Do parliamentary party groups put brakes on their ideological outliers?

“Party discipline” and ideological outliers in the Belgian Chamber from 2007 to 2010

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All comments are most welcome.

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**Introduction**

This paper concentrates on the effect that ‘party discipline’ has on the parliamentary behavior of individual MPs. Namely, we want to explore whether and how ideological distance to one’s party group influences individual legislative activity. In other words, our question is: Do parliamentary party groups put brakes on their ideological outliers?

In certain contexts parties have, as a convenient modelling assumption, assumed to be unitary actors, for example when a unique policy position for an entire party (Budge, Klingemann, and Volkens 2001; Volkens, McDonald, and Klingemann 2007) has been used in order to predict the most probable or stable coalition formations (Laver and Shepsle 1996). In reality, it is well known that political parties are far from being unitary actors (Back 2008; Bernauer and Brauninger 2009; Giannetti and Benoit 2008; König 2006; Meyer 2012). Parties are made up of individuals with their individual policy preferences that may or may not be identical. This is not only true for the mass of party activists, but also for the comparatively small number of individuals that form a party’s parliamentary group. Even if we assume that, on average, an MP is ideologically closer to the other MPs of his party and farther away from the MPs of other parties, it would be highly unrealistic to deny the existence of policy differences within a parliamentary group (Kam 2001).

Yet, the real extent of policy differences within a parliamentary party group is usually hard to determine for the outside observer. Especially European parliamentary parties want to hide frictions and demonstrate uniform behavior to the public. Voters refrain from voting parties which they consider less united (Kam 2009). So, party whips try to discipline their rank-and-file into cohesive behavior by avoiding that within-party dissent becomes manifest. For this paper we call this constant effort to maintain cohesive behavior of a party group as ‘party discipline’.
From a normative point of view, there may be pros and cons to ‘party discipline’. On the one hand, it permits stability and smooth government action. On the other hand, it compromises the freedom of individual MPs to act according to their own preferences. Opinions diverge over the question which of the two principles is to be privileged and to what extent. Therefore it is useful to know about the degree to which ‘party discipline’ actually blocks individual MPs and which ones.

As interesting and important the subject might be there are some pitfalls regarding the empirical testing of theoretically derived hypotheses. As has been said, parliamentary parties usually try not to expose their internal disagreement to the public. This represents a problem for researchers who are interested in the effect of an MP's ideological distance to his group on his parliamentary activity. While the dependent variable can be observed by simply taking a look at his parliamentary record, researchers face problems with the independent variable, the ideological disagreement between an MP and his party group. Several techniques have been applied with the goal of inferring MPs' policy positions from observed behavior, such as roll call analysis (Poole and Rosenthal 1985) or content analysis (Diermeier et al. 2012).

The first method seems to be more appropriate for presidential than for parliamentary systems where party discipline and the opposition-government gap produce highly uniform voting behavior. In this context, RCV analysis can lead to underestimation of the ‘real’ degree of within-party difference. Given that a parliamentary speech has less immediate impact than a parliamentary vote one can assume that parliamentary groups refrain to a lesser degree MPs in parliamentary debate than in voting. Proksch and Slapin (2012) develop and test a strategic model which shows that positions taken from parliamentary speeches will often underestimate the degree of internal disagreement. This is because party leaders will try to prevent as much as possible their most dissenting peers from speaking in parliament on too many opportunities. As
Proksch and Slapin (2012) put it “latent party cohesion is inversely related to party positions communicated in legislative speeches” (p. 535).

In this paper, we try to overcome these shortcomings by using MPs’ ideological self-placement and ideological distance to their own party group instead of derived measures as independent variable. These self-placements come from Belgian candidates for the 2007 federal elections and where collected in the context of the Comparative Candidate Survey. At the difference of roll call or content data these self-placements have not yet undergone the filter of ‘party discipline’ and are closer to a ‘true’ representation of MP’s own preferences. As dependent variable we use information on MPs’ legislative activity in the 2007-2010 legislature.

The paper will proceed as follows. In the next section we will formulate hypotheses on possible explanatory factors for the explanation of differences in individual legislative activity. The following section will serve to present our data and explain the operationalization of our variables. At this point, we will also explain why Belgium is a good candidate to test our model. In the next-to-last section we will then present the results of our analysis before some concluding remarks will be given.

