Personal Ambitions, Expertise and Parties’ Control: Understanding Committee Assignment in the Italian Chamber of Deputies

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Abstract: In this paper we look at committee assignment focusing on the extent to which MPs’ desires to become members of certain committees are fulfilled. Our theoretical argument is based on the assumption that legislators pursue individual goals, which interact with party leaders’ ones. To test our hypotheses we use original survey data about elected candidates in the Italian Parliament collected immediately after the 2013 general election. Our main findings highlight that individual preferences driven by distributive interests are more likely to be accommodated in case of loyal party members. On the contrary, party loyalty does not seem to affect committee assignment when MPs’ choices are driven by expertise-based motivations.

Keywords: legislative committees, committee assignment, political parties, party unity, expertise, Italian parliament

– First draft –

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**Introduction**

The committee system is a crucial feature of modern legislatures. Classic approaches to legislative organization focus on committee structure to understand legislative proceedings and outcomes, generating different predictions about patterns of committee assignment. The distributive approach suggests that legislators pursuing re-election will seek to become members of those committees where they can serve the specific interests of their constituents (Shepsle 1979; Weingast and Marshall 1988). Alternatively, according to the informational perspective, legislators will seek to become members of those committees where they can better exploit their policy expertise, acquired through their educational and occupational background (Krehbiel 1990, 1991; Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987, 1989). Finally a party-centred approach suggests that party leaders will use committee assignments to increase party unity and thereby their control over the legislature (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Cox and McCubbins 1993).

These competing views have been extensively debated with regard to the US Congress, and subsequently used to investigate committee structure and resources in different institutional settings (see Martin 2014 for a review). Overall, empirical research does not seem to bring clear-cut evidence in favour of either distributive, informative or partisan explanations, suggesting that all three approaches have some predictive power in explaining patterns of committee assignment in legislatures. Indeed, thinking about the compatibility of the different approaches, Shepsle and Weingast (1994: 175) claimed that, “[…] although the various authors of this literature have sought to differentiate their respective products, a compelling case for exclusivity has not been made and perhaps should not be”.

In this paper we start from this assertion, and assume that committee assignment is the outcome of an interplay between individual legislators’ aspirations and party control. It is widely recognized that parties play an irreplaceable role especially in parliamentary systems
where they need to coordinate legislative behaviour in order to ensure survival and functioning of governments (Laver 2006). As Damgaard (1995) pointed out several years ago, committee assignment is certainly one of the instruments through which party leaders control their party members.

We look at committee assignment focusing on the extent to which MPs’ desires to become members of certain committees are fulfilled. Our argument is based on the assumption that legislators pursue individual goals, which interact with party leaders’ ones. Legislators may want to become members of a specific committee for several reasons such as those highlighted within the main approaches to the study of legislative behavior. On the other hand, in parliamentary systems, MPs are usually assigned to committees by party leaders. We expect that party leaders will assign party members to different committees in such a way to further parties’ collective goals. This implies that legislators’ individual aims will be achieved only in so far as they help to enhance party goals.

To test our hypotheses we use an original survey of elected candidates to the Italian Parliament. Our data, collected immediately after the 2013 general election, provide information about Italian MPs at the individual level: preferences about legislative committees’ assignment, expertise, past political experience, educational and occupational background, ideological preferences and evaluations of relations within the party. Moreover, our data allow us to assess parties’ positions and preferences.

Our paper is organized as follows. Section one summarizes our theoretical argument and introduces the hypotheses we derive from it. Section two briefly describes the committee system in the Italian parliament. Data and methods are illustrated in section three. We present our results in section four and discuss them in the concluding section.
**Theory and hypotheses**

Members of legislative assemblies have personal goals that they pursue when acting as representatives. As seminal studies of legislative behaviour have emphasized, legislators typically want to enhance their prospects of re-election, as well as to influence policy-making (Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974). Legislators may pursue these goals by means of a variety of activities, such as introducing bills and amendments (Mattson 1995), delivering speeches on the floor (Proksch and Slapin 2014; Giannetti and Pedrazzani 2016), presenting parliamentary questions and interpellations (Russo 2011; Wiberg 1995), and even switching strategically to more advantageous parliamentary party groups (Heller and Mershon 2005; Pinto 2015). Becoming a member of a certain committee and carrying out committee work are among these activities, especially in legislatures where committees are endowed with relevant prerogatives in the lawmaking process.

