

# Committee Assignments: Theories, Causes, and Consequences

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Conventional wisdom suggests that a strong legislature is built on a strong internal committee system, both in terms of committee powers and the willingness of members to engage in committee work. Committee assignments are the behavioural manifestation of legislative organisation. Despite this, much remains unknown about how committee assignments happen and with what causes and consequences. Our focus in this article is on providing the context for, and introducing new research on, what we call *the political economy of committee assignments* - which members get selected to sit on which committees, why, and with what consequences.

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## **I. Introduction**

Parliamentary committees can play a vital role in aggregating legislators' preferences, processing proposed legislation, and holding the executive to account. All legislative assemblies 'work to a greater or lesser extent through committees' (Laundy, 1989, p. 96). 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, 1885, p. 69), scholars have sought to understand the origins, design, role, and impact of legislative committees.

Across legislatures, it is possible to observe large variation in how committee systems are established. Some committee systems have extensive drafting authority and agenda control (comparative studies of formal institutional characteristics include André, Depauw, and Martin, 2016; Martin, 2011; Mickler, 2017; Strøm, 1998; Yläoutinen and Hallerberg, 2008; Zubek, 2015). A strong committee system is typically seen as a necessary if not sufficient condition for the legislature to operate effectively in terms of influencing the legislative process and holding the executive to account (Strøm, 1990).

This article, and the articles that follow, explore the politics of committee assignments. Committee assignments are the behavioural manifestation of legislative organisation, a process by which 'resources and parliamentary rights [are assigned] to individual legislators or groups of legislators' (Krehbiel, 1992, p. 2). Our specific focus is on understanding which members sit in which committees, why, and with what consequences. As Rohde and Shepsle (1973, p. 889) noted over 45 years ago, understanding the 'process by which members are assigned to committees is of the greatest importance.' Despite this, much

remains unknown about how committee assignments happen and with what causes and consequences.

The literature on committee assignments is characterised by two distinctive research ‘traditions’. One tradition relates to US Congressional studies (Martin, 2014a). The debate within this tradition revolves around the question of whether committee assignments are made so as to advantage individual legislators, the full chamber, or political parties. More recently, a ‘second’ research tradition focuses on legislatures around the world, often where partisan structures have a profound effect on parliamentary organisation and procedure.

Extending our knowledge about committee assignments to other legislatures is of crucial importance. Exploring committee assignments outside the US case allow us to analyse how two of the most central institutions and pivotal elements in legislative politics—parliamentary parties and parliamentary committees – interact. Indeed, understanding the causes and consequences of committee assignment patterns in a legislature illuminates the fundamental motivations of political elites. In other words, understanding committee assignments helps us understand if politicians, and the political parties to which they belong, are interested in policy, office or votes – or some mix (Martin 2016; Müller and Strøm 1999).

Exploring the politics of committee assignments is not merely of academic interest. Research on committees and subcommittees has been vital to understanding the work of legislatures as a whole (Martin and Vanberg, 2011; André, Depauw and Martin, 2016). By analysing and explaining the process of ‘who gets what and why?’, research on committee

assignments offers an important stepping stone to better understand decision-making processes and power relations within modern legislatures. Although parliamentary parties are, in many legislatures, the dominating organisational structures (Damgaard, 1995; Saalfeld and Strøm, 2014) compared to committees, committees nevertheless constitute a central venue for political actors. Parliamentary procedures affect political outcomes. We know that many parliamentary parties rely on a process of internal division of labour and delegate the task to develop policy proposals to specific policy experts in committees – Japan’s LDP being a classic example (Saalfeld and Strøm, 2014). Committee members are privileged in the sense that they are able to work on policy issues within the committee’s jurisdiction before other legislators have the opportunity to do so. Having the ‘wrong’ legislator on a committee, therefore, risks to produce outcomes with detrimental effects for the parliamentary party. Additionally, an enhanced knowledge of committee assignments opens up new and fascinating research questions about the further implications of the assignment patterns, the autonomy of committee members and their relationship with other actors in and outside of the legislature.

