCubbins (1993) suggested a need to re-evaluate the role and impact of legislative parties in the US Congress (see also Aldrich 1995 and Rohde 1991). Cox and McCubbins acknowledged that much of the observable work of Congress is undertaken within and between committees but suggested that political parties nevertheless play a crucial role by shaping the committee system and

committee activities. Moreover, for Cox and McCubbins, the structuring of the system by political parties assists the party's leadership by cartelizing legislative power. The committee system, far from being the focal point of power is a structure created to allow parties to influence members' behavior. In the model of a partisan cartel, all is not as apparent to the casual observer, and in particular, committees are not the dominant source of influence and authority which traditional accounts of congressional organization suggest.

Similar to the empirical investigation of existing theories of organization of committees, Cox and McCubbins (1993) focused on the assignment (and reassignment) process—the rules by which members gain appointment. The party's leadership, Cox and McCubbins suggest, play a far more significant role in the assignment process than previously acknowledged. The analysis of assignments to committees, between 1947 and 1988, undermines the assumption that committees consist of policy outliers. Assignments of members of Congress are not always to their preferred choices. Instead, evidence suggests the party leaders cartelize the allocation of assignments and use the assignments strategically to reward loyal partisan and punish members who have defied the leadership during roll-call votes. A similar pattern of control emerges when exploring requests for switched assignments (reassignment of committee membership). In short, the suggestion is that the focus on committees as an important unit within Congress obscures the fact that parties control who sits on which committee. This control shapes not only the composition of committees, and by extension the nature of the committee, but also the power the party leadership wields, to enforce party discipline. It may not be a case of committees versus parties, but parties using committees.

For Sartori (1997) bipartisan behavior and continuous interaction are features of a committee-centered rather than plenary-centered legislature. Indeed, it could be argued that committees are capable of being less political than the plenary. The US case appears not to conform to this model. In exploring patterns of behavior inside Congressional committees, Cox and McCubbins (1993) uncovered significant evidence of partisanship, which, they suggest, confirms their thesis that conventional wisdom of congressional scholars understates the role and impact of parties. For example, bill sponsorship aligns along partisan lines. Thus, committees are not alternatives to parties within the legislature but in their operation and behavior reflect the predominance of party. This significant departure from the thesis of a "committee-centered Congress" has the consequence of rendering the appearance of the US to be more similar to parliamentarism in which scholars have long understood the predominance of party, and not committees, as the central organizational structure.

17.2.4 Bicameral-Rivalry Theory

The foundation for the fourth theory of committees in Congress arises again from the perspective of rational choice, from which committees are member-designed, institutional aids for members' achieving their goals. In the bicameral-rivalry theory, the proximate goal, however, is neither re-election nor policy influence, but the maximization of payments to legislators by lobbyists. The rationale for committees as mechanisms to extract maximum payments from lobbyists relates to whether or not the legislature consists of one or two chambers, hence the name bicameral-rivalry theory (Groseclose and King 2001).

Diermeier and Myerson (1999) suggested that a non-cooperative game between competing chambers provides the best understanding of the internal organizational design of a chamber. Consequently, the cameral structure (whether the legislature has a single or multiple chambers) shapes the incentives for establishing committees as core organizational features. Diermeier and Myerson's explanation and model relies on a vote-buying perspective whereby lobbyists use bribes in an attempt to influence legislative outcomes. In this game, legislators desire to maximize their monetary payoffs. The core contribution of Diermeier and Myerson is demonstrating, through formal modeling, that legislators maximize their monetary payoffs under bicameralism by creating institutional hurdles within each chamber. Institutional hurdles include within-chamber veto points and supermajority requirements. Thus, if one chamber has such hurdles and the second chooses not to, members of the first chamber extract disproportionately more bribes from lobbyists. In equilibrium, both chambers should maximize their hurdles in order to maximize their share of bribes. A strong committee system with delegated authority, arguably, is an obvious avenue for a chamber to create an internal hurdle. Committees can institute an internal veto to maximize incumbents' monetary returns derived from lobbyists seeking passage of preferred legislation.