However, party leaders are commonly assumed to act in such a way to ensure party unity in committees and more generally in the legislative setting (Cox and McCubbins 1993). Party leaders are usually very interested in coordinating party members’ behaviour in order to ensure party effectiveness throughout the legislative process. This is especially true in parliamentary democracies, where governments can enact their policy goals only in so far as they control cohesive legislative majorities (Laver 2006). Party unity is valuable also for opposition parties when attempting to effectively challenge the incumbent government (Giannetti and Laver 2009).

Our general argument is that parliamentary parties’ leaders will not let legislators self-select to committees as both the distributive and informational approaches suggest. Party leaders will allow MPs to become members of the committee they desire if such assignments

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1 Leaders’ incentives for maintaining party unity do not depend just on electoral considerations. Governing parties’ leaders cannot secure the support of a legislative majority and the enactment of the government’s electoral program unless they control a disciplined bloc of legislators. In turn, opposition parties’ leaders can hardly pose a credible threat to the stability of the government coalition if they do not rely on the loyalty of parliamentary parties’ members.
will not undermine party effectiveness in the legislative process (Damgaard 1995). When making assignment decisions, party leaders will reward “reliable” or “loyal” party members by allowing them to join the committee they desire (McElroy 2006). In addition, choosing the “right” members of committees becomes more crucial in committees deemed as particularly important for the party. Following this theoretical argument, we derive hypotheses about how party leaders can be expected to deal with possible tensions between what individual MPs desires, based on the motivations highlighted above, and what party leaders think is desirable for pursuing their party’s collective goals.

As implied by the distributive approach to legislative organization, legislators have personal goals that can be different from the policy programme of the party they belong to. This is because individual legislators often have various attachments to constituents, interest groups, private firms, professional associations, public institutions, and so on. In other words, the electoral constituency of representatives can be defined in geographical or functional terms. Legislators would then like to be assigned to the committee that has jurisdiction over the policies they (and their respective voters) care most about, as this will allow them to distribute benefits to their constituents and increase their re-election prospects (Shepsle 1979; Weingast, Shepsle and Johnsen 1981; Weingast and Marshall 1988). If individual legislators’ desires were fulfilled, committees would consist of policy “outliers”, or more specifically, “high demanders” for whatever benefits each committee provides. As a result, the legislation produced by the parliament would be biased toward particularistic interests, overproducing bills with a regional or narrowly sectional specific-benefits nature.\(^2\) In light of Cox and McCubbins’ (1993) party-centred approach, self-selection by interested legislators could damage the unity of the party. For this reason, we expect that the “distributive” desires of

\(^2\) Another consequence, which however is not the focus of this paper, is that in aggregate the legislature would spend more in each policy area than the median legislator might prefer.
individual legislators will be satisfied by their party leaders only in so far as a legislator is a loyal or is a non-extreme member of the party. We hence hypothesize the following:

**H1: Individual legislators’ desires to join a particular committee where they could serve their constituents’ interests are more likely to be fulfilled by party leaders the closer a legislator is in ideological terms to the position of the party.**

The informational approach to legislative organization implies that those representatives who can specialize at lower costs – thanks to their professional training or other prior experience – in a committee are more likely to become members of that committee (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987, 1989; Krehbiel 1991). For instance, a politician whose (previous) profession is working as a lawyer, magistrate or judge, will probably aim to join the justice committee; medical personnel are more likely to prefer the health committee, and so on. However, legislators with prior expertise in a given area are also very likely to generate huge information asymmetries between committee members and party leaders (as well as, more in general, between committee members and their colleagues who are not member of the same committee). On the one hand, committee members acting behind closed doors are supposed to act as agents of their party. On the other hand, if a legislator is a policy expert or a “natural specialist” (Mattson and Strøm 1995) in a certain committee, their principal can find it difficult to detect deviations from the party line. When working on legislation in a committee, a natural specialist is expected to pursue a technically feasible policy that is closest to their party’s policy position. However, if thanks to their expertise members can move policy at their discretion when sitting in a committee then party leaders may be unable to understand if they are toeing the party line. The strategic advantage enjoyed by policy experts is enhanced when committee membership provides easy access to
information through formal committee hearings, and facilitates developing relationships with outside interest groups and executive agencies in issue networks (Damgaard 1995).