However, before we are able to address these questions, we need to analyse why particular legislators get on particular committees. The times of a ‘Washington bias - which deems Congress, and Congress alone, as the only legislature worthy of study’ (Nelson, 1974, p. 120) are long past. Studies into sub-national, national and supranational legislature are manifold. Yet, further comparative research is needed in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of legislative behaviour which take into account cross-national variation in political design (for example, the consequences of parliamentary versus presidentialism and the impact of electoral systems on political behaviour). A major source of contention in the scholarly

literature is the application and appropriateness of the so-called congressional framework of legislative organisation. While the concepts derived from US congressional theories prove to be helpful, at least as a starting point, to understand politicians' motivations and progressive ambitions, our knowledge of committee assignments in other legislatures still lags behind.

The articles in this section of *Parliamentary Affairs* study committee assignments in (mostly) European parliaments. This will provide new contributions to the debate on the suitability of US-originating theories outside of their 'home turf' (Martin 2018; Zubek 2015) and can help us to solve the disjunction between 'European' and 'American' experiences.

## **II. Committee Assignments: A Congressional Bias**

With important exceptions, the theoretical treatment of the process of legislative organisation - of which committees are a central feature - is still structured largely in terms of three distinctive perspectives that were developed to study the US Congress. Although the three perspectives were mainly produced in the 'golden era' of studies of legislative organisation between the 1970s and the 1990s, they continue to structure the scholarly debate on committees. Any study of committee assignments must, therefore, begin with a review of the distributive, informational and partisan theories of legislative organisation.

### *2.1 The Distributive Theory of Legislative Organisation: 'High Demanders' in 'Outlying' Committees*

The distributional theory gains its designation from the suggestion that committees exist to allow members to distribute particularistic benefits to their constituents. The formalisation

of the distributive perspective was highly influenced by the works of Shepsle and Weingast (Shepsle, 1978; Weingast, 1979; Shepsle and Weingast, 1982). A number of assumptions are key factors for understanding the distributional theory of legislative organisations. At its core, the distributive theory assumes that legislatures are highly decentralised institutions. Legislators are ultimately interested in securing their own re-election. In order to facilitate this goal legislators engage in logrolling, *i.e.* the mutually beneficial exchange on influence in issues of high salience for legislator's own advantage (gains from trade) with the aim to provide benefits to their constituencies. Benefits could include specific policies favoured 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 key strategy of legislators to achieve this is trading their own votes on issues which are not important to their constituents in return for votes and influence on issues of more importance for their constituencies.

This, however, creates a dilemma. When all legislators have equal influence in the passing of policies, and no mechanism is available which breaks through this impasse, it is unlikely that a majority is established to pursue a particular policy. Without a clear majority of legislators to support a policy and little control over the successful passing of this proposal, a 'deadlock' is unavoidable. Black (1948) showed that a stable outcome is unlikely when complex issues must be solved via majority voting. Similarly, Arrow (1951) argued that political outcomes are inherently unstable with simple majority rules. Agreements between legislators may solve such a deadlock, but the absence of a system which enforces agreements reached through logrolling does not induce a stable situation.

The enforcement problem follows from the time-lapse of log-rolling bargains between legislators. After engaging in log-rolling and exchanging votes, legislators fear prospective defection. Support for a bill in exchange for future support by the other legislator creates a moral hazard problem. As Weingast and Marshall (1988, p. 140) note, the 'public perception of the issue may change, and the electoral effect of this change is observable solely to the representative it affects.' To solve this, legislators seek additional mechanisms to make credible their bargains. The distributive theory argues that institutions created by the legislature, and primarily the committee system, provide the solution to the 'deadlock.' By dividing policy areas, committees create a decentralised agenda control system. This gives interested legislators a chance to join their respective field and 'cluster' in committees. The committee system provides substantial protection against opportunistic behaviour and enables legislators to facilitate gains from trade. The collective legislative instability is 'stabilised' by institutionalizing bargains between their members (see *e.g.* Tullock, 1981), thus permitting members to distribute particularistic policies and spending to their constituents. 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).