Plausibly, many would reject or at least question the underlying assumption that legislators design the internal organization of the chamber to maximize monetary payments from lobbyists. However, as Groseclose and King (2001) astutely observed, the possibility remains to retain the Diermeier and Myerson (1999) model and derived expectations while replacing bribes as the core motivation of legislators with "power" or "policy influence." From this perspective, chambers in a bicameral system engage in a

non-cooperative game competing for influence on policy-making. In such circumstances, the approach suggested by Diermeier and Myerson (1999) would yield exactly the same expectations: a chamber in competition with another chamber for legislative influence would create internal hurdles to maximize influence; committees, apparently, are ideal internal hurdles.

Although the bicameral-rivalry theory has not received sufficient attention compared to the distributive, informational, and cartel-party theories of committees, the rivalry theory nevertheless, is appealing for its parsimony. Moreover, it fits with the well-observed idea that the US House of Representatives and Senate compete aggressively with each other to shape policies. In seeking to indirectly test various components and observable consequences of the competing theories of Congressional committees, Groseclose and King (2001) suggested that the bicameral-rivalry theory is at least as empirically accurate as the three other theories. Gailmard and Hammond (2011) returned to the bicameralism argument, suggesting that committees are bargaining agents in interactions with the other chamber. Again, using formal analysis, they suggested that this creates incentives to stack committees with "tough" agents—those whose polices misalign with the parent chamber but whose consequently tough bargaining confounds the other chamber. The impact of inter-cameral rivalry on intra-chamber organization undoubtedly deserved more attention.

17.3 Do Congressional Theories Travel Well?

Clearly, a richly informative literature exists for the origins and consequences of internal legislative design in the case of the US Congress. By contrast, the literature is sparse in consideration of the reasons for the evolution of the legislative structures in parliamentary

systems. Given the increasing tendency to frame comparative legislative research within the congressional literature, perhaps surprisingly, an understanding of the origins of committees as a form of legislative organization has not reproduced itself in other settings. The explanation for the non-mobility of committees as an agenda for research perhaps relates to the perceived weakness of committees in most legislatures operating under parliamentarism (Lees and Shaw 1979; Hazan 2001). Of course, even if accepting that committees are not particularly significant in all legislatures, the reasons for this are legitimate and fruitful issues for research. The second and possible more significant factor preventing construction of comparative theories relates to a lack of data to test any such theories. In short, and with some exceptions discussed later, paucity exists for comparable data on national committee systems and even a sense of the important institutional features of committee systems. In short, comparative work on committee structures is largely country-specific or thick-descriptive in intent.

A clear exception is the empirical contribution made by Mattson and Strøm (1995) as part of the Döring project exploring the structure and operation of seventeen Western European parliaments and the European Parliament. Mattson and Strøm (1995) provided impressive detail for a large number of committees' features covering structures, procedures, and powers. The reductionist method, codifying the rich details and significant complexities of committee institutions in each parliament has the potential to miss much of the important information. Nevertheless, the impressive data reveals that committee systems differ greatly in their complexities and arrangements. Committee strength, at least in part, is representative of two observable dimensions. The first dimension relates to committees' abilities to draft legislation, including, for example, the

right to initiate legislation or rewrite bills. A second dimension relates to committees' ability to control its own agendas, including, for example, controlling its own timetable and the ability to summon witnesses and demand documents.

Mattson and Strøm (1995) embedded their data and analysis within the broad framework of rational choice and used the European data as a test of the distributional, informational, and cartel party theories of Congressional committees. Sadly, they concluded that a clear-cut test of these competing propositions is not possible, although they postulated that the evidence seems to favor the informational perspective. Western European committee systems seem to share many of the features associated with committees as institutions to maximize gains from exchange through policy specialization. Yet the suggestion is tentative and Mattson and Strøm (1995) concluded their exploration of committees in European parliaments by suggesting that "many of the critical questions have not yet been asked, much less answered." Disputing their analysis remains difficult, today as well as originally.