Such informational asymmetry would not be a serious problem for parties if the ideological preferences of natural specialists sitting in committees were aligned to the policy positions of their party. In this case, policy experts would indeed work for a technically feasible solution that is the closest to their party line. On the contrary, intra-party tensions can emerge if a natural specialist is an extreme member of her party because their work in a committee can undermine the party’s effectiveness. As highlighted in the literature on delegation, information asymmetries are a major source of agency loss if combined with policy divergence between principals and agents (Strøm 2003). In this view, an instrument at the party leaders’ disposal is their authority to choose agents before the delegation takes place: that is their power to decide, among the possible candidates for a committee seat, who is going to become a member of that committee. We expect that party leaders will minimize adverse selection problems by fulfilling the desires of natural specialists only when they are not ideologically extreme members of the party. Therefore, our second hypothesis is the following:

\[ H2: \text{Legislators’ individual desires to join a particular committee where they are policy experts are more likely to be fulfilled by party leaders the closer a legislator is in ideological terms to the party position.} \]

The two hypotheses we have put forward rely on the idea that individual desires concerning committee assignment can often be at odds with party collective goals, which are safeguarded by party leaders. Following this line of reasoning, we would also expect party leaders to put greater effort to protect party goals the higher is the importance for the party of
the policy area over which committees have jurisdiction. However, coordination problems within parties tend to increase for more salient committees simply because more legislators ask to become members of them. Needless to say, not all committees are equally valuable for a parliamentary party. When a committee is really important for a party many legislators from that party, regardless of ideological proximity to the party leadership, will ask to join that committee. This implies that a loyal party member is less likely to see her request fulfilled the more her preferred committee is salient for the party, as many other loyal members are making similar requests to their party leaders. The same holds for extreme members of the party: ceteris paribus, their requests to sit in their preferred committee are less likely to be fulfilled by party leaders because many other party members make similar claims.

In other words, MPs’ requests can be incompatible in case of the most important committees, which usually attract interest from more candidates than those that can be accommodated given the limited number of committee seats available. Moreover, all committees in the legislature have to be filled, including those that are not very attractive for party members. This means, for example, that not all members of a rural party can sit in the agriculture committee, and some of them will have to sit, for instance, in the defence committee. When members of that rural party asks to join the agriculture committee for pursuing their personal goals, they can expect to have rather low chances to be assigned to that committee, even if they have preferences aligned with those of the party. The same legislators would have a much better chance if they asked to join a committee that is considered less important for their party, i.e. in this example the defence committee. To sum up, the more a committee is important for a party, the more committee assignment will be determined by party leadership concerns vis-à-vis individual legislators’ preferences. On the basis of this pragmatic argument, we expect the following:
H3: Individual legislators’ desires to join a particular committee – whether they are driven by distributive interests or by policy expertise – are less likely to be fulfilled by party leaders the greater is the importance of that committee for the party.

The committee system’s organization in Italy

Before illustrating how we empirically evaluate the three hypotheses put forward in the previous section, we briefly describe the organization of parliamentary committees and the assignment process in the Italian parliament. Legislative business is organized through a system of specialized standing committees, with prerogatives guaranteed both in the Italian Constitution and in the Rules of Procedures of the Chamber of Deputies. Italian committees are considered among the strongest in contemporary legislatures (Della Sala 1993; Lees and Shaw 1979; Martin 2011; Mattson and Strøm 1995; Strøm 1990; Zucchini 2001). As in many parliamentary democracies, committees in both branches of the Italian parliament have jurisdictions that closely correspond to ministerial portfolios (Carroll and Cox 2012), and have the authority to convene hearings and summon witnesses (Mattson and Strøm 1995). In addition, Italian permanent committees retain extensive lawmaking powers: they can amend all types of legislation including government-sponsored bills, and according to the “decentralized procedure” which can be invoked in case of wide consensus in the assembly can even pass bills into law without sending them to the floor for examination. These institutional arrangements imply that becoming a member of a preferred committee can be crucial for enhancement of an MP’s personal goals.