A core assumption of the distributive theory of legislative organisation is that members are able to self-select into preferred committees (Shepsle, 1978). Legislative party groups play a subordinate and reactive role. Consequently, the composition of committees is predicted to be highly unrepresentative of their parent body and 'committee members' preferences differ systematically from those of the larger legislature' (Krehbiel, 1990, p. 149). As an

example, 'urban policy committees are dominated by congressmen from cities; pork barrel committees by districts with high demand for construction activity and rivers and harbours projects; welfare committees by congressmen with poor constituents; and defence committees by congressmen with significant defence contractors or defence installations in their districts' (Shepsle and Weingast, 1982, p.370). Crucially, the policies emanating from the legislature are ultimately unrepresentative of the views of the majority in the plenary - because the committee has the power to control the agenda in that policy area.

This perspective provides 'parsimonious, but nonetheless powerful, explanations' ( Martin, 2014a, p. 355) of the stability of Congress. It views committees as autonomous power centers with an exceptional status and gate-keeping power. This 'textbook view of Congress' was the dominant theme in congressional studies for over a decade, remained conventional wisdom until the 1980s, and was considered the state of the art in handbooks of the US Congress (see *e.g.* Jewell and Patterson, 1966; Keefe and Ogul, 1968).

## *2.2 The Informational Theory: Committees as Representative 'Microcosms' of the Chamber*

The informational theory of legislative organisation of Gilligan and Krehbiel (1987) 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 informational theory departs from two assumptions of the functioning of Congress. First, the inevitability that policies are selected in the 'presence of substantial uncertainty about their consequences upon implementation' (Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1990, p. 533). Second, policies cannot be enacted without the consent of the majority of the



legislature's members (a so-called majoritarian postulate). The emphasis on the uncertainty that legislators face in the policy-making process has important ramifications for the internal organisation of legislatures.

Since members cannot possess the necessary expertise about all issues coming before the chamber they try to minimise information asymmetries through institutional arrangements. Committees are viewed as the prime organisational means to provide the possibility for specialised information to reduce the uncertainty regarding legislation and minimise unintended policy outcomes. From the informational perspective, membership working in committees provides a collective benefit. Committees do not just allow more work to be done – they allow members' specialisation to accumulate informational advantages and tacit knowledge resulting in better legislative activities of benefit to the entire chamber. This organisational advantage of committees is not only characteristic of legislatures: Any organisation can benefit from creating a sub-unit in which members specialise. 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.

Gilligan and Krehbiel (1990) model the legislative process as a two person-game under incomplete information between a standing committee and the entire legislature. They conclude that reduction of uncertainty in mostly new and untried policies is unanimously valued by risk-averse legislators. It is argued that specialisation of committee members is a necessary condition to enhance informational efficiency, but it also provides opportunities for strategic use of this expertise. Within a game of asymmetric information, in which the

committee is better informed than the legislature, the floor has no incentive to ever adopting a bill which comes out of a committee (see Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1990, p. 547), if the committee does not reflect the preferences of the chamber. Even when a committee's preference differs only marginally from that of the legislature, the plenum can 'no longer rationally believe the committee's bill will yield the legislature's ideal point' (see Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1990, p. 547). As a matter of prudence, a rational legislature anticipates these unwanted consequences. The legislature is assumed to carefully 'balance resources with preferences, concerns, knowing that each has implications for capturing collective benefits from informative committees in the presence of uncertainty' (see Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1990, p. 544f). 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.

### *2.3 The Partisan Theory: Committees Controlled by the Parliamentary Party Group Leadership?*

Both the distributive and informational theories of legislative organisation place emphasis on individual members' interests and abilities to shape the committee system. Despite being contradictory in their predictions, both share one assumption: The absence of partisan organisation as major force in the organisation of the US Congress. This assumption followed the general perception of parties in the political system of the US as 'empty vessels' (Katz and Kolodny, 1994).

In a significant departure, Cox and McCubbins (1993) re-evaluate the role and impact of legislative parties in the US Congress (see also Aldrich, 1995; Rohde, 1994). While much of

the observable work of Congress is undertaken within and between committees, political parties nevertheless play a crucial role by shaping the committee system and committee activities. 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' behaviour and control the agenda. 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 organisation suggest.