**Theory & hypotheses**

Our main interest lies in the role that “party discipline” has in explaining the variance in MPs’ legislative activity. Thereby, we want to know whether “party discipline” has a different impact on ideological outliers or dissenters and if an MP’s individual attitude to “party discipline” influences his level of legislative activity. We formulate two core hypotheses with regard to this central argument. Additionally we will formulate several complementary hypotheses.

In parliamentary systems parties usually try to show cohesive behavior. Though, this cohesion is in many cases not the result of “divine harmony” between the

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1 http://www.comparativecandidates.org/node/1
individuals who form a party group. Rather it is the party whips who try to ensure cohesion and avoid dissenting behavior. The most probable “victims” of party discipline are those MPs who are farthest away from the party line. They may be, for instance, personally reminded by party whips not to translate personal disagreement over a given issue into a vote against the party line (De Winter and Dumont 2000). With respect to parliamentary debates, Proksch and Slapin (2012) have found evidence that dissenters are given less time to deliver speeches in parliament in systems where party reputation plays a more important role in re-election. What is true for delivering parliamentary speeches should principally also apply to legislative activity. It seems even straightforward that dissenting MPs are more motivated than their colleagues to propose private member bills to signal their distinct personal point of view to the public. But this is exactly what party leaders presumably do not want to happen. Dissenters should therefore be more curtailed in their liberty to propose bills. As a consequence our first hypothesis states as follows:

**H1:** The greater the ideological distance between an MP and his parliamentary group is the less active the MP will be.

Independently from their general policy positions MPs may also have their own opinion on ‘party discipline’ itself. Some MPs may be in favor of “party discipline” as it assures smooth working and cohesion. Others attach a higher value to the link between themselves and their respective voters as being closer to their idea of democracy. We think that MPs’ position on this issue affects their parliamentary activity in the following way:

**H2:** The more critical a MP is with respect to “party discipline” the more active the MP will be.

Besides our main hypotheses we will test two control hypotheses with respect to an MP's seniority, and his belonging to the parliamentary majority.
In detail, we predict that majority MPs are less active bill proposers. Party discipline should be more important to government parties than to the opposition. Generally a government is expected to command its numbers. Too much visible dissent in the coalition may be interpreted as a sign of instability or government crisis and punished by public opinion. Besides, in multiparty governments the credibility of each partner depends on his ability to contribute to government cohesion and, in many systems, to respect the government agreement (Moury 2010). Dissenters can undermine the trust between political partners and put the government at risk. Therefore they should be controlled more closely.

As far as seniority is concerned, we believe that more experienced MPs are more active. This can be due to the fact that they are on average higher in the internal hierarchy of a party group. Second, they may be more familiar with the formal and informal procedures to respect. Finally, they can rely on personal networks to other long-serving MPs which the freshmen still have to establish.

Having laid out our hypotheses, the next section will be dedicated to describe out data and the operationalization of our variables of interest.

**Data & variables**

In order to test our hypotheses we rely on data from the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS) 2007 in Belgium as well as legislative data which was retrieved from the website of the Belgian Chamber. Belgium is for several reasons a particularly good candidate for the empirical test of our hypotheses.

Our main hypotheses are about how a party group's leadership handles its ideological outliers. Belgium has for many years been described as a country with particularly strong parties. 'Partitocracy' is a term which has been used with reference to the huge influence of the parties that has also gone beyond politics and reached into society (De Winter, Deschouwer, and Della Porta 1996). In the parliamentary arena, the parties are extremely cohesive, in particular if one
takes their voting behavior as an indicator. Depauw and Martin (2009) tell us that from 1991 to 1995 the Rice’s index of cohesion which is calculated as the absolute difference between the proportion of party members voting in favor and of party members voting against on the same issue was about 99 (with 100 being the maximum). This extraordinary discipline can be at least in part attributed to the efforts of the party leadership. According to De Winter and Dumont (2000) most parliamentary party groups use a set of (informal) rules, conventions, etc. to avoid departures from the official party-line. Namely, they explain that individual MPs have to get private member bills approved by the group’s leadership or the group as a whole. Besides, party groups have a number of sanctioning measures at hand to discipline ‘rebels’. Therefore, Belgium should be a good study case. If dissenters are really curtailed in their legislative activity it should be visible here.

Second, Belgium is also a good study case if we consider our dependent variable which is private member bills in the Belgian Chamber. Formally, in the Belgian Chamber a single MP is enough to initiate a law proposal. This is evidently the lowest possible threshold one can imagine. For our analysis this is important because we hypothesize about the relationship between the leadership of a parliamentary group and individual MPs. A system with a higher minimum threshold to initiate a bill would somewhat blur the link between individual dissent and parliamentary activity we want to observe and introduce additional strategic rationales about the right partners with whom to draft a bill.