The number of standing committees in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate is currently 14 (see the Appendix for the committees’ list). Each committee is responsible for scrutinising bills dealing with its area of competence. There are, however, a few committees
which have further competences that go beyond their specific policy area. These are known as “filter” committees, whose advice on the first draft of a bill is required before starting an examination of the proposed legislation. According to the Rules of Procedures of the Chamber of Deputies (Articles 74 and 75), the filter committees are the following: I – Constitutional, Presidency of the Council of Ministers and Interior Affairs; V – Budget, Treasury and Planning; XI – Public and Private Sector Employment. In what follows, we focus on committees’ organization in the Chamber. However, similar rules apply in the Senate.

With regard to committees’ composition, Italy follows a general rule in Western Europe, whereby proportional representation of parliamentary party groups is almost always respected. In particular, Article 19 of the Rules of Procedure of the Chamber states that in each committee the share of committee posts for each parliamentary party should reflect its share of legislative seats, and that no legislator can be member of more than one committee.

The assignment of Italian legislators to committees seems to be heavily influenced by parliamentary party leaders (Manzella 2003: 134-137; Traversa: 230-235). According to Article 19 of the Rules of Procedure of the Chamber, upon being established each parliamentary group has to appoint a number of members to each committee, immediately informing the directing authority (or “Bureau”) of the Chamber. The President of the Chamber is in charge of adjusting committee assignment according to the proportionality rule, taking into account minor parties and the Mixed Group.3 Reasonably, coordination within each group in assignment decisions is likely to be carried out by party leaders.

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3 The Mixed Group is a parliamentary group in both Houses of the Italian Parliament composed of legislators of those parties that failed to reach the minimum threshold required to form a parliamentary group (20 members). According to the new regulation approved by the Chamber of Deputies in 1997, ten legislators can form a subgroup in the Mixed Group. However, even smaller subgroups are usually allowed to form by the President of the Chamber. The President is in charge of distributing among the committees the deputies belonging to these minor parties in the Mixed Group which have fewer members than the number of committees.
Other institutional details indicate a prominent role for party leaders vis-à-vis ordinary party members in the assignment process. First, party groups can ask the directing authority of the Chamber to revise the composition of committees (Article 12). Second, every party group may, for a specific bill, substitute a member of a committee with one from another committee, provided the committee chair has been notified (Article 19). Finally, committees have to be renewed every two years from the date of their establishment and their members may (not) be confirmed by party groups (Article 20). In sum, Italian parliamentary parties’ leaders exert control on committee assignment and can sanction “rebel” committee members by removing them. Similar rules and procedures can be found in other West European democracies, where real decisions on committee appointments are, in fact, made by parliamentary parties (Damgaard 1995).

**Research design, data and methods**

To assess the explanatory value of legislative organization theories, empirical research on committee assignment in the US Congress has played a crucial role (Adler and Lapinski 1997; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Groseclose 1994; Krehbiel 1990, 1991; Shepsle 1979). Outside the US, the appointment of committee members has been extensively investigated in the European Parliament (Bowler and Farrell 1995; McElroy 2006; Whitaker 2001; Yordanova 2009). Other scholars have explored patterns of committee assignment in national legislatures such as Brazil, Argentina, Costa Rica and Venezuela (Pereira and Mueller 2004; Crisp et al. 2009), the Turkish National Grand Assembly (Çiftçi, Forrest, and Tekin 2008), the Danish Folketing (Hansen 2010), the Irish Dáil (Hansen 2011), and the German Bundestag (Mickler 2013).

Unlike most previous works dealing with committee assignment, our analysis does not focus directly on testing of the “classic theories” of legislative organization. As stated in
the previous section, we assume that different individual motivations play a role. We are interested in exploring the interplay between legislators’ individual preferences over committees and party leaders’ concerns for the promotion of party goals throughout the legislative process. For this reason, we base our research on the self-evaluations of MPs when asked to indicate which committee would most prefer to be members of. Then we compare such preferences with their actual assignment.