Martin (2011) reported original data on committees' designs in thirty-nine democratic legislatures, with the express intent of building an index of committees' strengths. Such endeavors inevitably accrue costs and challenges: determining, ex-ante, the characteristics of a strong committee system relative to a weak committee systems is necessary. Building on Strøm (1990), seven features of committee systems are suggested as potential measures of the ability of committees to impact public policy and oversight:

1. Committees' jurisdictional congruence with executive departments.
2. The stage, if any, in the legislative process in which committees consider bills.

3. Committees' rights to initiate legislation.
4. Committees' rights to amend proposed legislation and/or rewrite bills.
5. Committees' authority to compel ministerial attendance and evidence.
6. Committees' authority to compel civil servants to attend.
7. Existence of subcommittees.

To provide an example of the rational, the first component of the index of committee strength—the congruence between official ministries and committee portfolios—may be a key indication of committee influence. The more closely the committee system corresponds to ministerial portfolios the more likely the former holds "property rights" over a particular area of policy. The congruence between ministry and committee should also ease oversight, with the committee able to accumulate expertise concerning an ongoing interaction with the relevant department. Notably, all seven variables are rule-based; that does not suggest any direct measure of influence from the committee.

Even when generally agreed that certain institutional characteristics imply significance, scoring each variable for each country is necessary. Martin (2011) relied on a mixture of document analysis (national constitutions, the chamber's Standing Orders, other rules of procedures) and a survey of national experts. The general absence of cross-institutional and inter-temporal measures of committee organization and the entirely absent variables for committees from cross-national studies of institutional structures reflects the difficulty of obtaining such data. For example, committees are notably absent in the Fish and Kroenig (2009) study of the powers and rules of national parliaments.

An alternative empirical strategy has been to focus on one or a small number of legislatures and explore, in detail, typically quantitatively, the patterns of appointments.

This seems a potentially fruitful exercise when recalling that an analysis of appointments to committees formed the backbone of empirical research on Congressional committees.

The European Parliament (EP) system of committees provides a special opportunity to test theories of assignments to committees given the similarity between the US Congress and the parliament of the European Union (see Hix and Høyland, this volume). Earlier study of committees in the EP noted that distribution of committees' assignments were proportionate to the party's plenary size, and parties thus influenced and shaped the composition of committees (Bowler and Farrell 1995; McElroy 2006)—suggesting evidence favoring the party-cartel perspective. In contrast, Whitaker (2001; 2011) noted that members are typically able to self-select assignments, based on members' own policy interests—suggesting evidence in favor of the informational perspective. Yordanova (2009) found little evidence to support the partisan theory but noted that committees with distributive potential tend to consist of "high-demanding" preferential outliers—suggesting evidence in favor of the distributive explanation. In contrast, committees with no distributive authority tend to attract members with relevant expertise but no special interests—suggesting evidence in favor of the informational perspective. As with the US Congress, research on committees in the EP currently brings us no closer to agreeing on a general theory of legislative organization.

Crisp et al. (2009) explored patterns of assignment to committees in Argentina, Costa Rica, and Venezuela. They found that procedures for selection of candidates and electoral rules contribute to explaining some but not most of the variation in patterns of assignments among national cases and individual careers. Ciftci, Forrest, and Tekin (2008) explored patterns of assignments to committees in the Turkish National Grand

Assembly and found evidence that policy interests and seniority are influential, interpreted as evidence for both distributional and informational theories. They also revealed that members closest to the party median were more likely to receive assignments. Thus, the empirical study of the Turkish case seems to suggest that the three theories of congressional organization have at least some predictive value but no one theory best explains the Turkish pattern.

Other recent studies explored the patterns of assignments to committees in the Danish Folketing (Hansen 2010) and the Irish Dáil (Hansen 2011). The Danish case suggests assignment processes differ within the same chamber by party. Some parties place members with special knowledge on relevant committees, although this practice appears to be declining. For smaller parties, allocation to committees appears less strategic. In the Irish case, neither the distributional, informational, nor partisan theories explain the pattern of assignments, leading Hansen to speculate that the entire process is simply random. Ultimately, Hansen (2011, 358) suggested that the aspect needed to advance understanding of committees in European parliaments is "a clear break with the theories based on the unique American institutional design," which leads us to consideration of the recent and ongoing attempts to move beyond congressional theories and toward comparative theories of legislative organization.