Similar to the empirical investigation of existing theories of organisation of committees, Cox and McCubbins (1993) focused on the assignment (and reassignment) process – the rules by which members gain appointment. Cox and McCubbins reject the depiction of this process as one of 'self-selection.' Rather, the party's leadership play a far more significant role in the assignment process than previously acknowledged. Cox and McCubbins nevertheless accept that 'members' preferences for assignment are important and determine much of the pattern of actual assignment' (Cox and McCubbins, 1993, p. 186). Their analysis of assignments to committees, between 1947 and 1988, undermines the assumption that committees consist of policy outliers. Additionally, 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 partisans and punish members who have defied the leadership during roll-call votes. The effect is present in their analysis on initial assignments as well as 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 party leaders are in

control over 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 of the party leadership to enforce the party discipline. It may not be a case of committees versus parties, but parties using committees.

#### *2.4 Committee Research in the United States of America*

Especially with regard to the theme of committee assignments, a rich body of empirical work is available on the US Congress, particularly the House of Representatives.<sup>1</sup> After first focusing on the US Congress researchers later turned to committee assignments in US state legislatures (Overby and Kazee, 2000; Prince and Overby, 2005; Battista, 2006, 2009, 2012; Hamm, Hedlund and Post, 2011). The variety of state legislatures has further complicated the task, as theories have been reinterpreted and altered.

Some studies have found evidence in line with the predictions of the distributive theory (Masters, 1961; Fenno, 1966; Shepsle and Weingast, 1981; Niou and Ordeshook, 1985; Hall and Grofman, 1990), especially when taking into consideration constituency characteristics and whether they match with the committee of the legislator (Adler and Lapinski, 1997; Adler, 2000; Frisch and Kelly, 2004). Based on committee request data to the Democratic Committee on Committees in the 86th-88th and 90th Congresses, Rohde and Shepsle (1973, p. 895) conclude that there is 'a clear relationship between the type of district represented and the committees most requested'. An analysis of the composition of ten House Appropriations subcommittees in the period of 1959-1998 by Adler and Lapinski (1997, p.

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<sup>1</sup> The Senate is considered by many researchers to be much more diffuse than the House, in which "individual legislators benefit from a great deal of freedom to pursue their own goals" (Lazarus & Monroe, 2007, p. 604).

913) indicates that membership in several standing committees looked ‘much more extreme compared to the floor when we examine constituency characteristics rather than “policy preferences”’.

However, the argument that constituencies disproportionately benefit from the distribution of government money when they are represented on the relevant committee has not gone unchallenged. The distributive theory faced more empirical challenges from the informational or partisan perspective. Scholars were unable to provide coherent empirical proof of a systematic and significant difference of preferences of legislators in committee compared to the floor. Krehbiel (1990, p. 150) argued that the evidence for ““preference outliers”, “high-demand committees”, “self-selection tendencies”, and ultimately “committee power” is inconclusive’ (see for criticism Hall and Grofman, 1990).

Several studies found empirical support for the informational theory (Krehbiel, 1990, 1993; Hamm, Hedlund and Post, 2011). Overby and Kazee (2000) found only a few outliers and the majority of committees are composed in such a way that they are representative of the floor (see also Overby, Kazee, and Prince, 2004; Prince and Overby, 2005). Data by Hamm, Hedlund, and Post (2011) indicate that members who possess advantageous policy-relevant knowledge and expertise are overrepresented on legislative committees which lets the authors conclude that legislatures ‘tap the talents’ (Hamm, Hedlund, and Post, 2011, p. 318) of their members.