Such a research strategy has been made possible thanks to data gathered through the 2013 Italian Candidate Survey (ICS, Di Virgilio et al. 2015b), which included a series of relevant questions targeting potential and elected legislators. The ICS collected the original survey data with the aim of gaining new insights about the role of political elites, and specifically candidates for the Chamber of Deputies in the last Italian general election held in February 2013.\textsuperscript{4} Focusing on the relationships between candidates, parties, and voters, the ICS questionnaire covers several topics such as campaigning, recruitment, career patterns, and opinions about a number of issues, including a series of questions about committee preferences submitted only to elected candidates. Overall, 141 MPs (out of 630) representing the eight main political groups in the Chamber of Deputies participated in the survey, yielding a response rate of 22.4%.

We constructed our dependent variables as follows. Legislators were asked to answer two separate questions: a) “In which committee do you think you can best serve your constituents’ interests?” and b) “Taking into account your professional and political experience, in which committee do you think you could best perform as a member of parliament?”\textsuperscript{5} The first question captures the rationale behind the distributive logic, where legislators should opt for those committees which allow them to distribute particularistic

\textsuperscript{4} The fieldwork took place in the aftermath of the Italian general election of February 2013. For more information about the survey see Di Virgilio et al. 2015b.

\textsuperscript{5} More than a half of respondents indicated the same committee when answering question a) and question b).
benefits to their constituents. The second one is consistent with the informational rationale, according to which committee selection should be driven by MPs’ personal expertise and knowledge. Then, we compared MP’s answers to the previous questions with their actual committee assignments. For data about MPs’ committee assignments we used the following question: “Which standing committee are you currently member of?” If a legislator is a member of the same committee indicated in answering question a), our first dependent variable takes a value of “1”, otherwise zero (Match D). If a legislator is a member of the same committee indicated in answering question b) our second dependent variable takes the value of “1”, otherwise zero (Match I). We counted 59.0% and 61.6% of positive matches according to the distributive and expertise-based responses respectively.

Due to the dichotomous nature of our dependent variables, we use a logistic regression model to assess the relationship between group loyalty and committee importance for the party to which a legislator belongs with the likelihood to observe a positive match between self-selection into preferred committees and real assignments. To test our hypotheses, we performed two separate analyses. In both models, according to the latent-variable formulation of the logistic regression models, the dependent variable(s) (Match D* or Match I*) measures the propensity to observe a positive match for legislators included in our data set. Based on the hypotheses put forward in the theoretical section, this propensity is then modelled as a function of two main independent variables: group loyalty, importance for the party of legislators’ preferred committee, plus a series of control variables.

The ideological distance between MPs and the parties to which they belong is used as a proxy for group loyalty. More precisely, our first main independent variable is measured as

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6 We cross-checked legislators’ answers using information available on the website of the Chamber of Deputies (http://www.camera.it/leg17/28).
7 When logistic regression is formulated as a latent-variable model, the dependent variable is assumed to be a continuous latent variable which takes on values less than 0 when the event does not verify, and greater than 0 when it does, while the error term is distributed according to a standard logistic distribution.
the absolute difference between a legislator’s self-reported left-right positions on a 0 (left) to 10 (right) scale and the mean score of left-right self-placements of all the MPs belonging to the same party.\textsuperscript{8} In comparison to other indicators of loyalty based on ex-post voting behaviour used in the literature (see for example McElroy 2006 and Yordanova 2009), our measure does not suffer from potential endogeneity problems. This is because our loyalty measure is derived from survey data and are completely exogenous to the process of committee assignment. Moreover, scaled ideological scores based on individual voting records do not guarantee measurement of true policy preferences since in most national parliaments legislative voting is driven by government-opposition dynamics rather than by left-right ideological positions (Hix and Noury 2015). Since individual legislators entering in the two models are the same, our measure of loyalty has unique values of the mean and standard deviation (0.86 and 0.73 respectively).