Finally, the case selection is also reasonable for the more pragmatic reason of data availability. On the one hand, Belgium is one of the participants in the CCS. This supplies us with reliable information on ideological positions of single candidates. On the other hand, the website of the Belgian Chamber offers easy access to information about the parliamentary activity of individual MPs from oral questions in the plenary or in committees to private member bills.
Having explained the motivations of our case selection we turn now to the dependent variable, that is individual legislative activity. More concretely, we aim at explaining some of the variation in the number of private member bills authored by individual MPs over the legislature. From 2007 to 2010, the total number of bills to be treated in the Chamber was 1821 of which only 15 per cent were initiated by the government. This leaves more than 1500 private member bills. Compared to the preceding legislatures the share of government sponsored bills has clearly decreased in the 52\textsuperscript{th} legislature from 2007 to 2010.

As usual for parliamentary systems, the probability to become law was much higher for government bills than it was for the rest. While government bills were successful in about 90 per cent of the cases, private member bills succeeded in less than 10 per cent. Initiating a private member bill would be a rather irrational act by individual MPs, if their aim was to obtain a majority for their bill. Instead, private member bills are probably more seen as a signaling device of MPs in the face of possible voters outside parliament. Even if private member bills, especially opposition bills, have usually low chances to get parliamentary approval they may be beneficial for the individual MP for marketing reasons (Dandoy and De Winter 2005).

On the individual level, each MP in our data set (n=96) has (co-)authored on average about 35 private member bills from 2007 to 2010. While only 5 MPs have not initiated a single bill, there are 24 MPs who have (co-)initiated each of them more than 50 bills. As can be seen from figure 1 the distribution is right skewed with the median being at 30.

\textbf{Figure 1}

Most of our independent variables they are taken from the CCS. Within the framework of the CCS, 1500 questionnaires were sent out to candidates for the House elections (including all effective candidates and a variable number of suppléants) and for the Senate elections (including all effective candidates and
a number of suppléants) two months after the May general elections. The overall return rate was about 28 per cent. Return rate was equal between effective candidates and suppléants, about equal for House and Senate candidates. Only in terms of party the return rates varied considerably from the under representation for the right-populist Vlaams Belang to overrepresentation for the green party Ecolo, a pattern of bias that one encounters in all elite and public opinion surveys in Belgium.

For testing our hypotheses, only the 96 elected candidates for the House of Representatives elections will be included (which represent about 20 per cent of the respondents).

For the first hypothesis we need a measure of the ideological distance that separates individual MPs from their party group. To obtain such a measure we used the respondent's self-placement on a ten point left-right scale. For each individual in our dataset we subtracted then the mean left-right score of the other respondents from the same party and took the absolute value of the difference. We excluded all MPs for whom there were less than five respondents from the same party in the dataset. This leaves us with 87 MPs out of a total of 201 MPs in the 52th legislature. Figure 2 shows the distribution of this measure. The mean deviation for MPs was at about 1. More than 20 per cent of the respondents had a distance of more than 1.5 to their own party group.²

Our second hypothesis suggests that the attitude of individual MPs to the concept of ‘party discipline’ has an influence on their legislative activity. The CCS contains four items which seem to be related to this question.³ A principal

² Proksch and Slapin (2012) use a similar measure in their paper.
³ The four items are: a) decision-making in my party is too top-down; the grassroots cannot make its voice hear; b) individual members of Parliament should be able to vote independent of their party; c) the party leader is too powerful; d) pollsters and political strategists have too much influence over my party’s decision making
component analysis was run on these four items. The analysis resulted in just one component with an eigenvalue bigger than 1 that explained about 60 per cent of the total variation. We extracted the component scores for this first component as a measure for an MP's attitude on party discipline.

Finally, we are going to control for a MP’s belonging to the majority and his seniority. The first variable is self-explaining and measured by a government/opposition dummy. Regarding the seniority, we code whether an MP is elected for the first time in parliament, for the second time, or longer.

**Results**

Our dependent variable is the number of legislative bills initiated by a MP during the legislature. This means that we deal with non-negative discrete numbers; with other words we have count data. Given the nature of our data we cannot run an OLS regression or another model which relies on the assumption that our data generating process follows a normal distribution (King 1998). Essentially, we have to choose between a Poisson and a negative binomial model. There is strong over-dispersion in the data. This means that when the response variance is greater than the mean (Hilbe 2011). In this case, running a Poisson model would give overly optimistic standard errors and increase the risk of wrongly refuting the null hypothesis. As a consequence, the negative binomial model will be chosen.