The role of legislative parties across time has been highly disputed (Krehbiel, 1993; Hedlund and Hamm, 1996; Carsey and Rundquist, 1999; Snyder and Groseclose, 2000; Hedlund *et al.*,

2009; Kanthak, 2009; Mooney, 2013). Studies which supported the informational and distributive theories systematically downplayed the role of legislative parties. Yet, partisan considerations were demonstrated in numerous studies (*e.g.* Hedlund and Hamm, 1996). Findings by Carsey and Rundquist (1999, p. 1167) are consistent with the general argument inspired by Cox and McCubbins and conclude ‘that the majority party organises the committee system so as to benefit its members’ constituencies’. Kanthak (2009) concludes that loyalists are more likely to be assigned to desirable committees, thus supporting the prediction of the partisan theory.

The debate about these three theories is still ongoing with no one theory prevailing clearly. Most studies on the issue of committee assignments have presented some evidence for one of the theories without settling the debate. These varying results have been ascribed to the differences in estimating preferences and case selection (for methodological discussions see *e.g.* Londregan and Snyder, 1994; Snyder, 1992; Sprague, 2008).

### *2.6 Comparative Research on Committee Assignments*

Research on committees outside the US initially focused primarily on the European Parliament (Bowler and Farrell, 1995; Whitaker, 2001, 2005; McElroy, 2006; Yordanova, 2009, 2011). Research on the European Parliament noted that committee assignments tend to be proportionate to the party’s plenary size, and parties thus influence and shaped the composition of committees (Bowler and Farrell, 1995; McElroy, 2006) – suggesting evidence favouring the party-cartel perspective. Bowler and Farrell (1995) also find support for the heterogeneous committee prediction of the distributive theory. This finding was later backed up by a study on assignments of rapporteurs in the environment committee which

also proved that affiliation to green-minded interest groups is important in the assignment process (Kaeding, 2004; Yoshinaka, McElroy and Bowler, 2010).

In contrast, Whitaker (2001, 2011) focused on the assignment process and the level of influence of political group leaders, concluding that 'most members are able to self-select their committee positions and many do so primarily on the basis of their own policy preferences rather than on that of the prestige of a committee or its relevance to constituents' interests' (Whitaker, 2001, p. 82). Signs of the influence of national parties in support of the partisan perspective are further provided by a later study (Whitaker, 2005). McElroy (2006) also finds occupational factors and interest groups ties to be of relevance, as well as strong evidence in support of a seniority norm in the assignment process. Yordanova (2009) finds little evidence to support the partisan theory but noted that committees with distributive potential tend to consist of 'high-demanding' preferential outliers. In contrast, education and professional expertise matter more in information-driven committees, as predicted by the informational perspective. Some of these findings contradict earlier research as there is, *e.g.* no support for the hypothesis that MEPs with trade union ties join the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs. The low explanatory power of the partisan perspective is attributed to the European Parliament as a legislature characterised by high turnover of members.

As with the US Congress, the inconclusive results of research on committees in the European Parliament brings us no closer to agreeing on a theory of legislative organisation linking electoral considerations to members' attitude to committees (as measured through

committee assignments). Committees in the European Parliament was therefore characterised as being 'in need of a theory' (Yordanova, 2011).

Although a large body of literature is available which reviews committee assignment procedures in parliamentary systems (*e.g.* Olson and et al, 1998; Park, 1998; Rommetvedt, 1992), analyses similar to those of the European Parliament or even the US Congress were scarce. A number of empirical studies argued that committee assignments are affected by electoral rules or candidate selection procedures (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987; Stratmann and Baur, 2002; Pekkanen, Nyblade and Krauss, 2006; Crisp *et al.*, 2009; Gschwend and Zittel, 2016). Stratmann and Baur (2002) analyse the effects of Germany's mixed member system on committee assignments. They argue that nominally elected MPs are strategically assigned to different committees than their colleagues which entered the Bundestag by a party list. By assigning them to those committees which allow them to please their local constituents the parliamentary party groups hope for electoral benefits at the next election. Their results show that committees which allow for the allocation of benefits to their geographic re-election constituency are stacked with nominally elected legislators while committees which control funds that benefit their party's re-election constituencies are disproportionately filled with legislators which entered the Bundestag by a party list (Stratmann and Baur, 2002, p. 513). Looking further at the German case, Gschwend and Zittel (2016) find that legislators with local ties are more likely to be assigned to committees that deliver pork to please local constituents. But the mode of election (single member district versus party list) does not influence committee assignments.