To measure our second main independent variable, i.e. importance for the party of MPs’ preferred committee, we rely on a question included in the ICS survey asking “Could you assign a score on a 1 (not important) to 10 (very important) scale to the standing committees indicated below based on their importance for the political goals of your parliamentary group?” We then aggregated individual scores for each party and each committee to build a measure of importance that, as far as we know, has never been employed in empirical research on committee assignment. This variable computes how valuable the committee preferred by an MP is for the party to which she belongs. Because each legislator included into the analysis could indicate a different committee in answering question a) and question b), the covariate has different values for the mean and standard

\textsuperscript{8} Our results do not change substantially by employing the median instead of the mean of left-right self-placements as a proxy of parties’ positions. Both the mean and the median correlate very highly with experts’ estimates of left-right parties’ placements (see Di Virgilio et al. 2015a, 2015b).
deviation in the two models (distributive preferences: 8.42 and 0.84; expertise-based preferences: 8.37 and 0.79 respectively).

Table 1 reports the most important and the least important committees for the four main parties represented in Chamber of Deputies. Committee I – Constitutional, Presidency of the Council of Ministers and Interior Affairs – is among the three most important committees for each parliamentary party. There is a variation across parties in the ranking of committees. For example, left wing parties such as PD and SEL attached more saliency to the committee dealing with employment, while centre-right political parties like SC and PDL valued more committees having jurisdiction over budget and justice policies. Conversely, M5S, a party which greatly emphasizes environmental issues in its electoral manifesto (Pedrazzani and Pinto 2015) considered the environment, territory and public works committee as being very important.

To single out the effects of our main covariates, we also take into account a number of control variables that are assumed to affect the process of committee assignment. First, as stated above, in Italy committees are appointed in a way that reflects the proportional strength of the parties represented in the parliament, which allocate their members among the different committees accordingly (Article 19 of the Rules of Procedures). For this reason, we include a covariate measuring parties’ seat share in the Chamber of Deputies. This variable has a mean of 0.32 and a standard deviation of 0.18. Second, all other things being equal, senior MPs may be able to secure a better position than their colleagues. However, as highlighted in previous research (Bowler and Farrell 1995; Hausemer 2006; Yordanova 2009), seniority should matter only in terms of committee incumbency, since it reveals a kind of “property
“rights” of certain MPs over their committee membership. As a consequence, we include two dichotomous control variables identifying incumbents with and without past experience in the committee they indicated when answering questions a) and b). Regarding MPs with past experience in their preferred committee, 12% of the legislators included in our survey data set are incumbents who indicated the same committee in which they sit in the past when answering question a). We found the same percentage of incumbents who indicated the same committee in which they sit in the past when answering question b) (12%). We identified about 14% of incumbent legislators who – when asked which committee best serves their distributive interests – indicated a different committee from the one they sit in the past (incumbents without past experience in their preferred committee). We found the same percentage of incumbents without past experience in their preferred committee (14%) for those legislators who indicated their preferred committee on the basis of their expertise and knowledge. Third, we add a continuous variable measuring the age of the legislators included in our data set (the median age is 47 years). Finally, we took into account education and gender of legislators, incorporating in our model two dummies, identifying female MPs (27%) and MPs with a graduate or post-graduate education (71.6%).

Results

The logistic regression results are plotted in Figure 1, which displays the log odds estimated by our models based on the distributive (M1) and expertise-based (M2) motivations of legislators. A positive (negative) coefficient indicates that the variable increases (decreases) the likelihood of observing a positive match between self-selection into preferred committees.