The results of the regressions can be seen in table 1. We test three slightly different model specifications. All three models cover the whole legislature from 2007 to 2010. Each model contains control variables for the left-right self-placement of the respondents as well as a variable indicating the number of days a respondent was actually MP during the legislature. This last variable is necessary as the Belgian Chamber is subject to some fluctuation in its membership throughout a legislative period. For instance, MPs who become ministers have to give up their parliamentary seat and are replaced.
The model in the first column controls for the MPs’ parties (coefficients not shown). For reasons of multicollinearity there is no way to control simultaneously for this variable and the belonging to a government party or a particular language group (French or Dutch speaking). With regard to the first hypothesis we can see that coefficient for the measure of the ideological distance (Ideological distance) between an MP and his party group is as expected negative and significant at the 5 per cent level. With increasing ideological distance to their party group MPs initiate fewer private member bills. On the other side, H2 cannot be confirmed. Even if the coefficient for an MP’s attitude towards ‘party discipline’ (Party discipline) points into the right direction it is far from reaching statistical significance. Seniority has the expected effect. The coefficient is positive and significant at the 5 per cent level implying that ceteris paribus longer serving MPs are more active bill initiators.

Table 1

In Model 2, party dummies are replaced by a government / opposition dummy. The coefficients remain largely unchanged. Whereas ideological distance is still significant at the 5 per cent level, seniority joins ‘party discipline’ in being statistically insignificant. As to the government / opposition dummy it points into the expected direction but fails to reach statistical significance as well. Finally, model 3 includes also a variable indicating whether a MP is French or Dutch speaker taking account of this important cleavage in Belgian politics. Once again ideological distance turns out to be the only statistically significant variable even though at the 10 per cent level.

What do we learn from these analyses? First, there is no evidence supporting our second hypothesis. Whether a MP believes that MPs should be generally more independent from their parties or not, his individual attitude towards party discipline has no quantitative impact on his legislative activity. Second, the picture is also mitigated with respect to seniority and the belonging to a government party. The latter does not reach statistical significance in any of our
model specifications while MPs’ seniority succeeds in one out of three models. Third, the ideological distance measure behaves as predicted by our first hypothesis. MPs that disagree more strongly with their party group introduce fewer bills than their colleagues. Figure 3 gives a graphical representation on how the ideological distance of a (newly elected and majority) MP to his party group influences his individual law making activity. While our model predicts about 50 bills per term for a MP who is completely in tune with his group this number shrinks to about 22 bills for one who is 4.5 points away from his party line (which would mean for example an (unrealistic) extreme left / right MP in a centrist group).

Figure 3

Conclusion
How do party groups handle their dissenters? Our statistical analysis shows a significant correlation between ideological distance to one’s party group and the number of introduced bills. In line with the existing literature we hypothesize that this is due to party whips’ efforts to impose party discipline on their ideological dissenters in order to offer the image of a unified and cohesive party group to the public. On the other hand, alternative explanations such as an MP’s stance on party discipline or his status as part of the majority or the opposition could only partly or not at all be confirmed.

Obviously, there are some limits for our results that might be filled by further research. First of all, our analysis focuses on the legislative period as a whole. Thereby, it ignores the fact that the 2007-2010 has surely not contributed to build a reputation of stable governments because it has seen more than just one government come and go. Until the anticipated elections in 2010 the country has not seen less than six governments. In addition to the Verhofstadt caretaker government in office until December 2007 there were the following government Verhofstadt III, the governments Leterme I and II, the Van Rompuy government and finally the caretaker government led by Prime Minister
Leterme until the 2010 elections. There may be an aspect of 'government philosophy' or other factors which may vary across different governments. In order to check the robustness of our results one should test separate models for each of these governments.

Second, there may be a time dimension that is not captured by our analysis. For example, the second care-taker government happened to be at the end of the legislature. With Election Day approaching, party leaders may have been keener on giving the image of a unified and unified part to the voters. As a consequence, the brakes on outliers might be especially tight at this point of time.
Bibliography


Figure 1: Distribution of private member bills per MP during the 52th legislature (2007-2010)
Figure 2: Distribution of ideological distance between MPs and their party group during the 52th legislature (2007-2010)
Table 1

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*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.1$