Further evidence to the arguments regarding the connection between 'localness' of German legislators and committee assignments (Gschwend and Zittel, 2016) was provided by Mickler (2013; 2017). However, his studies also highlighted additional influences on committee assignments: First, a strong adherence to a seniority principle which provides incumbent legislators with a relatively strong claim to stay on a committee. Second, many assignments can be linked to legislators' external interests and advantageous policy-relevant knowledge greatly increases the likelihood to be assigned to a corresponding committee. Additionally, the assignment process is structured by country-specific patterns such as the influence of the regional factions of the larger parliamentary parties and, for smaller parliamentary parties, self-imposed quotas (men and women, political wings or regional considerations). On the other hand, partisan considerations were hardly influential. More experienced legislators have slightly higher chances to be assigned to more electorally salient committees, but partisan 'stacking' is limited.

Ciftci, Forrest and Tekin (2008) explore the Turkish case, finding evidence that policy interests and seniority are influential, interpreted as evidence for both distributive and informational theories. Crisp *et al.* (2009) explore patterns of assignment to committees in Argentina, Costa Rica, and Venezuela. They find 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.

The Danish case suggests assignments processes differ within the same chamber by party, leading Hansen (2010) to speculate that the entire process is potentially random. For the Irish Dáil, Hansen (2011) analyses participation in committees (all committees pooled) in a

period of 1982 and 2010 as well as the assignment to important committees in two multivariate models. Although some patterns are found, most notably with regard to sector knowledge (Hansen, 2011, p. 354), the author concludes that 'the results point towards committee assignments in Dáil Éireann happening rather randomly' (Hansen, 2011, p. 346). However, a more recent study of assignments in the Dáil, which relies on a statistical analysis of assignments and interviews with legislatures, concludes that the assignments can be described by a mixture of reoccurring and stable factors (Mickler, 2017b). Although there was hardly any evidence of partisan influences, advantageous policy-relevant knowledge corresponding to a committee's jurisdiction increase the likelihood of a legislator to be assigned to a corresponding committee. Additionally, the interviews with legislators highlighted factors ascribed to the distributive rationale, at least when it comes to the assignments. Raymond and Holt (2014) find that distributive and partisan models of legislative organisation explain committee assignments in Canada. Additional studies which focus on committee chair assignments and the extent to which committee chairs from one coalition parliamentary party group 'shadow' cabinet ministers of another coalition parliamentary (Kim and Loewenberg, 2005; Carroll and Cox, 2012; Sieberer and Höhmann, 2017).

### **3. The Papers**

The six papers that follow attempt to shed new light on the politics of committee assignments across a number of (mostly) European parliaments.<sup>2</sup> All are, in one way or another, influenced by the congressional literature and existing attempts to apply and refine

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<sup>2</sup> All six papers were originally presented at the 2016 ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops. We thank all participants in the workshop on *Analyzing Organization in Parliaments: Causes and Consequences* for their contribution and comments.

these theories to settings outside the United States. Each paper seeks to make a theoretical contribution, supported up by original data collection and analysis.

Mickler (this issue) introduces a theoretical framework which highlights the involvement of legislative parties in the assignment process. His analysis of committee assignments in the Dutch *Tweede Kamer* – using quantitative analysis and elite interviews - provides us a picture of legislative behaviour in the context of an electoral system which should not incentivise constituency-based assignment patterns. The results of his analysis indicate that legislators' educational and occupational backgrounds matter in the committee assignment process but partisan influences are also clearly at play.

Giannetti et al. (this issue) explore committee assignment by focusing on the extent to which Italian legislators' desires to become members of certain committees are fulfilled. Using original survey data on elected candidates, they suggest that individual preferences driven by distributive interests are more likely to be accommodated in the case of legislators who are close to their party in policy preference terms. Ideological proximity to the party does not seem to affect committee assignment when legislators' committee assignment preferences are driven by expertise-based motivations.