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9 For example, if an incumbent legislator who previously served in the committee XIII – Agriculture indicates committee XIII – Agriculture when answering question a) or b), she is coded as an incumbent with past experience in her preferred committee. On the contrary, if the same legislator indicates a different committee such as committee XII – Social Affairs when answering question a) or b), she is coded as an incumbent without past experience in her preferred committee.
and real assignments. When the confidence intervals are on the right or on the left of the zero line the covariates' effect is statistically significant either at the 95% or 90% confidence level depending on the thickness of horizontal lines. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, loyal MPs have a higher likelihood of joining a committee that they judge best for distributing particular benefits to their constituents. Contrary to Hypothesis 2, the ideological distance between MPs and their party does not have any significant impact on the probability of observing a positive match between the committee legislators chose according to their personal expertise and knowledge and their actual committee appointments. Finally, consistent with Hypothesis 3, regardless of distributive or expertise-based motivations, legislators’ committee preferences are less likely to be pleased as the committee importance for the party increases.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 2 shows the predicted probability (with 95% confidence intervals) of observing a positive match between individual committee preferences and real appointments when distributive motivations are taken into account in terms of different values of the group loyalty variable holding all other covariates in the model constant. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, a loyal legislator driven by distributive motivations has a higher probability to see her desires of joining a particular committee fulfilled by the party to which she belongs. When legislators’ ideal points almost coincide with the party leader’ one (i.e. when the left-right distance between MPs and the party mean is near zero) the probability that individual preferences match with actual committee assignments is 62% [50%-75%]. As the ideological distance between MPs and the party mean increases, this probability drops. Moving one step on the right or on the left of the party line reduces the predicted probability to 48% [39%-57%]. When the distance is equal to the maximum value observed in our data (3.24), the
likelihood of observing a positive match falls to 20% [.6%-39%]. In other words, when the value of loyalty moves from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean, the probability that MPs’ self-selection into preferred committees coincides with real assignments decreases by 56%. Contrary to our expectations (Hypothesis 2), the same does not happen when expertise-based motivations are taken into account. According to our results there is no difference between loyal and disloyal legislators when policy expertise is driving committee self selection.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 3 plots the predicted probability of observing a match between MPs’ preferred committees and real appointments against all the values of the committee importance variable, while holding the other covariates in the model constant. Consistent to Hypothesis 3, individual legislators’ desires to enter a particular committee are less likely to be fulfilled as the committee’s importance for the party increases. Preferred committee importance exerts a negative effect on both our dependent variables. However, it has a stronger impact on the propensity of a positive match between distributive motivations and current appointments, while it is barely significant on the propensity of a positive match between expertise-motivations and current appointments (at 90% level). As far as expertise-based motivations are concerned, the likelihood for a legislator to enter in a committee to which a party attaches a saliency score just above 6 is about 71% [57%-86%]. This figure is higher, i.e. 82% [65%-99%], when distributive interests are taken into account. When committee importance for the party approaches its maximum value (10), the probability to observe a positive match between self-selection and real assignment falls down by 51% when expertise drives the
choice of the preferred committee and by 70% when distributive interests are prominent, reaching a predicted value of 35% [14%-56%] and 25% [0.7%-42%] respectively.

[Figure 3 about here]

Among the control variables, both the covariates associated with committee membership, incumbency and age, exert a significant impact in both model specifications. As stated in the previous section, we include two dummies identifying incumbents with and without past experience in their preferred committee. However, incumbent legislators with past experience in their preferred committee are dropped from the analysis because of perfect prediction. In other words, either they are driven by distributive interests or by policy expertise, incumbent MPs who indicate as their preferred committee the one in which they sat down in the past are always pleased by their party leaders. On the contrary, parties tend to “punish” those incumbent legislators who indicate a committee different from the one in which they served in the past: incumbents without past experience in their preferred committee (i.e. with experience in a different one) have a probability to see their desires fulfilled by their parties’ leaders which is 65% lower for those MPs who are driven by distributive goals and 94% lower for those who are driven by their expertise respectively. Together these results indicate that parties appreciate greater committee specialization, especially when information-based motivations drive legislators’ choice. Regarding age, Figure 1 shows that older MPs have a higher chance to enter in their preferred committees. Finally, the likelihood of observing a positive match between self-selection and real

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10 Together with several missing values in the variable measuring left-right ideological distance, this is the reason why the number of legislators included in our models is lower in comparison to the figures reported in the text.
assignment is higher for legislators who are university graduates only when information driven motivations are taken into account (at 90% confidence level).

**Conclusions**

In this paper we examined patterns of committee assignment in the Italian Chamber of Deputies in light of the main approaches to legislative organization developed in the literature. We adopted a novel research design by using survey data about elected representatives in the 2013 Italian general elections. Our data allowed us to compare individual legislators’ expressed preferences over committees with their actual assignment. Our main findings highlight that individual preferences driven by distributive interests are more likely to be accommodated in case of loyal party members. On the contrary, party loyalty does not seem to affect committee assignment when MPs are driven by expertise-based motivations.