17.4. Comparative Theories of Legislative Organization

As Martin and Vanberg (this volume) highlight, recent comparative research suggested that legislatures play a key role in helping individual parties in multiparty government maintain relationships. Each party in such governments must maintain awareness of each

other to ensure implementation of agreed policies by each minister (Strøm, Muller, and Smith 2010 provide a review of legislative and extra-legislative controlling mechanisms).

Recent scholarship suggested that parliamentary committees function as mechanisms for parties in government coalitions to maintain oversight of each other. In particular, Martin and Vanberg (2004; 2005; 2011) showed that parties in government use committees to review policies of their coalition partners. For any given policy proposal, the greater the ideological distance between parties on that issue, the longer was required for the bill to pass through the committee stage in the legislative process. Moreover, the more divisive the topic, in terms of the preferences of each party in government, the more amendments were added—to correct any "ministerial drift." As Hallerberg (2000) identified, in the case of budgetary politics, at least two characteristics of committees' systems maximize the usefulness of committees as a tool of intra-coalition monitoring: First, committee jurisdictions should be congruent with ministerial portfolios. Second, in terms of the appointment of committee chairs, such appointment should come from a party other than the party controlling the ministerial portfolio. In other words, in a two-party government, in which one party controls the agricultural portfolio at cabinet level, the other party should control the chair of the agricultural committee. Clark and Jurgelevilt (2008) revealed that Lithuanian parties adopt such strategies for appointing chairs in committees.

In a significant contribution to this debate, Carroll and Cox (2012) considered the pattern of parties in government in nineteen legislatures shadowing each other through the use of committee chairs. Their findings are consistent with the theory that committees are monitoring mechanisms. Moreover, Carroll and Cox (2011) confirmed previous

results that monitoring (this time through the strategic appointment of committees' chairs) is most likely to occur when political parties governing together diverge most from each others' preferred positions on policies.

Martin and Depauw (2011) extended the previous suggestion, by asserting that committees emerge under parliamentarism as a structural solution to the needs of each party in a coalition government to maintain oversight of the other. The suggestion is that parties' need to "keep tabs" on coalition partners shapes not only legislative behavior but also structures legislative organization, in particular, committee structures and powers. A strong committee system is likely the best form by which the legislature can hold accountable individual cabinet ministers (Lees and Shaw 1979) by scrutinizing draft laws emerging from the government. Significantly, they can do so more efficiently and effectively than the plenary assembly because of gains from trade, information acquisition, and specializations of committee members (Krehbiel 1991). Strong committees can maintain vigilance over post- and non-legislative activities of individual ministers, particularly when parliamentary committees shadow a particular official department. Only as long as committees continue to serve governing parties' interests for monitoring one another, will strong committee systems be features in legislatures. This argument suggests both an informational role for committees and a partisan role as the key players are political parties seeking to maintain oversight of each other. Supporting cross-institutional evidence linking government-type (coalition versus single-party) and the structure of legislatures, is a case study tracing the reorganization and strengthening of committees in the Irish parliament following Ireland's shift from single party to multiparty government. The suggestion is that legislative organization shifted in the Irish

case, with committee structures strengthened to serve as an institutional solution to the needs of the smaller Irish parties in a coalition government to shadow their larger partners.

Powell (2000, 34) noted the empirical correlation between strong committees and proportionally representative electoral systems. This may reflect that majoritarian electoral systems tend to lead to single-party government, whereas proportional representation electoral systems lead to parliaments with no party having an overall majority, rendering coalition governments more common. If committees serve as a solution to problems of multiparty government, expectedly, an empirical correlation would arise between proportional representation electoral systems and strong committee systems in legislatures.

A reasonable but largely overlooked suggestion is that the system of committees depends on whether or not the legislature operates as a consensus as opposed to a majoritarian democracy (Lijphart 1999). Conventionally, strong committees are associated with opposition influence. Stronger committees may, therefore, be a feature of consensus-based political institutions with weaker committee systems more likely to exist in majoritarian political systems.