In what we believe to be the most geographically extensive comparative study of committee assignments to date, Raymond and Holt (this issue) explore committee assignments to committees whose remits include agricultural issues across 29 different legislatures. Their results suggest that constituency preferences impact committee selection in a wide range of legislatures. Interestingly, and contrary to conventional expectations, the effect of constituency preferences varies to only a limited extent according to differences in electoral systems, committee organisation, and the partisan consequences of personal vote-seeking.

Focusing on the European Parliament, Whitaker (this issue) provides the first systematic assessment of how far Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are successful in obtaining places on the committees to which they most want to be assigned. The results indicate a high degree of success for MEPs in achieving the committee assignments they want, within the restrictions that party groups receive a volume of seats proportional to

their number of MEPs. This analysis finds strong support for the informational approach to legislative organization when examining variations in committee assignment success rates. Nevertheless, there is also some evidence that partisan concerns influence the assignment process. The suggestion is that party groups and national parties in the European Parliament attempt to limit the agency losses that might result from a high degree of self-selection in committee assignments.

The article by Fernandes et al. (this issue) explore the appointment of committee chairs. As a form of mega-seat (Martin 2014b), committee chairs can be particularly important positions in legislatures. In an extension of the party-cartel model, this article argues that party leadership assigns legislators with low electoral vulnerability to committee chairs to buy their loyalty to the party. Their analysis of committee chair assignments in Spain and Ireland suggest that those legislators are assigned to committee chairs to heighten their willingness to work for partisan public goods.

Hansen (this issue) explores the importance of government formation to committee assignment politics in parliamentary systems. After all, a key role of legislatures in parliamentary systems – as contrasted to presidential systems – is the selection of the executive (Cheibub, Martin and Rasch, 2015). An analysis of committee assignments from the Danish parliament suggest that an approach inspired by the portfolio allocation model works best in explaining the distribution of seats and chairs between parties. Shadowing of coalition partners appears to matter little, if at all.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The study of committee assignments focuses on a relatively straightforward question by asking ‘who gets what?’ Yet, answers to this question provide much insight into the working of legislative assemblies. Understanding committee assignments allows us to make inferences about power-relations within legislatures, thus facilitating a whole research agenda about the *post-assignment* phase, including the room for manoeuvre of committee

members vis á vis their parliamentary party and the autonomy of committee members during the policy-making process. It is, therefore, no surprise that this question has attracted considerable scholarly attention, most notably in the US Congress. In a lively scholarly debate, new measures to determine outlying committees have been introduced and old ones have been challenged.

So far, legislatures outside the US largely lack their 'own' theoretical framework comparable to the US theories. As a consequence, most European studies of committee assignments rely on congressional theories of legislative organisation for their theoretical motivation. One might view this heavy reliance on the congressional theories as a weakness of the existing analyses. There is an ongoing debate about the (non)-usefulness of the theories for understanding other cases than the legislature for which they were developed - which might indeed be a 'deviant case' (Shaw, 1979, p. 387) in many respects. Although this debate continues, we believe that it might be outdated. In a way, the existing literature on non-congressional legislatures has already emancipated itself from the congressional framework.

Although congressional theories are usually the starting point for comparative researchers, studies of other legislatures usually do not simply transfer the predictions of the congressional framework directly but rely on adapted versions of those theories. Most fundamentally, existing scholarly research outside of the US setting usually redefines the role of legislative parties and views them as important actors with regard to committee assignments (see Fernandes, 2016; Hansen, 2016 for similar arguments). While the congressional debate is a more fundamental one and centres around the question whether partisan forces constrain individual legislators or not, this question is arguably superfluous

in the party-centred context of many national legislatures (including, arguably, the European Parliament).