An increasing importance of party control when distributive interests are at stake is not surprising, as individual legislators’ aims may conflict with party leaders’ goals. Becoming members of those committees where MPs can serve the specific interests of their voters can be conceived as a kind of constituency service. Providing particularistic benefits and services to specific groups can increase legislators’ likelihood to be re-elected through a personal vote. Thus, letting loyal legislators build a personal reputation by distributing targeted benefits may be helpful for parties as legislators’ constituency activism can advantage their electoral fortunes. At the same time, loyalty ensures the party against any problem that may arise from a strong personal reputation. On the contrary, MPs far from their party ideological position who join a committee where they can serve distributive interests can become a serious problem for their parties: personal reputation makes politicians more autonomous in legislative activities such as voting behaviour. Even though, in a system like
the Italian one – where parties have considerable control over the entire process of political representation – leaders can eventually prevent such independent legislators from running in their own party lists, these legislators could still cause trouble by switching to other parties or building personal lists to compete in the next elections.

Conversely, in delegating policy responsibility to members driven by expertise-based motivations, parties seem to give most weight to indicators of experience and knowledge, i.e. age, education, and having served in the same committee in the past. Our results suggest that party leaders value loyalty when legislators are inclined to use committee based resources to gain distributive advantages; however, this does not happen when legislators may use their knowledge to effectively pursue their own policy goals even if these differ from those of their parties. Parties seem to consider the consequences of potential “policy drift” that may derive from expertise less problematic. Why is this so? One possible reason is that party leaders can use a wider array of ex post control mechanisms – such as those used in the Italian parliament – to mitigate the delegation problems, keeping members to toe the party line even if they have different policy preferences.

Finally, we found that party control is higher when a committee is more important for the party. Legislators’ committee preferences are less likely to be pleased as the committee importance for the party increases, regardless of distributive or expertise-based motivations of legislators. In our view this simply derives from the fact that important committees attract the interest of a large number of legislators and, all other things being equal, not everyone can access them. Thus, our results are coherent with the realistic view that party leaders have to accommodate MPs’ requests for the most important committees as well as to fill the less attractive ones.

Despite data limitations, our work contributes to shed light on committee composition and intra-party relationships. Our research strategy shows that survey data can be a valuable
instrument to explore patterns of committee assignment. Collecting cross-country data would allow us to overcome the weaknesses of a single case study and examine the interplay among individual legislators’ goals and partisan effect in different institutional settings. Moreover, future comparative studies would offer the opportunity of exploring further avenues of research such as the relationship between committee assignment and individual legislators’ voting behaviour in parliaments and the role of parties in distributing rewards and sanctions among committee members.
References


### Table 1 – Committee importance for political parties

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<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>committee</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Parties are ordered according to their left-right positions.
Figure 1 – Logistic regressions of observing a positive match between MPs’ self-selection into preferred committees and real assignments.

- Group loyalty (LR distance between MP and party mean)
- Preferred committee importance for the party
- Party's share of seats
- Incumbent without past experience in the preferred committee
- Age (10 years)
- University degree
- Female

Logistic regression with robust standard errors
Log odds for constant term are not reported
M1: N=106; M2: N=111

Distribution preferences (M1)
Expertise-based preferences (M2)
Figure 2 – The impact of group loyalty.
Figure 3 – The impact of preferred committee importance for the party.

[Distributive preferences graph]

[Expertise-based preferences graph]
## Appendix – Standing committees in the Chamber of Deputies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standing committee</th>
<th>Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I – Constitutional, Presidency of the Council of Ministers and Interior Affairs</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II – Justice</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III – Foreign and European Community Affairs</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV – Defence</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V – Budget, Treasury and Planning</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI – Finance</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII – Culture, Science and Education</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII – Environment, Territory and Public Works</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX – Transport, Post and Telecommunications</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X – Economic Activities, Trade and Tourism</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XI – Public and Private Sector Employment</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XII – Social Affairs</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIII – Agriculture</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIV – European Union Policies</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total                                                   | 629     |

Note: The President of the Chamber of Deputies does not join any committee.