Finally, Martin (2011) suggested an alteration to the distributional theory as an explanation of legislative organization under parliamentarism as distinct from presidentialism. The implication of the distributive theory of congressional organization is that candidate-centered electoral systems should result in legislatures with strong committees. Martin (2011) suggests an overlooking of a key component of the relationship between electoral systems and legislative organization: *The mechanism to*

cultivate a personal vote shapes legislators' preferences over institutional design. Committees will be stronger when personal vote-seeking legislators supply fiscal particularism (pork) but weaker when legislators cultivate personal support by delivering extra-legislative service to constituencies. Empirically, Martin found that the effect of personal votes is conditional on legislators' ability to provide fiscal particularism. The unconditional effect of ballot structure on committees' strengths is statistically insignificant. The direction (and magnitude) of the effect of ballot structure on committee strength depends, critically, on the mechanism for cultivating personal votes. Thus, the degree to which committees provide a tool to cultivate votes differs and this difference shapes legislators' interests in committee work and ultimately committee organization.

17.5 Conclusion

Scholars have long maintained interest in the origins of committee power in the US Congress. Indeed, theory-building and the emergence of influential counter theories during the 1980s and 1990s could be representative of a golden age of congressional research. That research stimulated empirical study of congressional organization but also influenced heavily the theory of social choice, research on the political economy of institutions, and the study of American politics more generally. All major theories of legislative organization from this period provide many attractive features and some evidence of empirical accuracy. At the same time, despite much quality scholarship, no definitive explanation of congressional organization exists.

Research on the design and operation of committees in various legislatures is even more limited. Truly comparative cross-national and inter-temporal research has been the exception rather than the norm. Measurement issues and difficulties in identifying even

the most basic characteristics of committee systems may represent likely barriers to the study of committees in different institutional settings. Yet, the perceptions of strong committees, normatively, remain a necessary if not sufficient condition for the legislature to have influence, vis-à-vis the executive branch.

In terms of congressional research, further theoretical and empirical work is necessary to understand the degree to which committees compete with or are complimentary to the operation of the legislative party. In particular, understanding the emergence of an equilibrium between independently minded committees and party leadership which seeks to control all aspects of congressional life, is a necessary avenue of investigation. The most successful political science theories tend to be parsimonious; yet the reality of the origins and basis of legislative organization is likely far more chaotic than current explanations proffer, and future theoretical explorations are likely to require more complex models and arguments.

The power of theories is at least somewhat circumscribed when conditions limit opportunities for empirical testing. Beyond competing claims for the patterns of appointments and memberships of committees, observational equivalence is a significant barrier to empirically assessing competing theories of committees' organizations. As theories become more precise in their assumptions, explanations, and expectations, perhaps direct and indirect observational consequences can withstand identification and testing, either through observational studies, text analysis, or experiment.

The empirical assessment of existing theories of congressional research is far from exhausted. The changes that committees undergo over time, not least in the current era of perceived greater partisanship, is a study worthy of empirical assessment, either

contemporarily or through the lenses of American political development. Empirical tests using state legislatures as a laboratory and the legislatures in presidential systems in Latin American can likely reveal much more about the validity of theories of congressional committees than studies focused on legislative organization in parliamentary systems.

Relatedly, recent work seeking to identify novel explanations for parliamentary committees under parliamentarism need to progress theoretically and empirically. This may require moving beyond congressional theories or adapting them suitably to very different exogeneous institutional and political landscapes. Fundamentally, understanding the tension, if any, between parties and committees is critical to advancing legislative scholarship toward a more complete understanding of the operations of parliaments.

Finally, existing research focuses, perhaps too heavily, on the question of committee origins, with insufficient attention to the political economy of institutional consequences. Studying the structures of committees may be difficult, but scholars have only accomplished a bare minimum in uncovering the consequences of committee design. Since Strøm's (1990) suggestion that strong committees facilitate minority governments, little research has argued for the significance of committee organization. Whether or not committees are assets, or if legislatures would be as efficient and effective without committees, remains an unanswered issue. Clearly, the assumption, made also in this chapter, that committees are a crucial ingredient of a strong legislature is a stylized fact in need of theoretical and empirical verification.

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