Scholars usually (more or less explicit) assume Müller's (2000, p. 316) understanding of parties in the European context: 'no one would seriously consider any alternative to political parties as the most important political coordination mechanism'. Subsequently, most studies of legislative organisation and committee assignments view legislative parties as important gatekeepers (thus circumventing the fundamental debate of 'do parties matter?'). In this sense, the partisan theory by Cox and McCubbins (2007, p. 17) is 'correct' in its premise that committees are not autonomous. There will be no pure 'committee government', no self-selection with legislators' preferences being the sole decisive determinant of assignments. However, this does not make the further empirical implications of the partisan theory correct by default. When premising the supremacy of party groups over committees, the organisational implications of the distributive and informational theory provide perfectly valid strategies for legislative parties. It can be tested whether parliamentary party groups organise their work in committees according to a distributive, informational or partisan rationale (*i.e.* test the effect of relevant knowledge in a committee's jurisdiction or more experience on being assigned to committees), thus providing a much more nuanced account of the complex assignment process. Especially with regard to distributive rationales one might ask why strong parliamentary party groups would allow for legislators to cater to external interests. However, even 'outlying' committees can be in the best interest of parliamentary party groups: Making use of legislators' links to interest groups can bring external expertise into the decision-making process, while catering to electoral demands suits the goals of parliamentary party groups.

Additionally, it can be assumed that parliamentary party groups are aware of possible negative consequences of this assignment logic and still maintain other possibilities to affect the behaviour of legislators in committees (e.g. establishing within-PPG control mechanisms).

Whether something would be gained by developing a new 'non-congressional' framework is difficult to estimate. However, before attempting to develop such a framework we need to ask ourselves: What can be gained by abandoning the congressional framework and by providing a fresh perspective on non-congressional legislative parties and committee? Would the new framework really be fundamentally different compared to the framework that has been used so far (although sometimes more explicitly) and would it help scholars to understand the economy of committee assignment better? Such a question is difficult to answer without knowing the alternative but what we know is that the deduced rationales are not too far-fetched when reviewing the literature. Empirical evidence points towards the fact that the rationales deduced from the congressional theories are able to (in most cases) allow us to understand committee assignments in many non-congressional settings. Additionally, when approaching the study of legislative organisation completely afresh, assuming that parliamentary party groups assign legislators who have relevant knowledge or who are more experienced to committees is a very reasonable strategy for parliamentary party groups to pursue.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some additional anecdotal evidence can support this statement. During an interview with the whip of a German PPG, after explaining the way that the scholarly literature has talked about committee assignments (specialisation via informational rationale and serving outlying interests), the legislator's initial reaction was that these are inappropriate terms to capture the process in the legislator's own PPG. However, when asked what factors play a role in the assignment process, the exact same indicators were highlighted that are (usually linked) to the congressional framework (*i.e.* assigning legislators with advantages in knowledge, those who have a district link, etc.)

Although the prior section has argued that the congressional theories can help at least theoretically motivate non-congressional cases, there are several issues we want to raise. Scholars using the congressional theories should always be wary about their origin and be specific about the role that legislative parties play in the legislature they analyse. Most studies focus on actual assignments but usually do not pay close attention to the *assignment phase* itself. However, this is a crucial phase to consider when providing a complete account on who gets what (and why). In this phase partisan influences become visible (either in the way that preferences for committees are evaluated or not and, if so, what happens when there is a divergence between wished of the legislator and the actual assignment). To provide more insight into this negotiation phase, we could rely on committee request data (an often used strategy in the US literature). However, given that these are quite problematic because they are usually confidential or simply not kept for researchers to be accessed, qualitative research might be of help to provide insight into the informal discussions between legislators and the PPG leadership.

The results of many studies outside of the US context hint at the importance of country-specific patterns as an addition to the general framework. The presence of several country-specific factors is an important revelation which has 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, future research needs to leave room for such idiosyncratic mechanisms. Again, the use of qualitative methods and empowering



legislators to explain their own committee assignments can be highly beneficial to identify these mechanisms.

Lastly, after studying committee assignments other important questions arise which need to be tackled. As was mentioned above, the *post*-assignment phase, *i.e.* the actual decision-making processes and the room for manoeuvre of committee members are hardly studied so far (but see Damgaard and Mattson, 2004; Settembri and Neuhold, 2009; Mickler, 2018). Committee assignments are arguably most relevant when committees are empowered in the legislative and oversight process. In fact, the ability of committees to facilitate legislators' and parties' electoral, office and policy goals likely impacts the degree to which members demand committee assignments.

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